



## **NATO's mounting internal challenges**

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The Warsaw summit, which took place on July 8 and 9, occurred at a time when the challenges facing the venerable North Atlantic Treaty Organization have never been more serious. Despite the usual expressions of alliance solidarity, there are numerous troubling developments that are likely to plague NATO in the coming months and years. How Western leaders handle those challenges will determine what kind of future the alliance has - or whether it will have any future at all.

The long-standing controversy about burden-sharing has acquired greater salience than at any time since the 1950s when US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles threatened to conduct "an agonizing reappraisal" of Washington's defense commitment to Europe unless the European allies did more for the collective defense effort. There has been only tepid progress toward meeting the commitment NATO members made a decade ago at the 2006 summit to devote at least 2% of their gross domestic product to defense. Five members now reach that very modest target, and there are indications that one or two more may do so soon. A large majority of members, though, still fall short of the benchmark, including some of the largest and most crucial members, such as Italy and Germany.

More significant, alliance burden-sharing has now become an issue in the US presidential campaign. Presumptive GOP nominee Donald Trump has excoriated NATO's European members for failing to invest sufficiently in defense. In his most high-profile foreign policy speech, Trump could scarcely have been more candid about the consequences if greater burden-sharing was not forthcoming. "Our allies are not paying their fair share," Trump stated flatly. "The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, and if not, the US must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves."

But burden-sharing is hardly the only major problem the alliance is confronting. There are noticeable fissures about the most pressing security issue: how to deal with Russia. Most of the East European members embrace a confrontational stance toward Moscow, believing that any sign of weakness will only encourage the Kremlin to become even more abrasive and belligerent. NATO's political and military leadership clearly favors a similar approach. So far, the hawkish strategy has largely prevailed. NATO has conducted air, naval, and ground force maneuvers in the Baltic region, the Black Sea, Poland, and Ukraine. The decision to deploy four battalions to the Baltic republics as a symbol of NATO's determination to defend even those highly vulnerable members reflected a similar mentality.

The hostile stance toward Russia is not without its dissenters, however. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier startled his alliance colleagues with extremely negative comments about NATO's large-scale military exercises in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Such measures, Steinmeier stated, were "counterproductive," and he admonished NATO leaders to avoid "saber-rattling and warmongering." We are "well advised not to create pretexts to renew an old confrontation."

It is not coincidental that Germany was one of the major NATO countries most adamant about not extending membership invitations to Ukraine and Georgia, despite a vigorous lobbying effort by the United States, Britain, and most East European members. Berlin has also been, at best, a reluctant supporter of the Western economic sanctions imposed on Russia for its annexation of Crimea and its support of secessionists in eastern Ukraine. But Germany is not the only NATO member to exhibit doubts about the increasingly hardline policy toward Russia. Both Hungary and the Czech Republic have shown some reluctance. Turkey's recent, very public, reconciliation with Moscow may lead to a further erosion of any NATO consensus in favor of an aggressive policy.

Washington may not even be able to count on its loyal British ally for effective support to counteract the influence of Germany and the other more accommodating countries. Although the Brexit does not directly impact NATO, it is yet another source of intra-Western turbulence. Indeed, the aftermath of the Brexit vote raises questions about the continued viability of the United Kingdom itself. The vote has triggered a strong resurgence of secessionist sentiment in both Scotland and Northern Ireland. A breakup of the UK would have far-reaching implications for NATO and for America's influence in the alliance.

Potentially the darkest cloud on the horizon for NATO, though, is the US presidential election. Although Hillary Clinton is reliably committed to the status quo regarding NATO (as she is on nearly every other major foreign policy topic), Donald Trump is not. As noted, he has raised the burden-sharing issue in rather blunt and caustic terms. But Trump has sometimes gone beyond that question to express doubts about the wisdom of America's alliance commitments generally, especially NATO. On more than one occasion, he has scorned NATO as "obsolete." A Trump administration would be almost certain to demand major reforms in NATO, and it is not out of the realm of possibility that he would even seek a US withdrawal.

Those dignitaries gathered for the Warsaw summit show few indications of even being aware of the proliferating warning signs. Nevertheless, the fissures in the alliance are growing more pronounced and more serious. NATO could well be on the brink of an internal crisis.

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