Sustaining NATO by consultation

hard choices for Europe

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Sustaining NATO by Consultation: Hard Choices for Europe

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Abstract:
NATO allies have since the inception of the alliance sought to establish an Atlanticist habit of political consultation to prevent political go-it-alone drift on the part of key allies and help define NATO in regard to major strategic issues. Today, observers dispute the ability of Atlanticism to sustain the Alliance. This article reviews the history and current politics of Atlanticist consultations to assess the conditions under which consultations are most likely to serve as a force of alliance continuity. The article argues that European allies have become accustomed to an incremental Atlanticist approach that no longer serves them well. Reviewing Atlanticist history, the article suggests how Europe can leap forward to revive the tradition of consultations. It involves a balancing act for Europe between on the one hand expanded power to manage global issues such as the rise of China and on the other limited ambitions of strategic autonomy. NATO’s future ability to sustain itself by political consultations, the article argues, is hostage to this balancing act and the support accorded to it by all allies.
Soon after NATO’s creation in April 1949 the allies went in search of a culture of consultation and coordination to protect their Alliance from the disruption that wider global events or national impulses to go-it-alone threatened to inflict on it. The NATO treaty quite powerfully promised consultations “whenever, in the opinion of any [of the Parties], the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened,”¹ but in practice consultation extended beyond the invocation of the treaty to involve habits of coordination and compromise. In 1956 three “wise men”—Lester Pearson of Canada, Halvard Lange of Norway, and Gaetano Martino of Italy—tasked by NATO to clarify what such a habit of consultation involved, concluded that it concerned a reflex to talk on important issues, shape national policy in respect of NATO consensus, and if no such consensus was possible, take care not to offend the views of NATO allies.²

To capture the allies’ commitment to sustaining the Alliance by political dialogue and compromise we can usefully define Atlanticism in line with the “wise men”—as a tradition of consultation that builds on the treaty but also extends beyond it. Sometimes scholars define Atlanticism in opposition to Europeanism, which is useful for the purpose of tracing political views on the role of the United States in European affairs.³ Atlanticism as consultation is related in that it is (mostly) about US-European diplomacy but also distinct in that it draws out historical approaches to and practices of compromise in NATO strategic affairs. As this article will demonstrate, Atlanticism as consultation draws out a pattern of high drama followed by a sustained period of relative stability where European allies stuck to a formula developed in the late 1960s of incremental consultation. However, as the article also highlights, Atlanticist allies wishing to sustain the Alliance by consultation must today fundamentally rethink their approach to consultations, which notably involves defining Europe’s contribution to key global issues, including China’s rise. A stronger
European pillar of global relevance, the article argues, is in fact a precondition for continued Atlanticism.

There is plenty of evidence to support a skeptical view of continued Atlanticism. President Trump tears apart the “institutional fabric of Atlanticism,” feeds European investments in “post-Atlanticist” security options, and his “disingenuous manipulation of a high order” plays to Russia’s advantages and robs Europeans of any illusion that NATO is here to stay. President Trump is enhancing an underlying tension between Europe’s communitarian and pluralist outlook on the one hand and America’s unipolar and Hobbesian outlook on the other. Keeping this impulse of antagonism at bay was always a supreme challenge of Atlanticism, but Trump’s presidency might be more than traditional Atlanticists can handle, and in fact, it may have been President Trump’s design all along that the United States should pull out of NATO.

Yet Atlanticism may not be a spent force. The Trump presidency is drawing attention—and occasional outrage—because vested interests in the Alliance are pervasive, and these interests will be hard to fully dislodge. Moreover, even as it might want to give China its full geopolitical attention, the United States would be well advised to consider the adverse impact on its Asian allies that its decision to end or erode its established security guarantees in Europe would cause.

Where there is potential for both Atlanticist crisis and renewal there is a need for engagement with the historical record and its current relevance. In line with Michael Howard’s observation that Historians “offer as much past history as they think they can get away with, and as little prophecy and prescription as they think the readers will accept,” the article approaches the subject matter historically, tracing first the roots of Atlanticism, then the hard work of cultivating it through the Cold War years. In the third section the article argues that a trusted, incremental approach to consultations has had its day. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures, and for
Atlanticism to succeed today, the paper argues, it must involve a rediscovery on the part of European allies of the transformative ideas of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

**Reconciling Monroe and Europe**

When the Atlantic Ocean unified Western allies first during World War II and then subsequent to it, as NATO formed in April 1949, the challenge of reconciling continental experiences led key policy makers to trace a transformative path by which a true political community would emerge. It was thus an era of grand designs. While they eventually clashed and failed, they did build on the insight that the Alliance foundations needed reordering if NATO was to be sustainable. It is an insight to which Alliance leaders today should return.

