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How has the Ukrainian issue reshaped the NATO alliance?

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The aim of this article is primarily to explain how the Russia-Ukraine conflict has uncovered quite interesting trends in Euro-Atlantic security, including trends in NATO governance, and to conceptualise the strategic autonomy debate in Euro-Atlantic relations.

Introduction

One of the most important lessons learnt so far from the Ukraine conflict is that 25 years after the end of the Cold War, Europe is no longer at the centre of the United States' (US') security calculations. Consequently, the US will only judge NATO's usefulness by its concrete results in terms of how the European allies themselves make a substantial contribution in handling the conflict (Major 2015; Simón 2015). In the current security situation, therefore, the US will be prepared to support European security and even European military action, but will expect Europe through the EU to take the initiative. Hence, European strategic autonomy is one of the most debated themes in today's security discourse (Biscop 2014; Howorth 2014). The aim of this chapter is primarily to explain how the Ukraine conflict has uncovered quite interesting trends in Euro-Atlantic security, including trends in NATO governance, and to conceptualise the strategic autonomy debate in Euro-Atlantic relations. Interestingly, these trends have been with us for some time, even before the conflict began, but the current situation has brought these processes into daylight. First, this chapter aims at investigating why the debate on US retrenchment from Europe has not been influenced significantly by the conflict. Second, to what extent has NATO been able to react adequately to these new challenges and threats to European security? Third, this chapter aims at analysing how the conflict has al-

tered the global security agenda, including the impact on Ukraine in terms of security. In this respect, the Ukrainian military conflict can be regarded as one of the most significant signs of the new global multipolar order that has emerged in the early parts of the 21st century.

Understanding European strategic autonomy

To start with, Europeans need to overcome their current strategic myopia. This phenomenon has arisen as a corollary of strategic dependence on the US. Hence, safe under the US security umbrella, Europeans through the global role of the EU have enjoyed the luxury of aspiring to play a world role without the backing of military force (Howorth & Menon 2015: 13). In fact, the traditional US predominance in NATO has given the European governments little reason to bolster their own militaries (Valasek 2011: 2), and consequently given the European NATO member states and the EU strong incentives for freeriding. Some analysts have consequently argued that this conflict is all about the future US position in Europe (Techau 2015). Therefore, and important to emphasise, when several policy analysts and researchers underline that the US is prepared to support European military action, but expects Europe to take the initiative, the real implications are that the US will insist that the more powerful European NATO countries must play a greater role in reassuring their Central and Eastern European allies (Biscop 2013; Biscop 2014; Howorth & Menon 2015;

Major 2015; Simón 2015). The NATO Wales summit declaration from September 2014 on a Readiness Action Plan and the reform of NATO Response Force (NRF) with the establishment of a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) is of importance in this regard (NATO 2014a). As stated by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in November 2014, the Readiness Action Plan is the “... biggest reinforcement of our collective defence since the end of the Cold War. And it is my top priority to implement this plan in full and on time” (NATO 2014b). Therefore, when analysing the framework for the debate on European strategic autonomy, the main point of departure is that US retrenchment and the pivot towards Asia is not about leaving Europe behind. Instead, it is to use the resources that has been freed up after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to strengthen not just the US position in Asia, but also potentially in Europe (Simón 2015: 160).

In addition, to understand fully the debate on US retrenchment and European strategic autonomy it is necessary to obtain a new understanding of Germany’s changing position in NATO. Germany’s role explains why the debate on US retrenchment has not been significantly altered by the conflict. In fact, Germany’s strengthened position in NATO’s strategic adaptation is the other side of the coin of the US pivot towards Asia (Major 2015). Germany is therefore providing the foundation for the successful implementation of the 2014 Wales decisions. The Ukraine conflict happens to be taking place at a time when Germany’s political elite is actively formulating a more proactive foreign policy. From a German perspective, the decline of US power, combined with the world’s growing multi-polarity and fragility, calls for more responsibility in Europe and by the EU in the world (Meister 2015). Therefore, when assessing the outputs from NATO’s summit in Wales they would hardly be feasible without German involvement. For example, the most significant German initiative during recent years has been the Framework Nation Concept (FNC) from 2013. In FNC smaller armies plug specific capabilities into a larger framework nation that forms the foundation for the collaboration (Major & Mölling 2014). This concept is also an important element in the transatlantic burden-sharing debate which has always been present, reinforced in 2011 when the outgoing US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates complained about a “two-tiered alliance” (Gates 2011). In such an alliance, Gates complains, there are members who specialises in the “soft” humanitarian, development, peacekeeping, and talking tasks, while others conduct the “hard” combat missions.

