

INTRODUCTION

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NATO is at a crossroads – once again. Although recurrent predictions of its impending decay underrate NATO's inherent stability and strength, the challenges facing the alliance are real, and the need to adapt has been widely recognized among academic observers, national decision-makers and within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization itself. One major challenge lies in structural shifts affecting the leadership role of the United States, on which NATO has depended since its foundation. Domestically, the centre-ground of American society and of its political system is eroding, decreasing support for US global engagement and commitment to multilateralism, despite US President Joe Biden's reassurances that »America is back« (Goldgeier 2019; Kirshner 2021). Globally, the rise of an authoritarian and increasingly assertive China is pulling US attention away from Europe. European states, too, recognize China's growing presence in the region as a security risk. But the debate on the consequences of China's rise and NATO's possible responses has just begun. At the same time, Russia and NATO's stalling dual-track strategy based on deterrence and dialogue are pulling member states in different directions. While some argue for upping the ante by stepping up sanctions and putting more troops on the ground along the Eastern flank, others call for a fresh approach towards Russia. Splits are also emerging between member states looking to the East and to the South. The latter deplore the gap between their contributions to deterrence on the Eastern flank and the (lacking) attention paid to their concerns by Eastern and Northern member states. This geographic divergence also entails conflicting views regarding NATO's purpose. Are threats primarily military in nature and should NATO therefore focus on defence and deterrence? Or are member states confronted with multifaceted security risks, requiring NATO to broaden its agenda? Last but not least, member states are torn between visions of NATO as a community of values or as an organisation based on interests. Should NATO prevent deviations by member states from the catalogue of democratic values? Should it insist on solidarity and consultation with the aim of forging common approaches, not only with regard to Article 5 but across the entire range of foreign and defence policies? Or should NATO acknowledge differences among its members and lower its sights with regard to political coherence and common values?

While officials and pundits have long been aware of these questions and challenges, a culmination of events over the

past few years has given an acute sense of crisis and urgency to debates on the future of NATO: Turkey's repeated diversions from the alliance consensus; former US President Donald Trump's disdain for NATO; the sudden American withdrawal from Northern Syria; and a perceived general lack of consultation and common purpose led French President Emmanuel Macron to diagnose NATO as »brain dead«. Moreover, the alliance's de facto failure in Afghanistan – evident to both pundits and the public well before President Joe Biden's announcement of the impending US troop withdrawal – will undermine confidence in NATO and should cause a thorough evaluation and rethinking of its crisis-management concept. At the 2019 London summit commemorating NATO's 70th anniversary, the Heads of State and Government reacted to all of these signs of crisis and asked NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to initiate a forward-looking reflection process. One element of this process is the report of a Reflection Group published in November 2020 that will pave the way for a new Strategic Concept. NATO will most likely adopt this new Strategic Concept before the end of Stoltenberg's current term of office in late September 2022.

Adjustment may be inevitable but entails the risk of maladaptation (Tardy 2020). Critical analysis of NATO's reflection process, the different directions in which the alliance could evolve, and the political consequences that would flow from these different scenarios is therefore of the utmost political importance. This report provides the basis for such critical reflection.

To identify key lines of debate in the reflection process and likely changes of direction, we map expert discourses among think tanks, research institutes and other relevant non-state actors on the future of NATO in selected member countries, as well as Ukraine and Russia. Member countries have been selected for analysis on the basis of representativeness and of importance in terms of size and influence. By focusing on expert discourses, we seek to go beyond capturing a spectrum of opinions within each of the countries analysed in our report, rather than »blackboxing« these internal discussions and focusing exclusively on government positions. In some countries, such as Italy, the level of agreement among think tanks on crucial issues concerning NATO's future is fairly high. In these cases, clear country-specific positions can be identified more easily. In other countries, such as the

United States, differences among think tanks are vast, reflecting the broad range of political views on the alliance. In these cases, predicting future stances toward NATO based on the preferences of an individual government would be highly misleading.

By identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, the report highlights different alternative futures for NATO and the possible risks to peace, security and NATO's internal cohesion that these different scenarios entail. The mapping involved a structured assessment of debates and positions concerning NATO's major external and internal challenges.

- Regarding the external challenges, we assess debates on NATO's relations with Russia, China and the Southern neighbourhood, as well as debates on arms control and armaments, hybrid threats and out-of-area interventions.
- Regarding internal challenges we assess positions on a possible broadening of NATO's agenda, a possible Europeanization of NATO and relations with the EU, and ways of strengthening consultation and normative unity.
- Based on this mapping of think tank discourses in NATO member states, as well as in two of NATO's Eastern neighbours, we identify areas of agreement and disagreement and thus highlight three alternative futures for NATO. To assess the risk of institutional maladaptation, we discuss the political opportunities and risks associated with the three futures.

In particular, we argue that an evaluation of the reforms should be based on whether they allow NATO as a regional organization to reconcile inherent tensions between three classical conceptions: collective defence, collective security and common security.¹ Scholars have argued that NATO has been attractive for members not only because it has deterred potentially hostile external powers (collective defence) but because it has provided collective security (Sayle 2019: 29). According to this view, the unique combination of American hegemony and leadership, on one hand, and the voice opportunities NATO has opened up for its smaller members, on the other hand, have created opportunities for cooperation and peace within the transatlantic area (Risse-Kappen 1995). However, because of ingroup/outgroup effects and other dynamics, regional organizations in general and value-based regional organizations (such as NATO) in particular are prone to emphasize collective defence and security at the expense of common security; that is, their ability to cooperate with external actors. An assessment of NATO's reform process should therefore also take NATO's propensity for cooperation with external powers into account.

The report is structured as follows: Chapter 2 opens up with a discussion of the challenges NATO is facing and possible responses that are being considered within relevant bodies of NATO itself, particularly its International Secretariat.² Chapters 3-15 map debates within individual countries. The concluding chapter summarizes the findings, and presents and evaluates possible futures for NATO.

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¹ It should be noted that these classical conceptions differ from NATO's core tasks that have been described in the 2010 Strategic Concept as collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security. (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm).

² For this study, we conducted interviews with members of the International Secretariat and the Permanent Delegations of selected member states.