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THE (NOT SO) ROARING TWENTIES?



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NATO IS FOCUSING ON CHANGE

Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo

WE are well-aware that the international scene is evolving in a manner that few people would have anticipated a few years ago. We also understand that it is essential to embrace change in order to survive in an increasingly difficult environment—that we need a clever reading of facts and good analysis to come to grips with the changes all around us.

If we look at NATO, the first thing to notice is that the Atlantic Alliance now has a membership of 30 sovereign states; the second is that such a large number makes it more difficult to find a consensus on shared priorities than was the case during the Cold War (at the end of which we were 16 member-states). At that time, the world was clearly divided into two blocs. This is no longer the case today, and it appears highly unlikely that it will be the case in the 2020s.

Today, there are different threat perceptions, and they make internal cohesion more problematic than in the past when the international situation was easier to understand. The consequence is that there is a common perception that reforms have to be made and that the time has come for such a complex exercise. This is not going to happen for the first time in the history of NATO—in fact, NATO's longevity and success to date have been rooted in its ability to adapt to changing strategic circumstances.

The Treaty of Washington—NATO's founding act—was signed in 1949, at the beginning of the long period of the Cold War that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. But it was only afterwards, during the troubled dissolution of Yugoslavia, that NATO had to prove for the first time its crisis management capacity. Then, in 2003, the Alliance

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NATO's iconic emblem in the foreground of its headquarters in Brussels

Photo: CIRS

was deployed far away to Afghanistan in an unexpected operation against international terrorism. A difficult out of area experience undertaken without any previous knowledge of this kind of challenge. A decade later, in 2014, Russia occupied Crimea, which created a new set of questions about the role of NATO, notwithstanding the fact that Ukraine is not a member of the Atlantic Alliance. The clock has been readjusted to a semi-Cold War hour, and a low-medium intensity confrontation is still on-going. Looking ahead to the 2020s, such facts look obsolete from an historic point of view because the future of the security of the planet lies elsewhere.

In the past few years, the Trump Administration had not helped, as the American president maintained an aggressive attitude towards the Atlantic Alliance. His points are well known. He claimed that the United States was contributing a disproportionate amount of resources to protect its European allies, which are profiting from this situation. Had he been reelected last November, it is quite possible that the United States would have left NATO.

In the meantime, NATO has continued to adapt and modernize from a military point of view. On the other hand, a unified political dimension

seems to be lacking due to the fact that members have different priorities. Political cohesion has become difficult; this is unsurprising given that our membership goes from Estonia and Portugal to Iceland and Greece. The weight of the Baltics and Poland has been prevailing in the past few years, extending the military arm of the Alliance to the east to confront Russian ambitions.

Will this policy continue to prevail in the future? It is difficult to say because threats from the south are also relevant, both in terms of instability and international terrorism.

All these are familiar scenarios, but today there is a new call to “project security” far away, in the Indo-Pacific. We have seen a U.S.-China confrontation unfolding before our eyes, especially in terms of technology and trade. We don’t know the parameters of a possible NATO involvement and we can presume that it will be discussed at the next NATO Summit, scheduled for later this year. All in all, NATO finds itself in uncharted waters with no clear direction.

The point is that a deep political discussion is required: there are many issues at stake and they need to be carefully considered in order to give NATO a

new political approach and a fresh look into its decisionmaking process. Thankfully, this process of reform has already begun. It started in December 2019 with the establishment of an independent Reflection Group, co-chaired by Thomas de Maizière and A. Wess Mitchell. It

began its work in April 2020 and in late November of that year released a 65-page report entitled *NATO 2030: United for A New Era*.

The realization that more reform is necessary is not bad news, because it shows the vitality of the organization: a political-military alliance that has proven more than once to be able to adapt to a changing political environment.

Having said that, let’s have a look at NATO and consider the Alliance in terms of its added value. First, it maintains a solid civilian-military relationship. This means, in substance, that military advice cannot be influenced by external considerations; it also means that it is the civilians who are going to make the final political decisions.

A second basic feature is the interoperability of the armed forces of its member-states, which is without parallel in the world. This has been proven in various operations, ranging from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Afghanistan,

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whereby NATO has managed to put together, in a coordinated way, forces from up to 40 different nationalities.

