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NATO POST-CARDIFF: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

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The NATO Summit in Wales was predicted to be one of the most important summits in the history of the Alliance – "a crucial summit at a crucial time" according to the then Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen. World leaders gathered at a time where the member states found themselves surrounded by challenges in their immediate security environment. While the Wales Summit was originally thought to be the Summit where Exit Afghanistan would be the main topic, the crisis in Ukraine altered the summit agenda drastically. The Summit was no longer the Summit where NATO needed to find a new raison d'être, as the international commitment in Afghanistan was coming to an end. It seemed like no one questioned the existence or the importance of the Alliance. This was illustrated at the end of the Summit when the optimism was high and the media reported summit discussions were held on a high political level. Nevertheless, the summit also proved that there are several challenges for the Alliance ahead, not to mention the following through of the newly established "Very High Readiness Joint Task Force" the new spearhead within the NATO Response Force.

65 years ago, Lord Ismay said that one of the reasons why NATO was created was to "keep the Russians out". Little did anyone know that the quote would seem to be equally relevant at this year's summit. Throughout 2014 world leaders have borne witness to a shift in Russian foreign policy following the illegal Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. The crisis led a key member state, namely Poland, to act on Article 4 in the Washington Treaty. Article 4 proclaims that the member state can call upon the other members for a consultation whenever the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened. This illustrates the tension and perceived threat in the Eastern part of the Alliance.

However, NATO intervention in the Ukraine has never been a topic, nor was it at the Wales Summit. Article 5 covers members only, and NATO's role in this crisis is mostly focused on deterring Russia and reassuring nervous member states. Therefore, the discussions around the Ukraine crisis focused on this. However, the rhetoric used by NATO officials was severely critical of Russian behaviour. The state leaders expressed that Russian aggression will not be accepted and that the ongoing conflict poses a direct threat to the entire European neighbourhood. This strong language has continued even after the Summit, and in the new Secretary General, Mr. Jens Stoltenberg's, speech at the press conference ahead of the foreign ministers meeting in December 2014, he stated that Russia has a choice. They can "either continue to violate international law and not to respect the integrity and the sovereignty of sovereign nations; and thereby become more and more isolated. Or Russia can choose to respect its international obligations to respect international law and once again try to engage with NATO and NATO Allies in a more cooperative and constructive relationship."

Needless to say, the relationship between Russia and the West is tenser than what it has been for many years. This puts pressure on the Alliance's decision making skills and capabilities. In order to be credible, the member states need to put action behind their words, which may be a more difficult task than expected, and several issues were identified in this respect at the Summit.

Five Key Issues for the Alliance

First, one of the key issues discussed at the Summit was the 2%-defence spending guideline. There are currently only four member states that meet the guideline of spending at least 2% of their gross domestic product on defence, namely the US, Greece, the UK and Estonia. Almost all of the European part-

ners have seen decreasing defence budgets which has two main consequences. First, the US remains frustrated with its European partners who do not pull their weight while the American contribution covers nearly 75% of the total defence expenditures. This could further weaken the transatlantic bond and does not give any incentives for the US to stop pivoting towards Asia. Second, it means that the alliance does not have the resources necessary to remain credible and to build the defence capabilities they need in order for the "collective defence" to have any serious meaning. Efforts to meet this challenge were made in the Wales Declaration which states that: "Allies whose current proportion of GDP spent on defence is below this level will: (…) aim to move towards the 2% guideline within a decade with a view to meeting their NATO Capability Targets filling NATO's Capability shortfalls".

The language seems vague and unambitious as there are no deadlines and no concrete requirements that need to be fulfilled. Furthermore, there is not necessarily a realistic hope that member states actually will meet the guideline. The main reason behind the declaration is to make sure that it will stop the defence budgets from decreasing further and to change the way the resources are spent, with the aim of spending 20% of the defence expenditure on modernisation.
Second, and linked to the first issue, is NATO's decision to establish a new spearhead "Very High Readiness Joint Task Force" (VJTF) to counter Russian aggression. The VJTF should be able to be deployed rapidly in the Baltics and Eastern Europe within very short notice. This is in many ways the most concrete measure taken to deter Russia and to reassure the Eastern allies. The force will consist of about 4000 personnel and the training missions have already started. This will be an important task for the new Secretary General to follow up on. He will need to make sure that the allies put political will, not to mention the resources that are needed, in order to make this spearhead the reassurance it is supposed to be.