Atlanticism began during World War II when the United States had remarkable power to define the objectives and strategy of Atlantic cooperation. Though it was Western Europe that “invited” the United States into post-war Europe, in Geir Lundestad memorable phrase, the United States defined the terms of engagement. These terms ran in line with the American tradition of safeguarding its geopolitical space in the Western hemisphere, the Monroe doctrine of 1823, by which it meant its ability to keep Europe and Asia out. In the post-World War II years US decision-makers remained committed to the Monroe Doctrine but disagreed on its implications. As far as the Western hemisphere was concerned, the United States early on expanded on their American ties and signed in September 1947 the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, also known as the Rio Pact. With this collective defense treaty, the United States formalized the Monroe Doctrine against communist interference, establishing the principle that later also would become NATO’s namely that an attack on any one party would be considered an attack on all and repelled by collective defense measures. However, the question lingered whether the US security perimeter and its commitment to collective defense should extend beyond the hemisphere. Senate critics such as...
Robert Taft cautioned that history showed that the United States had the power to deter overseas aggression by a simple statement of the President to Congress, and further that it was preferable for the United States to maintain its freedom of decision and action. However, President Truman, Secretary of State Acheson, Under Secretary of State Lovett, and Senator Vandenberg managed in unison to build on the aid already committed to Greece and Turkey as well as the European Recovery Act (the Marshall Plan) and craft a bipartisan agreement to support also an Atlantic security arrangement on principles similar to those of the Rio Pact. In their view, NATO fitted within the Monroe Doctrine as an extension of the commitment to keep the American space safe from outside aggression and interference. The allies—West Europeans as well as Canada—thus gained US commitments to their collective defense but also the enduring challenge of defining how European interests beyond the Monroe Doctrine could be made compatible with the Alliance.

Atlanticism was the answer. In October 1951 a so-called Atlantic Community Committee called for an Atlanticist “habit of consultation” to deal with the threat of Soviet invasion. Later, following Stalin’s death and the “spirit of Geneva” evoked at the 1955 Geneva summit of NATO’s three big powers and Soviet Union, the challenge was to define NATO positively (for something) rather than negatively (against something). Lord Ismay, NATO’s first secretary general, noted in 1957 that while the North Atlantic Council (NATO’s political decision-making body) had increased its number of informal political consultations from 17 in 1952 to 66 in 1956, “it must be recognized that the practice of consultation in the Council has not as yet developed sufficiently to meet the demands of political changes and world trends.” Lord Ismay’s thus underscored the need for allies to follow through on the recommendations of the three “wise men” whose report of late 1956 on the need for a “habit of consultation” was mentioned in the opening to this article.

This Atlanticist prescription for cohesion was soon challenged by bold ideas. There were in essence two sets of ideas: one was progressive and foresaw an Atlantic Community or indeed federation and
thus a broad and sustained process of Atlantic integration to overcome the legacy of continental diversity. The other was regressive and sought to return Atlantic dialogue to its continental foundation whereby North America and Europe would create distinct platforms for a loose and improvised dialogue. These two grand ideas clashed notably through the 1960s and led to France’s formal exit from the allied integrated command. President Kennedy’s idea, articulated in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, on the US Independence Day, July 4, 1962, was to welcome Europe’s unity within the emerging realm of a “great new edifice” of Atlantic interdependence. It was a bold idea to overcome the plurality of power that president de Gaulle placed at the heart of his vision of cooperation—between a refashioned Europe led by France and then the United States and Britain as leading Anglo-Saxon powers. Kennedy’s and de Gaulle’s ideas failed to take root, though, as they mostly wore each other out in the transatlantic arena and opened a space for other ideas of cooperation.