The Ukrainian conflict has therefore illustrated how Germany has become the strongest US partner in Europe and in several ways replaced the United Kingdom

in European security. However, German policymakers have also on several occasions noted how the US has become a more unreliable partner in European security. As one German official at the Munich Security Conference in February 2015 complained: “Because the stakes are so low for [the Americans], we never know where Washington will end up. It could escalate the sanctions and arm Ukraine now. But in a few years, it could reset the relationship to secure Russia’s cooperation on an unconnected issue, such as Islamic State” (Krastev & Leonard 2015: 50).

Interesting to note is also the US “special relationship” with the United Kingdom, which has gone through dramatic changes. United Kingdom’s inability to make decisive contributions to the stabilisation phases in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, gave rise to major disappointments in Washington, and British officials and policymakers have been equally disappointed by their inability to make a visible difference to US policy (Jakobsen & Ringsmose 2015: 136). Assessing the Ukrainian conflict from a strategic perspective, it might even be argued that the United Kingdom, at least to some extent, is retreating politically from Europe. France, the other main actor in European security and defence, is the key to a closer relationship between the EU and NATO, but this country has side-lined itself in this conflict due to Germany’s leading position and also due to domestic weaknesses (Fiott 2015; Techau 2015).

Nevertheless, assessing the debate on the US retrenchment and European strategic autonomy is not about predicting an emerging strategic rift between Europe and the US. In fact there is fundamental agreement between them on how to handle the conflict where the US wants Europe and the EU to take the lead. However, US retrenchment and Europe’s growing strategic autonomy will have consequences for NATO and how the alliance in the future will be governed. In this situation, NATO is not the main institution where the Euro-Atlantic partners formulate and make policy responses. Therefore, the Ukrainian conflict is also about the future of the European security order, including how this order will be institutionalised. At the same time the European countries, including the EU, have been unwilling to understand the basic strategic dilemma they face in terms of how to handle this conflict.

NATO’s ability to respond

The first part of this strategic dilemma has to do with the continuing demilitarisation of Europe. Large parts of the general public and the political class are averse to military force and the risks that go with it. Undoubtedly, this has gone from a blessing in the 20th century, but has more become an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the 21st (Krastev & Leonard 2015:

51). The second part of the dilemma has to do with the financial crisis that began in 2008, making the European ability to promote stability in its geographical proximities in North Africa, the Middle East and in the Balkans, far more remote. Even though the EU's neighbourhood policy has been fairly successful, the real strategic dilemma European policymakers are facing now is to make "peace without money and war without the Americans", as Sven Biscop (2013) puts it.

The Europeans must therefore increase their defence spending and spend the extra funds more wisely through significantly more cross-border defence cooperation, coordination and integration. This implies to pool and share their defence resources and thereby spend the economic resources in a smarter way; i.e. the Smart Defence concept in NATO. But even now, during the worst European security conflict so far in the 21st century, several European countries are still cutting their defence budgets. In fact, most NATO members are doing little to reverse the decline in their defence spending. A report by the European Leadership Network (ELN) found that six countries, including two of the biggest defence spenders in Europe, Great Britain and Germany, will cut their defence expenditure in 2015 (Raynova & Kerns 2015). Defence spending in France, the third big spender in Europe, will remain static. In this perspective, NATO has so far not been able to react adequately to the new challenges posed by Russia.

Nevertheless, NATO has suspended cooperation and reduced its communication with Russia to a minimum. In this sense, NATO is more an instrument to protect European member states from Russian provocations than a platform for managing the Ukrainian conflict. This is a natural development. The US, NATO, the EU and the European member states must in the current situation prioritise to protect the institutionalised European security order, instead of conducting nation building operations outside Europe. NATO gave itself three essential core tasks in its 2010 Strategic Concept – collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security – but crisis management has in reality dominated during recent years (NATO 2010; Major 2015). The main danger with this development was that the NATO member states over the years gave priority to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan and as a consequence lost sight of what NATO originally was all about. The result was an "alliance adrift", a multi-layered alliance structure, and a lack of alliance cohesion (Knutson 2012: 7).

