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Trump-proofing NATO

NATO's 75th anniversary is overshadowed by the war in Ukraine and a possible US withdrawal from Europe. Can the EU master these challenges?

It would have been nice if NATO's 75th anniversary had gone differently; Heads of state and government talking about the good old days with their usual summit ceremony, paying tribute to the once so important – but now obsolete – defence alliance in a series of grand speeches.

Instead of a celebration, however, the summit turned out to be a hard-working meeting of an organisation that was once again charged with life and significance, welcoming two new countries to its ranks, and whose members, for the first time in a long time, are planning to meet the target of at least two per cent of GDP for defence. NATO is experiencing an increase in importance, driven by the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and China's growing ambitions. Despite the often-diverging positions of the 32 members, NATO is united in its assessment of the situation and its willingness to arm itself accordingly.

The Trump challenge

So, is everything set for the next 75 years? Even the view of the next anniversaries is clouded in darkness. Part of the decisions made on Ukraine are intended to make the continued support 'Trump-proof'. This in itself sums up the fundamental problem of the Europeans. Uncertainty about the future of US foreign policy on the one hand and Europe's continued massive dependence on that same policy for its security on the other.

Of NATO's €1.304 trillion in defence spending in 2023, the US will bear a full 875 billion *alone* and largely for tasks outside Europe. The rest is divided among the 31 other members. This distribution is one of the many reasons why the simplistic logic of 'but we spend so much more than Russia' does not work. What counts are the military capabilities in the areas where they are needed.

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And this is precisely where the European continent, with its numerous small boutique armies, is not well positioned. Without American help, the individual European components cannot be turned into a deterrent army, troops and material cannot be deployed quickly enough, and information, analysis and command are not guaranteed. Europe may be able to defend itself in the event of an attack, but without the unifying structure of NATO and US support, victory in a high-intensity war would be rather doubtful.

NATO will remain the most important security guarantor for Europe for the foreseeable future. At the same time, the US will in all likelihood be less active in Europe. The real challenge for the Americans lies on the other side of the Pacific, not the Atlantic.

A strategic defence industry policy for Europe

There is no way around it, the Europeans have to do more for their own security. So does that mean spending 'more, more, more' on armaments? Yes, but differently than before. If defence spending is not to grow faster than the effective defence capability, investments in defence must be more coordinated in the medium term. Europe has a defence pluralism that exudes a great deal of national sovereignty, but makes it difficult to take meaningful joint action. While the EU uses 17 different battle tanks from six different manufacturers, the Americans make do with just one. What this means for logistics, maintenance and operational capability in the event of war is obvious. Above all, however, it is expensive.

For reasons that are understandable, the European nations maintain their own bonsai industries with subsidies or comparatively high purchase prices in order to keep jobs or key industries in their own country. This is understandable in terms of industrial policy, but it is less advantageous for a functioning European defence.

A different balance is needed between national economic interests and European defence capabilities. Sometimes one must also simply accept that necessary technologies can be produced better by a neighbour. Or one has to promote the production of one's own technology in other EU states and create jobs there, before they bring non-European licensed production into the country and further increase the plurality of defence

equipment. In short, we need a strategic defence industry policy that focuses on European defence capabilities.

Based on a joint analysis of the scenarios for which we are preparing in Europe, we need to advance the already functioning cooperation within and outside the EU.

The only thing that is really certain in a constantly changing world order is that the geography of Europe will not change. The countries in this region will have to continue to steer the destiny of the continent. And the first step here is to achieve a credible deterrent against Russia. It makes little difference how likely it is that Russia could actually test NATO solidarity in the Baltic states, as an example. The aim is to prevent the US from possibly leaving and the EU member states not yet being fully prepared in terms of defence policy. If the war in Ukraine has taught us anything, it is that Russia likes to surprise and act quickly when it perceives the other side to be weaker. This calculation needs to be changed by clearly signalling that not only the US, but also the Europeans themselves can ensure security on the continent.

Europe's strength, unity in diversity, must also be brought to the fore in defence. We need more consolidation without becoming dependent on a few suppliers and we need standardisation in the internal market to promote competition.

Based on a joint analysis of the scenarios for which we are preparing in Europe, we need to advance the already functioning cooperation within and outside the EU. Successful projects, such as the OCCAR joint armament cooperation, the cooperation between Norway and Germany on submarines as part of the 'Common Design' or the Sky Shield initiative for joint missile defence, must be upheld and expanded.

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In the long term, however, more coordination and standardisation are needed, which the EU in particular can provide. The structures are already in place, even without a Defence Commissioner, but the political will to bring them into effect has so far been lacking. The EU can contribute to the standardisation of licensing and thus a real internal market in defence for simple equipment and spare parts. The cost savings would be enormous. It can join

forces for research in a rapidly changing technological environment. It can coordinate investment so that each nation can explicitly contribute to the common defence in what it does best and rely on the others for the rest.

As important as NATO is for European security, we should not rely on it to protect us in the same way in 75 years' time. Making the European pillar of the Alliance strong enought to stand on its own if necessary must be the goal of the European nations over the next decade. For the time being, this means more - in fact, considerably more - investment in defence. But if they are made with foresight and in a joint effort, they will not be excessive, but will bring Europe even closer together and create security on the continent and in its neighbourhood. And perhaps the celebration of 150 years of NATO will then be a worthy, somewhat boring act in memory of an alliance that has already become obsolete in times of peace.



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