Third, the member states need to agree on which issues to prioritize. This is a key issue in an alliance of 28 different strategic interests – one for each member state. While the Ukraine crisis was at the top of the agenda, there are many members who feel that it does not necessarily pose a direct threat to them – and at the very least – that it is not the main threat that needs to be considered. For example, as previously mentioned, Poland invoked Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. At the same time, NATO member Turkey find themselves in the middle of a very unstable Middle East, currently dominated by conflict and brutal terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This means that the conflict in the Middle East is right at NATO's doorstep, and that the next possible Article 5 situation could just as likely happen in the South rather in Eastern Europe. There was no agreement made on the Summit, but it was stressed in the Wales Declaration that ISIL does pose a grave threat to the Alliance and the member states condemned their actions in Syria and Iraq.

During the Summit, the US invited a small number of countries to join them in a coalition against ISIL; namely Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Australia, Turkey, Italy, Poland and Denmark. The coalition has since grown and now consists of 60 partners, but it is a US-led coalition and is not part of any NATO framework at the moment.

Fourth, although downplayed at the Summit, the lessons from Afghanistan remain an important issue for NATO. After having been engaged in the region for over a decade, the forces are now being pulled out of Afghanistan with a definite end to the ISAF mission at the end of 2014. There were supposed to be high level political talks between the president of Afghanistan and NATO leaders at the summit, but due to the fact that the outcome of the Afghani presidential election still was not clear at the time, they were unable to go through with the talks.

On November 27th, Operation Resolute Support was ratified by the Afghan parliament after the agreement had been made between the newly elected president Ashraf Ghani and NATO. This is a NATO-led non-combat mission, which aims to support Afghan security forces and institutions with training, advice and assistance. About 12 000 personnel will be deployed

in the mission, with the majority being American personnel.

For NATO, one of the issues discussed was how to maintain the level of interoperability and cooperation after the long term engagement in Afghanistan. These positive experiences between the national forces could prove to be vital in new engagements abroad and should be maintained through frequent training missions in all military branches, knowledge sharing and repeated exercises.

Lastly, NATO needs to find a way to keep important partners close. The European allies need to strengthen the transatlantic bond and make sure that the US interest in Europe is not weakened further. The importance of the special relationship between the US and its European allies was underlined in the Wales declaration on the transatlantic bond stating that "The North Atlantic Alliance binds North America and Europe in the defence of our common security, prosperity and values." The best way to keep the US engaged in Europe seems for the European allies to take more responsibility, which they claim that they will. Other partners that the current members need to keep close, however, are those who have been opposing membership for a long time, but who are now under a more direct threat than before, namely Finland and Sweden. In both countries, the discussion about membership has reoccurred in the media and amongst politicians. The Russian rhetoric towards both countries has been particularly harsh with one Putin envoy even stating that "Finland should not join NATO unless they want to start World War III".

Neither of the countries' government officials has said that membership is an option, but both Sweden and Finland were given a so called "Gold Card" during the Summit, which in practice means that they are in a selected group of close partners to the Alliance. Surely, the Russian presence influences their current defence policies, but it does not necessarily mean that they will become members anytime soon. Nevertheless, these countries have vast economic resources and by facilitating a closer relationship with Stockholm and Helsinki, it adds to Alliance's resources, capabilities and training options. At the same time, NATO needs to be careful and make sure that they do not lose the incentive of membership by offering agreements like these. Other partners, like Montenegro and Ukraine, were quickly reminded that NATO is in no position to expand or negotiate new agreements at this point, especially not in the East.

NATO at Crucial Crossroads

The new Secretary General has his work cut out for him in making the member states follow up on the decisions made at the Wales Summit. The current strategic environment surrounding NATO is extremely fragile, which means that the challenges linked to defence spending and diverse strategic interest are even more pressing at this point. Russia keeps pushing the limits and ISIL continues with their brutal conquest in the South. Simultaneously, Europe remains a continent characterized by economic crisis and with limited defence budgets. The political will and opportunity to spend more on defence is therefore lacking, despite immediate threats in the European neighbourhood. This seems to be the main obstacle for the implementation of the pledges made at Celtic Manor.

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