Thirdly, NATO also has the unique capacity to be able to launch large-scale operations at long distances. This is made possible by the military expertise existing at its headquarters in Brussels and at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), located near Mons in Belgium. And of course the expertise of the militaries of its member-states who are used to working together.

In other words, we are speaking of a pragmatic organization, one that is very operational and attuned to the importance of crisis management. The decisions NATO takes are essentially political. They are taken by consensus in sessions of the North Atlantic Council, whereby an extensive and discreet consultation takes place before a decision is announced. Consensus, it has to be noted, does not mean formal unanimity; rather, it is a softer concept that has worked well in practice.

Not to be forgotten is the fact that NATO has a clause allowing for reciprocal assistance in case of aggression. In other words, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty legitimizes an allies intervention in support of another ally under

attack on the European Continent or in North America.

Moreover, it should be noted that NATO has a minimal common budget. The civilian budget covers only basic expenses, while practical activities are financed directly by states, whereby every member bears its own costs.

The principle of “costs lie where they fall” is important for both political and financial reasons. In practice it means that every member-state takes its own responsibilities on the role that it plays in an operation. This approach differs in a substantial way from the European Union, which disposes of a large common budget from which every member-state tries to maximize its benefit.

Looking back, we may recall once more that NATO was born in relation to the advent of the Cold War. It lasted in that context for two generations. Especially near the end of that first phase, deterrence was conceived as a mix of dialogue and engagement.

In the second phase of its life, the Alliance was engaged in crisis management beyond the borders of its member-states, starting with the unexpected wars accompanying the dissolution of Yugoslavia. This began in Bosnia and

Hercegovina, where NATO made a difference both from a political and military point of view. The success of the 1995 Dayton Agreement has been recorded. It certainly was not perfect but the accords represented the only way, at the time, to stop a bloody conflict. After that, we witnessed the 1999 bombing campaign against Serbia over Kosovo, well-known in its causes, that lasted for 78 days and produced a regrettable heavy toll of human suffering.

Finally, in 2001 a third operation took place in the Western Balkans—this time in North Macedonia—in order to prevent the onset of a civil war. This effort was successful overall, notwithstanding its difficult political context.

History never unfolds in an orderly way and the 9/11 attacks orchestrated by Osama bin Laden cancelled all the previous books, so to speak. One consequence was that in 2003 NATO went to Kabul in order to fight international terrorism under the auspices of the UN Security Council. This operation ended on December 31st, 2014 but was followed by a “train and equip” operation that is still ongoing. Its purpose is to prepare the Afghan security forces and the country’s military, and does not involve any combat role. We still don’t know at present if a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban will end up being reached; nor do we know what this would mean for NATO.

Now we can come to discuss the 2011 Libya operation. It is a special case for various reasons, including the fact that, for the first time, not all NATO member-states took part in it. It is also special because the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council gave their formal approval to the operation, which included an active role of some Arab countries. The NATO air campaign over Libya was decided hurriedly after the failure of the intervention decided by the French President Nicolas Sarkozy. With a few exceptions—Russia being a notable example—the international community was not hostile to the operation: Muamar Ghaddafi, the country’s longtime leader, did not enjoy much international sympathy at that time.

The Libya operation also represented a moment of confusion, because the objective of the NATO air campaign was not meant to be “regime change,” but things developed in a different way.

A debated issue centers on the fact that, after the fall of the Ghaddafi regime, the Atlantic Alliance did not follow up with the provision of support for the reconstruction of the nation—not even its security institutions. There was never a consensus on this issue.

Let’s next turn to examining the present. NATO is now entering a new chapter of its history. The pandemic took everyone in the Alliance by

surprise, and we still don’t know what will follow. Who can seriously answer the following two questions with any degree of certainty: What kind of world order will emerge in the post-pandemic era? What will the end of the 2020s look like?

The first indications show that resilience prevailed in most of the important Asian countries, and that many of these demonstrated a capacity to recover from the economic crisis. This has nothing to do with democracy and human rights. On the contrary, we have the impression that in cases like COVID-19, authoritarian rule works more efficiently than democratic rule, where citizens are often critical of restrictions.

