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## NATO Transformation

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>“NATO TRANSFORMATION IS ABOUT STRENGTHENING OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD”..</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Interview with Ambassador Tacan Ildem, NATO Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy</i>	
<b>FUTURE OF NATO IN LIGHT OF TRANSATLANTIC CRISIS .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>Karyna Rohulia</i>	
<b>THE EU-NATO COOPERATION: PERSPECTIVES FOR MORE AUTONOMOUS EUROPE? .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<i>Margarita Mironova</i>	
<b>NATO’S BRUSSELS SUMMIT AND UKRAINE’S ASPIRATIONS FOR MEMBERSHIP: THE ALLIANCE’S NEW AGENDA.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>Mykola Kapitonenko</i>	
<b>ANNUAL NATIONAL PROGRAMMES AS AN INSTRUMENT OF EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION OF UKRAINE .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<i>Ihor Todorov</i>	
<b>THE NEW UKRAINE-NATO ANNUAL NATIONAL PROGRAMME: CHANGE OF ESSENCE RATHER THAN FORM .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<i>Inna Potapova</i>	
<b>NATO’S ENHANCED FORWARD PRESENCE: CHANGING THE ESCALATION DOMINANCE CALCULUS IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<i>András Rácz</i>	

# FUTURE OF NATO IN LIGHT OF TRANSATLANTIC CRISIS

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***Today, relations between the US and major European powers are still strained, and their hottest points are currently attributed to the “inadequate Trump policy”. It is not so obvious as it seems, because even during the presidency of Obama one could overview the disagreements between the partners. These were covert disagreements, which the parties tried not to show. Now Washington wants to set its own terms, thus demonstrating all the problems the parties have. The main question is how flexible the partners could be in order not only to save the unity, but to show the desire to strengthen NATO alliance and respond to the existing challenges.***

## **Transatlantic Cooperation: What Is Next?**

Current trends and events indicate that the world order is changing. The balance of power among states, their tactics and strategies, and the rules of the game are also changing. The rules, regulations, and institutions that have governed for centuries the interstate relations and relationships among major international actors have faced challenges such as reduced role of the US leadership, more assertive China, political populism, and technological changes.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the issue of the new world order remains open and the results of existing races for geopolitical advantages will become important elements in the formation of new rules of the game.

Contemporary events indicate the growing crises in the transatlantic relationship. Although a lot of experts relate this to the ascension to power of the Trump administration, the discrepancies between the partners have appeared a long time ago. Obama's policy was more liberal towards the EU member states and NATO partners, but during his presidency, the Europeans have expressed objections. Indeed, problems in the transatlantic relationship arose long before Trump became the president of the United States.

Democratic Europe, where peace and prosperity have dominated over the last 70 years, where liberal and democratic values are the cornerstone of any process, has recently faced populist nationalist movements as a result of a significant

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<sup>1</sup> A. Ward, *Chatham House Expert Perspectives 2018 Risks and Opportunities in International Affairs*, 19 June 2018 [<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-06-19-chatham-house-expert-perspectives-2018-final2.pdf> access: 07 December 2018].

increase of refugee flows from the Middle East and Africa. For the first time since the Second World War, representatives of the right-wing parties received a significant number of seats in the German Bundestag. Authoritarianism has replaced democracy, or threatens to, in such European states as Hungary and Poland. Democracy and liberal values have been endangered in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Right-wing nationalists came to power in Italy and foreign-political rhetoric is moving rapidly away from benefiting European unity, on the basis of which the EU was created.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Great Britain, which played a significant role in European politics during and after the Cold War, has stepped down and positions itself as a passive observer of the European agenda. The probability that dark times will come to Europe is now even greater than it was during the Cold War. This probability is even bigger if Europeans fail to maintain unity, and their common goal will no longer be equally important for each member state of the EU.

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***Disunity within the EU on a number of important issues such as finance, migrants, populism, and energy does not allow member states to rely on each other, so the transatlantic security vector is extremely important to this end***

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Quite a different situation can be observed within the framework of the American foreign agenda. Today Trump is trying not only to change and reorganise relations with partners and rivals, but also to change

the model of the world order: getting from the point where the US was the dominant power in the democratic world and coming to the point where the United States becomes a standalone player, no longer responsible for those with whom it stood side by side before.

These are the conditions of today's transatlantic relations. On the one hand, each centre of power is plunged into its own problems, and on the other, it tries to drag the blanket on itself. However, the current course and deterioration of the US-European relations have a rather well defined basis. First of all, we are talking about Trump's zero-sum foreign policy paradigm, which aims at both – a lack of loss and a lack of win for the other party. This paradigm is clearly traced in the Trump economic policy, but it has a significant impact on foreign policy. Another important aspect is economic protectionism as a priority for implementation of the election promises of returning production to the United States, in particular in the context of attempts to adjust the trade balance in favour of the United States. There are also the first attempts to resume dialogue with Russia, as evidenced by the recent Helsinki summit, which is strategically important for the United States in the context of China's containment.

