

Commentary

Beyond the perennial issues

The 2018 NATO Summit

Marten van Heuven

This year's NATO Summit will be held on July 11-12 in Brussels, Belgium. It will be attended by leaders of the current 29 members of NATO. The meeting is an opportunity for charting the course of the Alliance and to sketch strategic directions.¹

In the spring, the US Administration typically is busy with preliminary work for the summer Summit. But this year some experts note that the pace seems to have slackened, as officials, the White House and key departments have been consumed by attention to other issues.

As a practical matter the confluence of a large number of national leaders, most with particular views, perceptions and wishes, creates an environment that requires strong executive and managerial skills and political leadership. Many leading figures simply do not have the time, nor the patience, to sit through a long list of speakers at the plenary. This was the case for President Obama. It is likely to be the case as well with President Trump. The Summit will also be made up of bilateral and side discussions alongside the principal discussion in plenary. Experienced NATO hands, including the Secretary General, will facilitate the process to keep it manageable and to drive the resulting communique.

Modest progress

At the Warsaw 2016 Summit, there were three major goals: strengthen deterrence, beef up defense and project stability. The meeting recorded modest progress, despite a momentary European uncertainty about the US commitment to Article V of the NATO treaty.

In Brussels, there will be perennial issues: for the US, troop levels and tasks overseas; for Europeans, defense GNP at a 2% level and satisfactory consultation with Washington. For both, there will also be immigration, terrorism and the new issue of cyber warfare, which was exercised with NATO forces in Estonia this spring. Also, as former Dutch Minister of Defense Willem van Eekelen has pointed out in this journal, nuclear weapons are back again.² Important as they are, these issues are not likely to be at the heart of the 2018 Summit, unless triggered by a proximate event.

The kernel of this Summit will probably lie elsewhere. For example, the need to chart a Russia strategy. This issue is hotly debated between and within NATO politicians and experts. The Alliance needs to keep a watchful eye on the Baltics. Even though these NATO members are reinforced by the presence of NATO forces, their position remains precarious.

Though two decades ago NATO went to war against Serbia and in Kosovo, the area provides fertile ground for Russian meddling. Once again, tempers in and around Kosovo are on the rise. The US seems to have lost sight of the fact that it has interests there. Europe seems occupied elsewhere.

Public changes

The Summit must also reflect public changes that are triggering new political attitudes, in Europe as well as in the United States. Brexit is weakening Great Britain. Its departure from the EU weakens Europe. In many European countries populism is raising its head. In the US, the announced departure of Paul Ryan as Speaker of the House of Representatives is another sign that the Republican “Grand Old Party” is turning into a very different political force; even as the Democratic Party searches for new direction and new leadership. NATO needs to accommodate these changes and safeguard the democratic values that are at the heart of the Alliance.

Even though they are not on the agenda, the NATO Summit will not be immune from the evolution of events in Korea, global trade and nuclear issues with Iran. The Trump Administration is heavily involved in these domains and will be sensitive to views and actions, particularly from its NATO allies. By the time the 2018 Summit convenes, these issues will have moved along, though it is hard to say in which direction or with what effect.

The NATO alliance needs to maintain cohesion, as it has in other difficult periods. Chancellor Merkel alludes to Europe picking up more of the reins. President Trump calls for “America First”. But success in this world of change and challenge will require close work together. As it has so often in the past, that will be the ultimate test of the NATO 2018 Summit.

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Would you like to react? Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.

¹ These are personal comments, written two months before the 2018 NATO Summit.

² Willem van Eekelen, ‘Nuclear weapons are back again’, *Atlantisch Perspectief* no. 1, 2018.