For NATO to be more relevant during this conflict, and not just an insurance policy, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) could have served as a channel for crisis communication and practical communication. Such a reformed NRC might therefore be a channel for trust building. The

problem so far, and as the Russian analyst Alexander Goltz pointed out long before the Ukraine conflict broke out, is that NATO and Russia can come to mutual understanding and mutual decisions even without the NRC (Webber, Sperling & Smith 2012: 135). As a consequence, and in reality, during its 13 years of existence NRC has so far not been an institution for joint NATO-Russian decision making. Therefore, and for the time being, NATO's focus is collective defence, also including "hybrid warfare", where the Wales summit declaration states that "... We will ensure that NATO is able to effectively address the specific challenges posed by hybrid warfare threats, where a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures are employed in a highly integrated design" (NATO 2014a). The ability of all the allies, both in the EU and in NATO, to understand and respond to this new type of warfare, consisting of regular, irregular and criminal elements that operates across real and virtual spaces, will therefore be essential to safeguarding the peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area (NATO 2015: 6).

NATO and Ukraine in a multipolar world

Some scholars and policy analysts, especially within the realist school of thought, have for a long time already predicted the coming of the multipolar world (see e.g. Layne 1993; Waltz 2000). When assessing the Ukrainian conflict from such a geostrategic perspective, the events so far have, at least to some extent, proved them correct. The US pivot towards Asia is a clear sign of such a development. EU's emerging strategic actorness has not been that of a great power either, but of a "small power" (Toje 2011), thus indicating that much of the world is losing their interest in what is going on in Europe. This has certainly also added urgency to debates concerning the place of the West in the international system. A former foreign policy advisor to the Russian president, professor Sergey Karaganov (2014), has tried to explain the origins of the conflict by pointing out that the West is much weaker and Russia far stronger than many imagine. Furthermore, he points out, for Russia the conflict is about stopping NATO's eastward expansion into areas that are of vital importance to Russia's survival. While such a statement could be characterised as an exaggeration, it nevertheless seems to be a fact that most non-European states in the world, apart from the close EU and US allies, tend to follow their own national interests in this conflict. Consequently, they will not side with either the East or the West in the struggle over Ukraine. From a geostrategic perspective, such a development is a manifest sign of the emerging multipolar order that is reshaping the global agenda, which furthermore will impact Ukraine in terms of security. Hence, the Ukrainian conflict has not had significant global consequences. This will most certainly affect Ukraine's future possibilities for joining the Western institutions.

For example, at the NATO 2008 summit in Bucharest the leaders welcomed Ukraine's and Georgia's aspirations for membership (NATO 2008). The summit also initiated a process that would have prepared these countries for a Membership Action Plan (MAP). As a consequence, the summit initiated a process of intensive engagement with both countries to address the questions still outstanding pertaining to their MAP applications. As of 2015, both countries are still far away from becoming members of NATO (and of the EU). In such a perspective, Ukraine will for the foreseeable future stay in this intermediate state or condition. This is most clearly a sign of a multipolar order where the Western values do not seem to have the same universal appeal anymore.

This leads us to a very serious paradox for Ukraine. The OSCE Helsinki Final Act from 1975 states that every European state has "the right to belong or not to belong to international organizations, to be or not to be a party to bilateral or multilateral treaties including the right to be or not to be a party to treaties of alliance; they also have the right to neutrality" (CSCE 1975). This statement has since the end of the Cold War not just been a principle, but also a norm underpinning the very existence of the current European security order and fundamental to European security and cooperation at large. Denying Ukraine membership in NATO, as some realists like Henry Kissinger (2014) advocate, will consequently be in fundamental breach with this norm. Nevertheless, NATO's study on enlargement from 1995 also emphasise that "... States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance" (NATO 1995). In such a perspective, Ukraine's relationship with the Euro-Atlantic security community will be a test-case for the very future of this community pertaining that Ukraine gets it acts together and develops a system of good governance and democratic conduct.

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East European Security Research Initiative (EESRI) is an informal discussion, analytical and information-sharing international platform aimed at uniting efforts of those experts and scientists from various countries, who are interested in finding effective ways for strengthening security in the Eastern Europe as the most vulnerable region of the common European security system.

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