FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 17.06.2021 | Sidonie Wetzig

'NATO only remains relevant if it transforms itself'

Does Biden's visit to Europe mark the beginning of a new era for transatlantic relations? Sidonie Wetzig on China, Russia and the future of NATO

The first NATO Summit with US President Joe Biden took place this Monday in Brussels. What were the expectations towards Biden, considering the difficult legacy left behind by Donald Trump and a quite turbulent past four years?

> NATO and its members were clearly shaken by Trump's performances at previous meetings and his rhetoric, which cast doubt on the American commitment to the alliance. Macron's remark on NATO being 'brain dead' contributed to the organisation's self-doubt, as did the dispute over European contribution to the defence posture or the arms deal between Turkey and Russia. As a reaction to these challenges an internal reflection process started in part on the ability to adopt to future external security challenges – whether in the cyberspace, actual space or hybrid ones. NATO General-Secretary Jens Stoltenberg commented on this process by saying that NATO only remains relevant if it adapts and transform itself.
>
> The new US administration had already reaffirmed its commitment to the transatlantic partnership before this NATO summit. During his visit to Europe at the G7, NATO, and the EU-US summits, Biden didn't disappoint, and assured his European counterparts that America is back. This moment of relief was combined with an overall sense of harmony and unity ensured by the return of the US leadership to NATO. Hence, a fairly long communiqué which covers everything.

Although Donald Trump's engagement with NATO was largely limited to the re-affirmation of the 2 per cent defence investment pledge, this discourse is not new in American politics. Is it safe to assume that President Biden will follow in the footsteps of his predecessors?

The question of burden sharing has been part of the debate already for a while. Since 2014, the target of 2 per cent was formally adopted including the pledge to invest 20 per cent of the defence expenditure for procurement, research and development. This commitment was reiterated in the communiqué of this week's summit.

However, the tone in which the American President reminds his allies to fulfil this pledge has softened. A broader perspective is taken on the allies' contribution with regards to how and what is being spent on. What is still largely expected from allies, is their capability to meet the standards set by Article 3 in the Washington Treaty, which stipulates that they will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attacks.

Contrary to his predecessor, President Biden does not view a deeper European defence integration as a threat, as long as it is open for non-EU states. A stronger European pillar within NATO could be an option for fairer burden sharing.

A new development in the post-summit communiqué was the strong language on China. Historically, the general strategic orientation of NATO has been determined by the foreign policy priorities of the United States. But this time, it does seem that European countries are not quite convinced by Biden's new focus on China. How do you think this new dynamic will impact EU-US relations and future co-operation within NATO?

Already before the summit it was expected that China would be brought into the focus of NATO. All allies share the assessment that it poses a systemic challenge to the rule-based international order and security. At the same time, the communiqué contains an invitation to take up a dialogue to ensure transparency and confidence building.

What conclusion can be drawn from this assessment is another question, as different interpretations were offered in post-summit statements. Will it mean more engagement with partners in the Indo-Pacific? In particular, European leaders stressed the military character of NATO, which should focus on its core tasks, collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security.

China was also addressed in the post-summit documents of the G7 and the EU-US meeting. All three formats build a framework to address issues with China and, the US administration seems to utilise the different formats to serve its interests.

The EU and US accept their different ways of looking at China, their multi-faceted approach, not only as a systematic rival but also as a competitor and potential cooperation partner. The issues which the

EU has with China aren't limited to the military sphere. The EU has to offer a more varied toolbox to address the challenges China represents: for example economical, technological and also with regards to disinformation campaigns.

With the Biden and Putin meeting this week, how do you see the Russian relationship towards the US and NATO changing? Is it dangerous to turn the focus away from Russia?

I wouldn't say that the focus is turning away from Russia. It still most prominently features in NATO's considerations. The communiqué contains a long list of reasons of why trust towards Russia is limited and its aggressive actions are considered a risk to Euro-Atlantic security, such as hybrid actions, the annexation of Crimea or the breach of the INF to name just a few

Biden combined his visit to the summit with consultations with the Baltic states, to reassure them of his support about their concerns with regards to Russia. A clear shift in NATO's focus from Russia to China wouldn't have found the support from Baltic or Central European countries.

The meeting with Putin took place only after Biden consulted the G7, NATO and the EU. This signals that the US and its European allies are united in their approach towards Russia, including a call for dialogue and cooperation in areas where necessary.

What new potential trends and strategic orientation do you see for NATO's future?

This year's summit and its communiqué, covers a lot of ground and features enough elements for each ally to find their interest represented. It is a starting point for a new strategic concept that is expected for next year. This concept will require more precision about what issues NATO will address in the future, for internal and external clarity.

Will the focus remain on the core tasks and the transatlantic region? Could the US commitment be sustained even with new administrations to come? Will NATO follow the US occupation with China and pursuit political and military cooperation globally? Or will NATO broaden its thematic spectrum and tackle a wide range of security threats that go from climate change to democratic resilience?

In all three cases, the role of the European pillar within NATO will have to be re-considered. If the US and NATO have a stronger focus on Asia, Europeans need to use the potential of deeper EU defence

integration and still keep non-European members committed. With regards to non-military issues, NATO and the EU should avoid any duplication, especially where both organisations have their strong points.

This interview was conducted by Valentina Berndt.



Sidonie Wetzig
Brussels

Sidonie Wetzig is a policy officer at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Brussels. Her work focuses on Foreign Affairs, Security and Defence.