

WHY DEFENSE MATTERS: A NEW NARRATIVE FOR NATO

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is in search of a new narrative. While Russia's involvement in Eastern Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea will not give NATO a new sense of solidarity, these events have highlighted what the alliance and its members must urgently do. It is time for all NATO countries to engage in a real strategic debate about why defense matters and what members should do to uphold the transatlantic relationship.

A Disjointed Alliance

- Alliance countries face many threats apart from Russia, including terrorism, cyberattacks, instability south of the Mediterranean and in the Sahel in particular, Iran's nuclear program, and China's strategic ambitions. NATO has no strategies to deal with them.
- NATO members' defense spending is declining, but there is no political will to pool and share military capabilities.
- NATO countries perceive threats differently, which weakens alliance solidarity and purpose, putting NATO at risk of becoming a toolbox for coalitions of the willing.
- Washington will not reverse its strategic shift to Asia and refocus on Europe despite the Ukraine crisis, but NATO is unprepared to deal with America's new priorities.
- NATO members refuse to explain to their publics why defense matters, making it difficult to drum up support for the alliance.

Recommendations for NATO

Forge an agreement about what constitutes a common threat to the alliance. Foreign, defense, and security experts should discuss security at the national level, analyze the threats they believe their countries face, and ask what capabilities they have for dealing with those threats. NATO should agree on a common threat perception at its September 2014 summit in Cardiff, Wales.

Deploy permanent forces to Poland and the Baltic states while revamping relations with Russia. NATO will have to overcome resistance from Western European countries to deploy eastward, but such a measure would increase the security of NATO's Eastern flank and signal that NATO is not going to leave any part of the alliance exposed to Russian threats.

Discuss the alliance's relationship with Finland and Sweden. Members of the EU but not of NATO, these two countries have played a critical role in events in Europe's East and are debating whether to join the alliance. NATO should determine its position on the matter.

Reform the North Atlantic Council. Member-state ambassadors make the alliance's decisions in this council, but NATO's secretary general must have consensus to put even vital strategic issues on the agenda. Reform is necessary to make discussion of these issues possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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