At the same time, there are a number of provisions on which the parties are unable to reach an agreement, in both political and economic spheres, as well as in a number of related areas.

This also applies to commitments and contributions to the North Atlantic Alliance, which is directly related to the difference

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<sup>2</sup> R. Kagan, *NATO's Global Peace Is Unraveling and We Can't See It*, Brookings Institution, 15 July 2018 [<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/07/15/natos-global-peace-is-unraveling-and-we-cant-see-it/?fbclid=IwAR3v89qH4UMey14CKrcjzQ0imRtDLcP8KvNhGB10Z9zuwzz-VbuvZWHMBHs> access: 07 December 2018].

in views on European security. The other aspect is that Trump manipulates the defence spending issue to reduce the US trade deficit.

The economic aspects relate to the Trump administration's vision of the world economic system, in which multilateralism must dominate. In addition, significant differences are observed both in relation to climate policies of the parties and within the framework of the implementation of the Middle East policies, especially under conditions when Trump officially implements the US policy of recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, as well as withdrawal from a nuclear deal with Iran.

Disunity within the EU on a number of important issues such as finance, migrants, populism, and energy does not allow member states to rely on each other, so the transatlantic security vector is extremely important to this end. Transatlantic unity is necessary for the Europeans, because it is the basis of stability, which was laid after the World War II and is an integral part of European security and European integration, especially in the face of growing threats from Russia.

Thus, a weak European position in the world will make it easier for other players to play disagreements and enjoy the benefits of European fragmentation, to set the EU member states against each other, and to watch how the European continent turns once more into a playground for influential games – quite similar to the Cold War, but much smaller, with a lot of players and little alliances. That is the reason for Europe's consolidation against external threats, and Trump's manoeuvres do not matter much in this context.

## **Transatlanticism Is about NATO, but to What Extent?**

Today the NATO members from both sides of the Atlantic try to draw the Alliance into a political discourse that is quite negative. NATO is about security and defence, not about tariffs and quota. Of course, globalisation brings adjustments, but it would be incorrect to assume that the North Atlantic Alliance has lost its significance.

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***NATO without politics would not have been so effective both in former Yugoslavia and in the struggle against Russian hybrid aggression against the European democracies***

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The events of past years are a vivid testimony to the fact that NATO has been in good shape. The Suez Crisis, Vietnam, the deployment of missiles in Europe in the end of the 1970s, Afghanistan, the Kuwait crisis, the collapse of Yugoslavia – this list is not endless, but in difficult years of confrontation with the USSR or activities without a UN mandate, NATO member states have always shown a high degree of resilience, even when some of them were not truly involved in specific military operations.

From this point of view, it can be stated that NATO without politics would not have been so effective both in former Yugoslavia and in the struggle against Russian hybrid aggression against the European democracies. But with the Trump administration in power, bilateral political discussions began to replace the transatlantic political discourse. If it is all

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<sup>3</sup> D. Trump, Twitter, 11 July 2018 [https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1017093020783710209?lang=bg access: 07 December 2018].

about low defence spending of the European NATO members, then this is not a problem of the last two years. European states have always funded defence less, although predominantly they were more interested in it due to the territorial proximity to the source of threat. This tendency prevails today.

Strategically, Trump's logic is defined by his political motivation to deal with purely American affairs. The inquiries as to why the US should pay billions of dollars to finance Europe's security while Germany pays money for Russian gas.<sup>3</sup> However, such a strategy cannot succeed for two reasons. First, Trump tries to discredit not just Europe but the Alliance as a whole, which was clearly demonstrated during the Brussels Summit 2018, when Trump's actions showed that he did not want to negotiate, first of all on account of defence spending. Secondly, such a policy of discrediting does not play into the hands of European leaders, who ultimately lose their public support.

Nevertheless, most hypotheses in this context are formed in terms of historical retrospective. And the issue of defence spending is not an exception. The year 1949 marked the first active phase of the Cold War, and it was not a European war. By creating NATO, the United States sought to consolidate much of the space in this geopolitical struggle with the Soviet Union. It was no less Washington's political interest than a European one. Another point, the operations in Libya and Afghanistan, financed by European money, are also the political interest of the White House with the support of some European countries. Trump neglects these important moments, or it may be more correct to say that such a thought has never crossed his mind.

Reviewing Trump's political actions over the past two years, it can be concluded that quite often Trump acts like a businessman, not a politician, even on security issues

related to NATO. For Trump, the short-term deal is more valuable than an alliance based on shared values and goals. Thus, Trump criticises not only the North Atlantic Treaty, but also those ones that do not suit him as a businessman.

However, even under the current conditions, two years prior to the Trump era, at a NATO summit in 2014, the Alliance member states undertook the strategic decision to increase their defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2024 given the economic stability. European partners are specifically interested in improving stability and make significant contributions to the transatlantic security.