In any case, China has emerged in the last decade as a challenger to the traditional balance of power; and its government’s attitude and public stance is now very different from what it used to be. Why has this become the case? The country no longer consider itself to be a developing state; and Beijing’s present leaders think China is a great power, ready to oppose and challenge those who refuse to recognize this new posture.

In the past few years, commercial disputes have emerged, and this has resulted in a serious U.S.-China confrontation

over tariff duties (subsequently this confrontation has widened and likely deepened). The Biden Administration now has to decide on a new political line. Consider in this context that in early March 2021, Secretary of State Tony Blinken described

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China as the “only country with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system,” adding that handling China represents the “biggest geopolitical test of the

twenty-first century.” We should also add that, like it or not, the COVID-19 virus originated in China, and of course this reality has not helped Beijing attract sympathy towards itself.

How does all this affect NATO? The answer is that we simply don’t know yet. A heads of state and government summit, featuring the new American president, is likely to take place in a few months’ time, and the China issue will be on the table. What I think we can expect is a reinforcement of ties with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea; regular consultations can easily be foreseen to involve some kind of new partnership. But it is too soon to say anything beyond that. Nevertheless, some people are speaking of a global NATO, although it would be better to speak of NATO with global partners.

This is only one aspect of the anticipated reform of the organization. The aforementioned Reflection Group worked extensively on their final report; and they worked with the declared purpose of enhancing the political dimension of NATO. Many of us remember that the Emmanuel Macron had declared in an interview that NATO was brain dead.

Next, we should note that the military side of the organization has evolved regularly over the years whilst keeping its efficiency, political consultations have lost their momentum. A question has arisen regarding NATO's priorities; another regarding improvements to the decisionmaking process; and a third on the political tools at the disposal of the Alliance.

The issue is of course very difficult because it implies a process of deep reforms. The process of consultations on reform is now to be pursued directly by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg under the overall theme of "keeping the Alliance as a strategic anchor in uncertain times" and in accordance with the assessment made by the independent Reflection Group that "NATO remains indispensable." Stoltenberg has promised to make proposals to the NATO heads of state and government

by the end of 2021. A proof of good will, certainly, but it is more easily said than put into practice.

At this moment, the declared assumption in Brussels is that the fundamental purpose of NATO is "more demonstrably clear today than it has been for decades"—in the words of the report issued by the aforementioned Group. This is quite an ambitious statement and some comfort can be

drawn from the Alliance's demonstrated ability to adapt in times of historical change and transformation. The same report states that "today, NATO stands as history's most successful alliance, encompassing nearly a billion people and half of global GDP across a space that stretches from the Pacific coast of North America to the Black Sea." This should be read alongside the preamble to the Washington Treaty, which states that NATO's member-states "seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area."

If we look at the report of the Reflection Group we see an ambitious vision for NATO in 2030—an "Alliance defined by vitality, utility, relevance, and endurance. By the end of the decade, no matter the strategic environment," the Report says, NATO will need to:

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- Uphold its role as the bedrock of peace, stability, and the rule of law in the Euro-Atlantic area;
- Remain the strategic center of gravity for collective defense of all its members on the basis of an up-to-date Strategic Concept;
- Strengthen its role as the unique and essential forum to which Allies turn on all major national security challenges, proactively seeking to forge consensus and build common strategies for dealing with common threats;
- Play a larger part in an international order in which open societies can flourish and be secure and prosperous; a world in which a plurality of worldviews and fundamental differences of opinion are no obstacle to dialogue and cooperation;
- Enjoy deeper strategic and mutually reinforcing connections with partners that share these principles and aspirations, affirming the Helsinki Final Act principle that all states have the right to choose their security arrangements; and, where partnership is not possible, a commitment to work towards shared security on the basis of mutual respect;
- Possess a stronger relationship and intensify consultation on issues of common concern with the European Union built on the foundations of cooperation, with a view to taking advantage of different capabilities and toolkits.