The “wise men”-proposal for Atlanticism based on consultations could have staged a comeback at this point. It was inherently modest in character, an antithesis to grand designs, and in hindsight a brave but premature idea at the time of its inception, in 1956. Back then, the reigning impression was of upheaval and a corresponding need for bold new thinking. France and the United States mobilized distinct grand designs but so did NATO’s secretary general who sought a grand design for NATO itself, one mostly aligned with President Kennedy’s vision of Atlantic interdependence but also one that was in fact more ambitious, less patient, and designed to cause a leap forward in NATO affairs. The secretary general was Paul-Henri Spaak who had signed the NATO treaty in 1949 on behalf of Belgium and who in May 1957 succeeded Lord Ismay as NATO secretary general. Spaak put forth a vision of a “genuine community” of Atlantic countries and declared with full confidence in 1958 that “we [NATO] are no longer only a military organization, we are well on the way to becoming a community with a common foreign policy.” As NATO Secretary General,
Spaak was naturally well aware that diplomatic realities belied such rhetoric, but his intention was to push for unity even to the point of suggesting that foreign policy coordination along the lines of the “wise men” recommendations be made “compulsory.”

The big powers were not about to let Spaak seize the moment, though, and his effort to define a grand design for NATO died hard on contested grounds. The great powers sought informal, exclusive coordination that would optimize their own influence, and in no measure were they contemplating “compulsory” NATO consultations. In October 1957 Britain opted for bilateral transatlantic consultations in a range of new working groups (intended to be kept secret) that promised to institutionalize Anglo-American leadership. Less than a year later France, now led by president de Gaulle, countered the British design with his own one of trilateral consultations between the United States, Britain, and France. And thus began the rivalry of grand designs that tore at the seams of the Alliance. “By the end of 1957,” writes John C. Milloy, “there was no question that the Committee of Three [“wise men”] process had been a failure.” To this we may add that by the mid-1960s, it was clear that the grand designs of France and the United States had likewise been a failure.

Where this left the Alliance was then the question. For a moment the initiative fell to Pierre Harmel, also a Belgian statesman but one cut of a different cloth than Paul-Henri Spaak. Harmel was in 1966 tasked with the challenge of defining NATO’s approach to East-West détente and deterrence, and he weighed pragmatism over dogma. Paul-Henri Spaak in fact joined Harmel’s working group and wrote a report that vigorously upheld Spaak’s own Atlantic vision. The overarching Harmel report was much more modest in approach, though: “The Allies are not obliged to subordinate their policies to collective decision,” Harmel suggested, though “frank and timely” consultations needed to be “deepened and improved.” In December 1967 the allies signed on to Harmel’s conclusions.
Pragmatism and the diplomacy of small steps subsequently became NATO’s formula for developing a culture of Atlanticism—of effective political consultations. No one impersonates this approach better than Italian Manilo Brosio, NATO secretary general 1964-1971. Where Spaak pushed for a diplomacy of transformation, a leaping into an Atlantic community, Brosio patiently built small bridges in a strategy of incremental adjustment. In a number of publications towards the end of his time at the helm of the organization, and in the years afterwards and in fact as he was about to become appointed Italian ambassador to Moscow, he outlined how such modest and pragmatic steps could make consultation the allied modus operandi once again.26