Firstly, it is about the fight against terrorism and instability. The EU mission in Mali, the Central African Republic, and in the Mediterranean Sea is a major effort to prevent the spread of extremism and terrorism in these regions, and they are within mutual security interests of the United States and Europe. Given the fact that the interests of the United States and Europe coincide in regard to the politically stable Balkans, the EU plays a significant role in regional security through missions to Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The second major EU contribution to transatlantic security is the European Defence Action Plan and Permanent Structured Cooperation, which can enhance defence capabilities. The EU-coordinated plans to increase defence capabilities will enable more coordinated action with NATO structures, while relying on domestic resources, avoiding "significant contributions" from the US budget.

Due to Trump's subjectivity in foreign policy and the efforts of European partners to maintain unity in transatlantic relations, it can be concluded that the North Atlantic Alliance is an integral part of the broad range of relationships, namely transatlantic.

## The Joint Hybrid Battlefront

The difference in political views among the Alliance members determines the future of the organisation as a whole, but it also depends on the ability and willingness to negotiate. To date, such a desire has been demonstrated, and the results of the agreements have been implemented.

Having a closer look at the underlying moments on which NATO members are concentrated in the face of a common threat is important. Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is taken as an example.

The methods chosen by Russia in its unconventional war against European democracies are essentially hybrid, and their key function is to carry out a destructive role within specific states. In this way Russia is trying to undermine not only the European, but also transatlantic security. Russian propaganda and disinformation are the basis by which it tries to create a “parallel reality”. Undermining of cyber security and elections meddling are integral elements of this strategy.

The latest developments, linked to the aggression of the Russian Federation in Donbas and the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russian interference in elections in European countries and the United States, Salisbury poisoning, and a number of other events led to a complete overhaul of European and transatlantic security preferences. Given the current events that occur not only in CEE but also in Western Europe, it can be mentioned that Kremlin is interested in creating new conflict zones in Central and Eastern Europe. In such a way, Russia is trying to regain control over the post-Soviet space, as well as a part of Europe that had been controlled by the Soviet Union, to restore the status of a “superpower”.

International organisations such as the European Union and NATO should be

referred to as important international actors, involved in shaping the security situation in Central and Eastern Europe, and also directly affecting its dynamics.

Given the expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance to the East after the end of the Cold War, Russia felt the threat to its security because the territories that were controlled by Moscow in the Soviet era became an integral part of NATO. It can be argued that NATO's second expansion since the end of the Cold War in Central and Eastern Europe – on the Eastern Flank – took place precisely in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Indirectly it is related to the security of Ukraine, because the security of the transatlantic region closely correlates with it. On the other hand, NATO is strengthening its Eastern flank in the context of aggressive action on the territories close to its borders.

As a result of this policy, the defence spending of NATO member countries is gradually increasing to 2% of GDP. This is not closely related to Trump's policy, since discussions of this issue started in 2014-2015. In the context of such geopolitical confrontation, NATO has stopped any cooperation with the Russian Federation, leaving only a “window for dialogue”.

Another issue that became very important after the onset of aggression is the protection of critical infrastructure and cyber-sphere. Due to the activity of the Russian Federation in the cyberspace, cyber security was officially recognised as the fifth area of operations after the NATO Summit in Warsaw (Poland) in 2016. In order to strengthen security in Central and Eastern Europe, the Alliance is relying on deterrence of Russian aggression, especially through cooperation with the EU and Ukraine.

Taking into account the situation in Ukraine, caused by Russian armed and hybrid aggression, Ukraine is considered as a possible security provider for Central



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***when the same values are of a different weight for the partners and unresolved issues give reason to forget about these values, a joint threat becomes a converging element***

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and Eastern Europe, a key component and a major player in European security, a new Eastern European pillar for transatlantic security.<sup>4</sup> Such conclusions are based on its role as the Eastern outpost in counteracting new challenges and threats with a key role in deterring Russia's aggressive policy. From this perspective, one could explain NATO's high attention to Ukraine; joint trainings, trust funds, increased funding of numerous projects are the evidence of NATO coordinated and joint work on the front-line against Russian hybrid aggression.

## **Conclusions**

Transatlantic relations are not ideal today and have a number of sharp angles, but in the face of external threats, both sides of the Atlantic are ready to work together. It can be concluded that this is not just another family quarrel between the United States and Europe; it is a fundamental change in the rules of the game in the new geopolitical reality.

In essence, the future of transatlantic relations will determine NATO's future. To date, both elements lack unity, but with the transformation of the world order, the essence of the relationship is changing as well. Long ago, member states united on the basis of common values. Today, when the same values are of a different weight for the partners and unresolved issues give reason to forget about these values, a joint threat becomes a converging element. In the case of NATO, as long as there is a common threat, there will still be a common motivation for partners to be members of the transatlantic alliance. Significant changes in the rules of the game in the new geopolitical reality that is being formed are on the way. This will be the main challenge for NATO in the coming years.

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<sup>4</sup> *Regional Security in Eastern Europe: Place and Engagement of Ukraine*, Centre for Global Studies Strategy XXI, 28 November 2017 [[https://geostrategy.org.ua/images/Policy-Paper\\_EE\\_Eng.pdf](https://geostrategy.org.ua/images/Policy-Paper_EE_Eng.pdf) access: 16 December 2018].