

FINAL REPORT
“Is NATO indispensable? The Brussels Summit”
May 18, 2017

This report gives a comprehensive account of the key messages articulated at the high-level seminar “Is NATO indispensable? The Brussels Summit” that took place on May 18, 2017 at the Italian Parliament in Rome, Italy. Organized by the NATO Defence College Foundation, in cooperation with the Italian Delegation at NATO’s Parliamentary Assembly, this seminar brought together distinguished speakers including representatives from governments, international organizations and research institutes. The speakers discussed various perspectives, prospects and ideas about the role and function of NATO, but also its political dimension in an ever-changing global landscape. Particular emphasis was destined to topics such as defense spending, burden sharing, the fight against terrorism, but also internal cohesion, external threats and future partnerships, main objects of discussion at the May 25, 2017 NATO Brussels Summit.

During the discussion, NATO’s indispensability was never questioned and the speakers often emphasized the crucial role the Alliance still plays to guarantee security and stability. As tension rises all over the world, the panelists stressed the need to place security at the center of the debate while at the same time reaffirming the significance of defense investment. By addressing the relevance of this year’s summit, the speakers reiterated the guidelines and agreements laid out in previous summits, namely the 2014 Wales and 2016 Warsaw ones. This is the reason why the Russia-Ukraine relations, the 2% defense investment pledge and burden sharing continued to be largely discussed and re-examined in light of the latest events.

Five common challenges were acknowledged during the debate: 1) Russia’s aggressive foreign policy in the East, with its strategic aims and increased military capability; 2) the new threats from the Alliance’s southern borders; 3) the fight against terrorism; 4) the individual commitment of Member States, in a historical time when nationalism and populism is thriving; and 5) cooperation with other institutions and international actors.

As pointed out, Russia’s relations with NATO have deteriorated following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and aggression in Eastern Ukraine. Moscow’s hostile behavior is intended as a threatening display of the Kremlin’s strength and a reminder for member states of the urgency to counteract any intimidation appropriately. Furthermore, these tactics have been used by Russia to undermine the credibility of NATO. However, despite Russia’s behavior there is a need to find a common line to face the threat of Russia and take appropriate collective action. NATO needs to take a primary stage on the global scenario against Russia to thwart its expansion in the East and in the Black Sea.

The menace from the East is counterbalanced by the new threats and challenges that await NATO in other regions. Civilian instability in Afghanistan, in the Sahel, in North Africa and in the Middle East have driven NATO to broaden its security agenda and adjust its structure. The alliance faces today not only threats encompassing different and complicated fields but also instability along southern borders including proliferation of weapons, construction of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and human trafficking. The opening of the NATO-Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) Regional Centre in Kuwait on January 2017, shows NATO’s willingness to provide military cooperation and project stability in other regions and enlarge its sphere of influence.

In mentioning these challenges, the fight against terrorism was pivotal. The expansion and influence of terrorist groups pose high risks on the member states and the Alliance’s stability and security.

Nonetheless, NATO already has a history of anti-terrorism operations as shown by previous joint exercises in Afghanistan, Iraq and Tunisia. The establishment of a new anti-terrorism hub in Naples demonstrates NATO's effort to ensure a steady determination to combat terrorist groups and dangerous non-state actors. However, the panelists stressed the importance of supplementing anti-terrorism efforts with intelligence sharing and collective capabilities. To this extent, cooperation between member states remains essential to achieve such difficult tasks.

Facing a complex range of challenges, the NATO Defense Policy and Planning Division's purpose, following the guidelines laid out at the previous NATO summits in Wales and Warsaw, is to reinforce defense and deterrence within NATO's borders but also to project stability in the surrounding regions. The experience gained over the years allowed the Alliance to project stability by providing not only military training and defense capacity building to non-member states but also to play a pivotal role in supporting security and anti-terrorism coalitions along NATO's borders and beyond. Furthermore, the implementation of new measures in order to counter hybrid warfare, accompanied with large deployments of troops into the Baltic states, demonstrate the willingness to continuously enforce advanced plans to maintain security. In terms of Defense planning, the Alliance has also been focusing on improving regional understanding to face the threats coming from the south. The establishment of a Regional Hub at the NATO Joint Force Command Headquarters in Naples is an example of NATO's strategy to not only anticipate and quickly respond to crises, but also to encourage regional partnerships and capacity building efforts.

On the other hand, the rise of nationalist and populist parties all over the world has jeopardized the image and perception of the Alliance. The current political environment has been threatened on both sides of the Atlantic and risks to be highly damaged if member states persist to portray security and foreign policy to national terms. It is indeed fundamental that countries uniformly and impartially contribute on defense investment as agreed at the 2014 Wales Summit, to enhance enough operability and therefore credibility. NATO needs to reinforce its political dimension and lay the foundations for a new strategic debate to face collectively the challenges in Baltic, Black Sea and Mediterranean.

In order to achieve stability, it is essential for the Alliance to foster cooperation and partnerships with non-member states. The establishment of joint operations with other international actors would promote a comprehensive and collective response to challenges and strengthen the tools available for conflict prevention and crisis management. A long-term partnership with the European Union, highlighted by the 42 proposals made by the High Representative Federica Mogherini and NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, holds the potential to ensure improvements on defense and security operations in the upcoming years.

Today, NATO faces failing states, wars, terrorism and refugee crisis at Europe's borders. However, there is confidence about the Alliance's ability to overcome such challenges through a holistic, 360-degree approach. Whereas NATO's main goal has been for years to contain threats coming from the East, nowadays it must develop a strategy for all kinds of crises and react not only looking on its eastern borders, but also looking south, north and all around. The 2016 Warsaw Summit showed a unanimous intention to achieve a 360-degree perspective to security affairs. All member states have reiterated their position to remain committed to the NATO cause for many upcoming years despite the adjustments and requirements that the Alliance will need to face in the future to remain relevant.