**Europe on the Path of Brosio**

The Harmel approach of combining détente and deterrence offered the allies a platform from which they could successfully coordinate policies that hitherto had proven contentious. Six months following the adoption of the Harmel report NATO issued its “Reykjavik signal” by which it offered the Soviet Union “mutually balanced force reductions.” This by no means represented the onset of détente but it did signal that détente, which hitherto had been a subject of considerable dispute among the allies, would be managed in the framework of much improved NATO coordination and consultation. NATO was thus able to contribute to East-West dialogue and agreement on principles for a stable balance of power—in regard to strategic arms and ballistic missile defense (SALT agreement and ABM treaty of 1972) and wider issues of territorial integrity, confidence building measures, trade and human rights in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE, later OSCE) that started in 1972 and led to the Helsinki Final Act in 1975.27 A number of parallel developments led to the expectation that the Harmel doctrine and Brosio approach indeed could capture and channel effective Atlanticism and therefore consultation and coordination: as West Germany committed to the Harmel doctrine to cement NATO’s control
of East-West relations and avoid Germany’s neutralization; as president de Gaulle’s successor, Georges Pompidou, downplayed the Gaullist idea of separating the European pillar from its Atlantic anchoring; and as British Secretary of State for Defence Denis Healy in 1968 organized a so-called Eurogroup within NATO to advance coordination on conventional defense issues. However, the Brosio prescription for effective consultations was put to the test on account of two parallel developments. One was the prospect of superpower détente—an explicit aim of President Nixon—and the fear of decoupling it created among allies. The October 1973 war in the Middle East was a climax point of sorts, with European allies feeling undercut by US unilateralism in support of Israel and also its decision to raise the alert level for its nuclear forces, and with US policy-makers decrying the lack of European support. When the US ambassador to NATO, Donald Rumsfeld, proposed that NATO should impose punitive measures against the Soviet Union for its actions in the Middle East, the European ambassadors met the proposal with “incredulity.” The reluctance of the Nixon administration to effectively consult with its allies and thus share power in line with its own proclaimed policy of regionalization provoked alliance unrest, therefore. Another development was the reluctance of Britain and France to lead on NATO issues. Britain’s Eurogroup initiative was important but also just a measure to counter a divisive sense of “decoupling”—caused by discrepancy in US and European force levels and the prospect of “mutually balanced force reductions” between East and West. Britain sought to keep the Eurogroup very pragmatically focused on decoupling, but France was concerned with political ramifications and thus did not join the group, and the Nixon administration, unsure what to make of it, tempered its support for it. The promise of the Eurogroup to build on Harmel and become “a forum for harmonizing European views on major political or strategic questions” thus receded. Some observers at the time cautioned restraint and noted how the real art of NATO leadership lay in mobilizing “imaginative powers of decision” in support of continued cooperation. Still, many
concluded that Atlanticism had had its day. As if foreseeing NATO’s current debates on relative stability in Europe compared to issues in Asia and elsewhere and its corrosive effect on Alliance solidarity, observers in the 1970s debated Atlantic drift as a consequence of détente. Specifically, the prospect that the United States might purchase global stability by lessening its allied ties left regional allies scrambling to make up capability gaps and to worry about leadership vacuums. Rather than breaking with the emerging Harmel tradition of balancing détente and deterrence, European allies sought new ways of maintaining it. Thus, the spirit of Brosio prevailed. NATO’s dual-track decision of December 1979, by which the Alliance committed to upgrade its long-range theater forces while offering arms control talks with the Soviet Union, was in line with the restrained Harmel approach but was also a balancing act that tested the commitment to patient compromising. Recent scholarship has challenged the idea that the Carter administration had to be dragged into the arms control offer by European governments seeking cover for new missile deployments—a story line that variously nourished suspicions that the Americans were overly wedded to deterrence or that the Europeans had become addicted to détente.

Rather, the end run of NATO in the Cold War seems to indicate how the allies managed to innovate their Brosio approach to stubborn consultations. In particular the NATO High Level Group (HLG) that sketched plans for nuclear modernization and the improvised 1978 Special Group (SG) on Arms Control that became the détente leg of NATO’s internal diplomacy emerged as internal mechanisms that sustained consultations. The next challenge then emerged in the mid-1980s as the United States stepped outside the Alliance consensus framework with strategic proposals (on missile defense and the elimination of nuclear weapons), which brought the European allies to reactivate their dormant Western European Union—which in 1948 had served to bring the United States around to the idea of a transatlantic alliance—as a tool for maintaining and reinvigorating Atlantic consultations. Three conclusions offer themselves.
First, years of compromise and the discovery of a Harmel approach and a Brosio spirit had not changed the underlying condition of potential transatlantic antagonism. Rather, in the view of observers, continental diversity justified the Harmel/Brosio approach. Second, in spite of the revitalization of the WEU as a tool for recommitting the United States to collective deterrence, which unprecedently amounted to a European step outside NATO on the alliance’s home turf of defense and deterrence, there was no real political appetite in Europe for a larger recasting of the alliance architecture. Ideas for change did circulate—from transformative ideas regarding the disbandment of NATO and a demilitarized Europe to reform proposals for NATO’s Europeanization or, alternatively, the setting up of an informal governance structure by “principal nations”—but they did not find political traction as, ultimately, the ambition of European allies in stepping outside NATO was to bring the United States back in. The revitalized WEU was, therefore, a facet of the Brosio spirit.

