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Is NATO Ready to Adapt to New Threats? The Bucharest Meeting and Allied Solidarity

Artur Kacprzyk, Wojciech Lorenz

On the joint invitation of Poland and Romania, the presidents of nine Central and Eastern European NATO countries will gather for talks in Bucharest on 4 November. Contrary to concerns expressed by some of the other Allies, the meeting's aim is not to cause a split in NATO. A rift within the Alliance would be against the best interests of Poland and other countries that live under the shadow of a resurgent Russia and benefit greatly from NATO membership and solidarity.

For the last two decades, NATO has been developing its ability to run expeditionary missions and has lost its competence for territorial defence. Since Russia had been perceived as a partner until recently, NATO had not developed mechanisms necessary for defence of the new member states from Russian aggression. This situation has drastically changed with Russia's actions against Ukraine, annexation of its sovereign territory and threats against NATO border states.

Need for Stronger Deterrence in NATO's East. NATO is trying to adapt to the new situation without provoking Russia, mainly by enhancing the Alliance's ability to deploy troops to Central and Eastern Europe. On one hand, NATO is developing a 5,000-strong rapid reaction unit, which should be ready to aid a threatened or attacked Ally in a couple of days. On the other hand, Russia has repeatedly demonstrated regional superiority by mobilizing tens of thousands of troops on NATO's border within several hours, ready to operate under the umbrella of tactical nuclear weapons.

For Russian President Vladimir Putin, who perceives NATO to be the main obstacle to his regional and global ambitions, this imbalance might be an invitation to undermine the credibility of the Alliance. Should he try and succeed, Europe would lose a fundamental pillar of its security, with grave consequences not only for the easternmost NATO members but also for the whole of Europe and U.S. standing in the world.

From the Polish perspective, the priority should be a long-term boost of NATO's eastern defences to strengthen the credibility of NATO's collective defence guarantee. This would provide NATO with the necessary level of deterrence and will hopefully discourage Putin from playing *va banque* against the Alliance. It does not, however, mean that Warsaw perceives Russia as an eternal enemy.

Meaningful cooperation with its neighbour would be most favourable for Poland, which strived to improve relations with Russia in past years, including launching a bilateral "reset" in 2009. Unfortunately, those efforts eventually failed, as did the efforts of NATO and the U.S. These failures have had negative consequences for transatlantic security and need to be addressed. It is therefore praiseworthy that NATO has finally ramped up its exercises in the east and improved its reinforcement capabilities. Although much more needs to be done, the initial investments in the eastern flank have already raised some tension within the Alliance.

Countering Instability in NATO's South. The threat from the so-called Islamic State, the war in Syria and the ongoing migration crisis directly influence the sense of security of the southern NATO Allies, which would like to see more meaningful support from the Alliance. Unexpectedly, Russia's actions have also affected NATO's southern flank directly. Its air campaign in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime fuels further carnage in Syria, risking further growth in the number of refugees heading to Europe.

Potentially powerful mechanisms to deal with the effects and causes of the crises to NATO's south are there and only waiting to be exploited. If NATO has developed anything significant in the last two decades, it is the ability to influence security outside its borders through its crisis-management capabilities and partnerships with more than 40 different states. During the last summit in Wales in 2014, the Allies approved a policy that should help strengthen the partner states' capacity for improving security in the Middle East and North Africa. NATO is also well prepared to combat security risks emanating from its south, both inside and outside its territory and in cooperation with the European Union.

Allied Solidarity as a Key to Successful Adaptation. To keep NATO strong and united, countries to its east and south should be open to political decisions that enhance the security of both flanks. At least for Poland it is clear that without unity there will be no credible collective defence guarantee. Building regional unity in Bucharest is an important step on the path to the summit of all NATO countries in Warsaw in 2016, where the whole Alliance should demonstrate its determination to adapt to all the threats it faces, including from its east and south.