This six-point vision for 2030 is predicated on an awareness of the fact that the external security environment has changed dramatically since the present Strategic Concept was made public in 2010. The report of the Reflection Group recommends writing a new one, which will not be an easy task. So far, the only consensus is that such a new document should be based on collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. Those three priorities, which are also the cornerstones of the present Strategic Concept, will be maintained, but it looks as though these will remain the only elements of continuity.

At this juncture, it seems to me that emphasis will be placed on climate change and green defense, and also on security issues linked to natural disasters and pandemics. Terrorism, the report of the Reflection Group tells us, should also be incorporated more fully into NATO's core tasks. The list is a long one and quite impressive: arms control and nuclear deterrence, artificial intelligence, outer space, political cohesion and unity, decisionmaking, cooperation, and enhanced political consultation with the European Union.

In addition, there is a solid view that emerging and disruptive technologies will change the nature of warfare and enable new forms of attacks with hypersonic missiles and hybrid operations.

Therefore a special focus will almost certainly be dedicated to this complex and very innovative area.

As NATO looks to 2030, it will also need to address the issue of relations with Russia. Here, the strategic direction will likely remain based on the “dual-track approach of deterrence and dialogue,” as the report of the Reflection Group indicates. This is of course not new and it basically means that things will remain, more or less, as they are presently.

Of no less importance is China. Here the report of the Reflection Group states that “NATO must devote much more time, political resources, and action to the security challenges posed by China.” The new Strategic Concept, the report concludes, will need to develop a “political strategy for approaching a world in which China will be of growing importance through to 2030.”

The ongoing discussions with regards to the new NATO Strategic Concept also touches upon the reinforcement of partnerships and the necessity to have a clear and coherent approach to its southern, Mediterranean flank. No detailed program has been proposed to date, except the recommendation to strengthen the “Hub for the South at JFC Naples,” as the Reflection Group’s report puts it. This is not much to go on, as yet, although it is obvious that

the proposed posture towards NATO’s eastern flank is different than the one proposed for the South. With regards to the latter, emphasis is placed on the best way to support fragile governments exposed to threats coming from instability, international terrorism, and non-state actors.

How the governments of the NATO member-states will be able to reach conclusions remains to be seen. It is an easy prediction to make that it will be difficult to reach consensus on so many things, while at the same time change continues to take place before our eyes—deep-seated change that NATO will necessarily have to embrace.

I think that for an international reader it is relevant to perceive the present attitude of the Atlantic Alliance with regards to the question of new membership. The answer is that in all relevant documents issued by NATO—including the conclusions of the Reflection Group’s report—the Alliance’s Open Door Policy is reconfirmed: the terms used in the report are “upheld and reinvigorated.” This same document explicitly states that the “door should remain open to all European democracies that aspire to join NATO structures and who are able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership and contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area.”

We should note that in the past decade, NATO has enlarged exclusively in the Balkans: Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020. Serbia remains the most important country in South-east Europe. There is a special history here that justifies the present situation, and we know and understand that the weight of the past does not go away easily. However, the time has come to review old memo-

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ries and to turn a new page. Historical countries like Serbia cannot remain behind history. I well remember December 2006 when I opened for the first time a NATO military office in Belgrade thanks to a joint decision between the Alliance and the Serbian government led by Boris Tadić—the country’s first ever democratically-elected president. I was happy to be there and I thought that it was a good decision, being convinced that an historical country like Serbia deserved a special attention. Since that time, a fruitful dialogue has developed, and it should continue.

Like every other geopolitical actor in the 2020s, NATO will be kept busy in a challenging and turbulent time. We live in a fluid epoch whereby change is happening in all directions. Right now, little is certain. We don’t even know the kind of world that awaits us in the immediate aftermath of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic—much less what the planet will look like at the end of the decade.

This is something that’s visible and obvious to pretty much any ordinary citizen anywhere in the world. As for NATO, I think it’s clear that we cannot remain where we were without doing something to be in tune with visible changes; this is also obviously true for international security in general. NATO wishes to adapt, as other actors do, and the process will move forward. The Atlantic Alliance is far from being perfect, but it remains the most valid political-military tool in the arsenal of the international community, with its members being comprised of vital democracies in tune with our times. ●