Finally, Atlanticism, even if it prevailed as a principle for alliance continuity, changed in character during these critical years. The idea of the “wise men” back in the 1950s was to layer consultations into the NATO institutions, which was also the approach suggested by the Harmel Report, and which was also, by and large, the approach adopted by NATO allies in the late 1970s for getting to the dual-track decision. Summity and back channels mattered, as always, but NATO delivered two main mechanisms for getting to agreement, the HLG on nuclear modernization and the SG on arms control. By the 1980s, consultations moved into a broader, more informal format, or, in Piers Ludlow’s words, into a complex institutional web that did not privilege any one formal mechanism for getting to agreement, and which at certain points could not contain high level political disagreement, but which proved resilient and effective for intergovernmental coordination over time. While many observers at the time regretted Western Europe’s disunity and decline, Ludlow
continues, its “influence over Washington” as exercised through this wider web was in fact “remarkable.”

**Limits to Brosio and the Necessity of Change**

What had worked during the Cold War could also work in the post-Cold War era, NATO concluded, as it layered continental consultations first into its July 1990 London declaration on a transformed Alliance, next as the allies in November 1990 signed on to an ambitious conventional arms control agreement as part of a reinvigorated CSCE (henceforth OSCE), and as the Alliance in its first public Strategic Concept, of November 1991, highlighted the role of both intra-Alliance consultations and continental diplomacy. Through the 1990s these consultations and this diplomacy were increasingly dedicated to the management of crises on Europe’s periphery—notably in the former Yugoslavia—where NATO after a troubled start had some success in keeping the “coming anarchy” at bay. It was only some years later, during the wars on terror, when NATO became heavily involved in the Afghan mission, that NATO’s Brosio prescription for consultations visibly reached its limits, as NATO’s Afghan mission became overly Americanized. Subsequent to this mission, Russian and Trump revisionism threaten to outflank NATO consensus-seeking, and there seems to be no good exit for the allies. It is thus becoming apparent that the preferred Brosio option of patient transatlantic diplomacy has limited mileage and that a response to the disruption President Trump has introduced into the Alliance diplomacy must be the bold infusion by the allies of new life in the Atlanticist tradition. It is time, therefore, for a Spaak moment of daring imagination and diplomacy in pursuit of change.

The Afghan mission (2003–2014) became by far NATO’s largest and politically most consequential crisis management operation, and it ultimately demonstrated the limits to which the Alliance could go global, beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, and still remain committed to effective consultations. Put
differently, as NATO got serious in Afghanistan, it also got overwhelmingly American. The Alliance lost its Atlanticist character in the sense that Alliance consultations on the important issues at first happened but got nowhere, and they were then given up in a tacit acknowledgement that the Alliance was better off rallying in support of US policy. Atlanticism was visibly working in the early phase of the Afghan operation, it should be noted, because at this point the ISAF mission was small and perfectly manageable (confined to the Afghan capital of Kabul) and because Afghanistan was the “good war” as opposed to the inherently controversial war in Iraq. Atlanticism delivered NATO support for a security mission that was not hard-core counter-terrorist but yet expeditionary, demanding, and of clear political utility. Atlanticism receded with the decision to roll ISAF into a country-wide operation that would expose it to the full force of the Taliban insurgency. The decision was made in 2004-2005 but went into effect in 2006-2008, which then became bloody years of stalemate. NATO was losing, and NATO’s theory for winning—the so-called Comprehensive Approach that promised the effective delivery of security, governance, and development—was so ineffective that it was clear to all observers of the campaign that NATO had reached a dead end. The election of Barack Obama as US president offered relief, but the heart of the surged campaign was distinctively American.

Afghanistan thus amplified an underlying debate within NATO on burdensharing and particularly on whether the European allies did enough heavy lifting. As this debate on budget and force numbers moved front and center, political consultations on policy withered. The debate turned on European investments as opposed to collective objectives, as reflected in the literature on campaign “caveats” and competing national campaign “narratives.” Reverberations could be traced at the highest levels where US Secretary of Defense Gates’ in 2011 warned that European laggardness might cause the United States to consider NATO not worth its cost, where President Obama in 2014 pushed other allied heads of state and government to accept a 2% spending rule (promising that
European defense budgets would “move towards the 2% [of GDP] guideline within a decade,” thus by 2024, and where President Trump repeatedly has claimed the allies owe the United States “massive amounts of money.”

