



**NATO Foundation**  
*Defense College*



## *A crisis of NATO or a crisis around NATO?*

**Alessandro Politi**

**Director of the NATO Defense College Foundation**

It is rather interesting to collect the different trenchant critiques collected by the Alliance in three years. Let us start from the US President's tweets and remarks:

- “I said a long time ago that NATO had problems: Number one, it was obsolete, because it was designed many, many years ago.” (16/1/2017);
- “NATO was weak, but now it is strong again (bad for Russia).” (17/7/2018);
- Fox news host: “Membership in NATO obligates the members to defend any other member that's attacked. So, let's say Montenegro, which joined last year, is attacked. Why should my son go to Montenegro to defend it from attack?” – POTUS answer: “I understand what you're saying. I've asked the same question. Montenegro is a tiny country with very strong people. ... They're very aggressive people. They may get aggressive, and, congratulations, you're in World War III.” (18/7/2018).

Then we can continue with the quotes of the French President from the long Economist interview (7/11/2019). Unlike tweet, quotes have their full meaning in the full context of the discourse, but they are relevant signals:

- “What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO [...] There's a considerable risk that in the long run we will disappear geopolitically, or at least that we will no longer be in control of our destiny. [...]
- You have no coordination of the United States' strategic decision with NATO's partners and we are witnessing an aggression led by another NATO partner, Turkey, in an area where our interests are at stake, without coordination. [...]
- Questioned if he believes in the effectiveness of article 5 of the Washington Treaty, the answer was: “I don't know, but what will Article Five mean tomorrow? If the regime of Bashar el-Assad decides to react against Turkey, shall we engage? This is a real question. We have taken an engagement to fight against Daesh”.

Finally it is interesting to listen to a German politician, Jürgen Trittin, member of the Bundestag's Foreign Affairs Committee in an op-ed on Der Spiegel (14/11/2019):

- “Heiko Maas [the German Foreign Minister] thinks about a NATO that does not exist anymore. The Alliance in its 70th year is just a shadow of itself. NATO is in an existential crisis”.
- Mr Trittin lists as significant problems for NATO the divergent interest of allies on Syria, Libya and the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty, adding that NATO was good in deterring symmetrical threats.

Unfortunately on the media side the NATO Leaders Meeting (3-4/12/2019) has been obscured by political folklore, while the short London Declaration has more than meets the eye. Anyhow let us first brush aside some easy objections to these three political figures.

Yes, the US Presidents' communication style and subsequent actions are simply unproductive for national and allies' interest, but he is the symptom of a deep crisis within the US politics and society;

he is clearly signalling in his own words an imperial overstretch and he tries what he thinks possible to change the trend.

Indeed, the French President trots out the idea of a European strategic and defence sovereignty that is as old as De Gaulle and as clearly hegemonic as the one of his much more talented predecessor. Nevertheless, Europe's national leaders have to decide if they want to acquire a collective autonomy together or being individually impotent divided.

The German politician's positions can be liquidated as the by-product of a long personal anti-NATO position: memorable was his opposition as Environment Minister to the war in Kosovo in April 1999 that prompted the then chief of the FDP coalition party to ask Chancellor Gerhard Schröder for his demission. And yet he highlights the absence of a European position on issues of burning interest for the Old Continent.

Is NATO dead or in coma? Personally I warned about this structural problem since 2006 when I wrote on Nomisma's Nomos & Khaos 2006 global report that the US guarantee was uncertain and that the Cold War was over because its politically unifying dynamics had not been replaced by the so-called war on terror. By 2010 the signs of this political necrosis were even more visible: after the invocation of article 5, following the attacks on New York and Washington DC (a great and last European political initiative), NATO was not significantly involved for two long years in Afghanistan and has been used as a last resort palliative for a compromised campaign; the 2003 war against Iraq created a serious transatlantic split, further deepened by the reckless political exploitation of the Old vs New Europe divide done by the US Vice President Cheney; the missile defence in Europe was clearly a multi-bilateral exercise over the head of the Alliance, disregarding the indivisibility of allied security, and the enlargement of NATO was not ipso facto a strengthening of it. The actual political hullabaloo on NATO's demise has long roots.

By the way, in the same period EU started its own political decay leading to its present deep crisis, with or without Brexit.

So much for a timely diagnosis. What about the prognosis?

Political declarations are written on paper, but they surely outlast the mediatic storms in a teacup because they have been agreed by heads of state and government. The London Declaration prescriptions are:

1. Reaffirmation of an enduring transatlantic bond and solemn commitment to article 5;
2. Increased expenditure by all other allies and commitment to do more;
3. A dual track approach to Russia and nuclear non-proliferation (stand firm and continue dialogue). A simultaneous commitment to nuclear weapons as long as they are around, but also to full implementation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in all its aspects, including nuclear disarmament (in clear text, full global nuclear disarmament);
4. Multilateral cooperation with UN and EU plus Open Door policy;
5. Technological security and resilience starting from 5G, space, cyber and hybrid;

6. Stepped up role in human security (a non-negligible novelty);
7. Attention to opportunities and challenges vis-à-vis China;
8. A forward-looking reflection process under the auspices of the Secretary General to be presented to the Foreign Ministers (i.e. a wise persons report);
9. An enduring guarantee to “our freedoms, our values, and our security”.

So, behind bluster quarrels and media stunts, these are the facts agreed by leaders and political machineries despite their deep and partially true feelings.

NATO is a cost to taxpayers not shouldered by allies? First of all, the 2% goal is a sham, because capabilities do not rise accordingly and because even the main ally dedicates to NATO's security 1,4% of its expenditure in real terms, not to speak about the minority contribution to the official common budget of the organisation. Secondly, it costs much more money, blood and strategic influence to be alone without allies and rely just on opportunistic coalition partners.

Europe should be strategically sovereign? Great. As a fully-fledged European I am listening to this refrain since 1952-1954, when France's internal divisions (again a crisis around Europe) torpedoed the European Defence Community, and since 1999 with a Helsinki's Headline Goal that vanished among the inertia of all European member states. It is just common sense to avoid empty grandeur and to continue to seriously develop the European defence pillar within a functioning NATO, until real results will show what is viable and what not. Surely a European project does accommodate for leadership, but not for disguised hegemony in arms procurement.

NATO only good for symmetrical threats and missing European political initiative? Yes, regarding Europe's national leaders being politically incapable compared to their Cold War predecessors. The best one is leading from behind and will soon exit active politics, the others are simply divisive. But regarding the threats issue there is, perhaps unfortunately, only one Swiss pen-knife and it is NATO (plus superior US logistics and technical intelligence).

The Alliance is surely neither a silver bullet not eternal, yet we are not living in a wonderland: the crisis is clear and present, but not where opinions say it is. The crisis is around NATO, in its single member states, in the politics and societies of many important members. It is easy to say that we are infested by mediocre, uninspiring and unreliable ruling political and economic elites, bent on their own self-interest; it is hard to acknowledge the individual responsibility that brought and kept these elites in power until now.

What want individual citizens from NATO? Has this life insurance worked until now? Is there still peace across the Atlantic? Has security been at least sometimes projected? These questions cannot be drowned just by the last political communication manipulation in the next elections, they are part of the vital future of each citizen, because failure could easily another world war, and not a cold one.



**NATO Foundation**  
*Defense College*

---