In short, as NATO went increasingly global, its tradition of Atlanticism suffered. The discrepancy between European and American muscle was simply too big to allow a substantial and sustained dialogue on common political objectives and strategy. Some scholars have identified democratic institutions and practices as the glue that holds NATO together during one crisis after another. Building on this insight, other scholars argue that NATO’s 21st century troubles are best answered by a global design for NATO that will support US global strategy and, more broadly, the international liberal order. This analysis suggests in contrast that globalism makes it inherently difficult for NATO allies to give political meaning to their intra-alliance consultations. Globalism, rather, is a recipe for the steady dissolution of alliance ties.

The return to regionalism—following from the end of the Afghan combat mission in 2014 and Russia’s simultaneous intervention in Ukraine, including the unlawful annexation of Crimea—should therefore offer NATO relief. As NATO gets closer to home, it returns to the safer ground of Brosio-style consultations. Perhaps for a moment, in 2014-2016, this impression of a safe return to business-as-usual settled in, but three conditions have changed compared to the Cold War.

First, NATO returns home to Europe in a new context of globalized competition where China has established itself as the preeminent contender for global leadership. The future of US engagement in Europe will thus inevitably be tightly linked to Asia as its geopolitical center of gravity. For NATO, this does not mean that it must build up forces in Asia or disregard important questions in Europe, but it does mean that European allies must be able to answer the question of how they can assist US priorities in Asia in return for US investment in European security. In February 2017 (now former) Secretary of Defense Mattis put the issue on the NATO table, stating that “an assertive China” is
part of NATO’s remit. There is a range of options for assisting the United States on Europe’s table—military, diplomatic, economic, and European allies should only expect the question will loom larger in the future.

Second, NATO will not be able to reinvent the Cold War recipe for cohesion and consultation, namely containment of Russia, simply for the reason that China is destined to become a factor in NATO’s strategizing. Where Russia’s containment during the Cold War was the overriding preoccupation of the Alliance, today Russia policy must be made compatible with the wider and in fact overriding objective of containing China. Put differently, it is not a NATO interest to push Russia into a tight alliance with China, and so NATO must think creatively about how to follow a dual track policy of keeping borders firm in Europe (i.e., protecting the Baltics and other territories) while offering Russia a greater stake in Europe’s order. This will by all measures be difficult. At present the Alliance is by and large silent on any future political relationship, pretending the Russia-NATO agreement of 1997 is an option when Russia quite clearly has concluded it is not. President Trump is visibly unable to articulate a Russia policy, in part because of the ongoing investigation into his personal Russia ties, in part because his apparent inclination to cozy up with the Russian president during private talks, in Helsinki in July 2018, has become a source of political distrust at home and in the West. What seems clear, though, is that NATO’s current deterrence posture in time will be supplemented by a more explicit balance of power policy that does not build on visions of convergence between East and West, like the 1997 agreement, but principles of cooperation on armaments, borders, and diplomatic dialogue.

Third and finally, the challenge of managing the allies’ southern flank is not only persistent but also persistently divisive. NATO has a few arrows in its quiver: it has some left-overs in terms of institutional partnership and surveillance missions; it has sought to break new ground with so-called Defense Capacity Building (DCB) packages to Jordan and Iraq, and it has signaled its
intent to get serious by handing the dossier to its deputy secretary general, Rose Gottemoeller; and it has set up a “military hub” in NATO’s integrated command structure to help ensure coordinated and focused efforts. However, these are marginal measures in the big picture of things. As evidenced by the war in Syria and sustained tension between Turkey and the United States, two NATO allies, NATO is simply not an overwhelmingly important organization when it comes to managing southern threats. The EU seems more central (though often equally unable). As Europe and North America look to their distinct southern flanks—symbolized by their desires to erect barriers of different kinds in the Mediterranean and along the Mexican border, respectively—there is a real and persistent risk that southern challenges will disrupt Western politics and thus also the tradition of Atlanticism.

Thus, NATO has experienced the limits of consultation-as-usual in Afghanistan up until 2014, and the current European security situation leaves few hopes that consultation-as-usual will suddenly become viable again. New challenges—from confronting China over dealing with Russia to containing southern division—are of such great consequences that the old recipe for Atlanticism seems the equivalent of fiddling while Rome is burning.

Europe must thus return to Spaak and his desire to catapult the Alliance forward into a new age. Spaak’s recipe for Atlantic union and unified foreign policy is clearly not of relevance: we are long past the moment when such tight transatlantic integration is credible. One option is then to diversify the Alliance along geographical lines of responsibility—encouraging Germany to take the lead on land warfare deterrence in Central Europe, France on expeditionary missions along the southern flank, Britain a range of global naval missions, with the United States hovering in the background in support. While this option captures a number of geographical realities in the Alliance, it also involves the risk of creating multiple alliances within the Alliance—de facto an invitation for external meddling that the allies always sought to preempt. Another option is therefore to reimagine
the overarching strategic purpose of the Alliance and anchor consultations, which ultimately are reflective of alliance diversity, in such a reinforced collective framework. NATO has the tool for doing this—the Strategic Concept that gives guidance to NATO’s day-to-day business. What matters is the political realization that the Concept must be reimagined and that incrementalism, the small steps of Brosio, will not suffice.

The most recent Strategic Concept from 2010 puts three core tasks on par for the Alliance—collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. This broad and eclectic framework served the Alliance well as it was seeking to move beyond the Iraq war and the wider war on terror: it offered the Alliance a strategic document in which all allies could recognize their key priorities. Division (on Iraq) was out; consensus was in. However, today the Alliance is in need of a shared strategic priority that brings them together. This, perhaps, is the key message of the Trump presidency—that NATO is facing a new era where the ways of the old no longer suffice; that NATO must leap into the future in order to be relevant to it. Some argue that the future is Eurasian—that this “supercontinent” is connecting and integrating to shape the future of world politics. NATO’s irrelevance will follow if the allies pretend to be able to muddle through in this regard: the fact that Europe is located at one end of Eurasia and the United States is drawn to the other, to balance China, will ensure the gradual erosion of the Alliance’s ability to cohere on important issues. In contrast, if NATO made Eurasia the centerpiece of a new Strategic Concept, it could remain relevant and in business. A Eurasia-centric Strategic Concept for NATO would enhance not only the coordination of allies’ defense strategies but also help align EU and US policy on China, including on trade and investments—issues that today drive the allies apart. If such a radically revised Strategic Concept would serve NATO well, it will only do so if the allies come to realize that the Brosio formula of small steps that especially European allies have come to rely on.
will not rescue them. A bold and imaginative approach to the Alliance’s future raison d’être instead seem necessary.

**Conclusion**

This assessment of Atlanticism offers several conclusions: that the allies collectively were quick to perceive a need for effective diplomatic consultations to build a collective vision on top of a military structure in which the US very clearly was in the lead; that such a consultation habit or reflex was inherently difficult to build and therefore in need of regular inputs of designs and ideas for renewed progress; that the outcome of failed consultations has been and continues to be the Americanization of collective strategy; and that European allies have grown accustomed to a low-key, Brosio-style consultation approach whereby they avoid drama and focus on incremental adjustments.

There is thus more Brosio than Spaak to the history of Atlanticism: the era of grand designs in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the end proved inimical to NATO, and Harmel inaugurated a new style of compromise by the subtle balancing of distinct geopolitical concerns. When US presidents stepped outside this compromise—which president Nixon soon did; and which president Reagan did in the 1980s and president Bush did in the War on Terror in the 2000s—the result was the Americanization of collective strategy and a European search for renewed consultation and balanced strategic dialogue. Today, as President Trump yet again challenges the Alliance, the temptation is there for the Europeans to seek cover, wait Trump out, and return to tried and tested ways of moving the Atlantic relationship forward. When former Vice President Biden comes to Europe to tell allies that “This too shall pass. We will be back,” perhaps the allies feel vindicated in their belief that old recipes for consultation and coordination remain valid.57
However, continuity is unlikely to offer relief, as this analysis has argued. NATO consultations suffered after quite some enthusiasm in the 1990s when the Atlanticist prescription for cohesion was exported to partners and friends. Consultations were particularly strained during the early phase of the War on Terror when the United States decided to invade Iraq. When the allies decided to zoom in on the good war in Afghanistan, they found an engagement so tough that strategy Americanized, and consultations withered. The return to Europe in 2014 offered limited relief as Russia annexed Crimea and introduced a revisionist element in European politics, as China in a more gradual process gravitated toward the center of the American security agenda, and as the Trump presidency disrupted longstanding collective security priorities. What Europe wants politically from Russia, and what it has to offer the United States in the bigger Eurasian game, are questions that the European allies now confront and lack strong answers to.

Absent such answers there is a real risk that Atlanticism will corrode further. The United States might continue taking the lead in deterring Russia militarily, but there is no substitute for shared political priorities and sustained consultation in the Alliance. In other words, NATO will not be fine as long as the United States desire it; it must involve a collective sense of political purpose. If NATO cannot give political meaning to itself, outside powers will be emboldened in their attempt to sow seeds of division. In 1958 Paul-Henri Spaak spoke of trouble in the West resulting from “static” and “faint-hearted” foreign policies; some 60 years later these words once again, and from a NATO perspective, regrettably, ring true. Atlanticism can yet prevail, but it will require a bold engagement on the part of NATO allies with their collective raison d’être in a future shaped by rising Eurasian powers.
Notes

9 Drawing on Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) Colin Dueck makes this argument in The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). The geopolitical case for shifting priorities can be traced in the literature’s focus on “pivots” of power, and for China as the new pivot see Nina


12 Lawrence S. Kaplan, NATO Divided, NATO United, 3.


15 Rynning, Political NATO, 270.

16 Milloy, Community or Alliance?, 131.


22 Milloy, Community or Alliance?, 182.


24 Milloy, Community or Alliance?, 190.

25 Harmel Report, paragraph 7. The Harmel Report takes note of four underlying working group reports, including that of Spaak, but does not endorse their conclusions.


31 Kaplan, NATO Divided, NATO United, 58.


35 Henry H. Gaffney, who came up with the idea to organize the High Level Group, modeled it on the Nuclear Planning Group that since 1966 had advanced allied coordination (as opposed to sharing, which was on the agenda earlier in the 1960s) on nuclear issues. The High Level Group had its first meeting in December 1977 and was based on the spirit that no one ally had all the answers—that collective deliberation would serve the Alliance. Henry H. Gaffney, “Euromissiles as the Ultimate Evolution of Theater Nuclear Forces in Europe,” Journal of Cold War Studies 16/1 (Winter 2014), 180-199. Gaffney’s article is a rebuttal to Kristina Spohr Readman’s argument that the United States was not in the front of this process of nuclear consultations: “Conflict and Cooperation in Intra-Alliance Nuclear Politics: Western Europe, the United States, and the Genesis of NATO’s Dual-Track Decision, 1977-1979,” Journal of Cold War Studies 13/2 (Spring 2011), 39-89.


45 Rebecca R. Moore and Damon Coletta, eds., NATO’s Return to Europe: Engaging Ukraine, Russia, and Beyond (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 2017).


Sten Rynning, “The false promise of continental concert: Russia, the West, and the necessary balance of power,” International Affairs 91/3 (2015), 539-552;

NATO’s counter-piracy mission off the coast of Somalia (Operation Ocean Shield) terminated in December 2016; its partnership with the African Union is limited to small cases of staff training and liaisons; its maritime surveillance in the Mediterranean, Active Endeavor, transformed in October 2016 into a more flexible (reduced) Sea Guardian mission; it has offered maritime surveillance in the Aegean Sea to help reduce tensions related to refugee flows (and, once again, to manage relations between two of its allies, Turkey and Greece); and it maintains its usual partnership programs—the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

NATO introduced these DCB packages at the Wales summit in 2014 as part of a so-called Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative. This initiative was extended to Jordan at the 2014 summit, and then in 2015 to Iraq. NATO, “Wales Summit Declaration,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, September 5, 2014, paragraph 89. https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm

This hub was eventually located within the Alliance’s southern regional command in Naples, Italy, where the hub (app. 100 personnel) will help other NATO units assess threats, gather information, and plan NATO and partner training and exercises.


