

NATO at Seventy: between yesterday and tomorrow

Jamie Shea¹

2019 is a year rich for anniversaries, all of which having lessons for the age in which we now live.

In June we mark the 75th anniversary of the D Day landings on the beaches of Normandy. It recalls the horrors of classic warfare between what we today would call peer to peer competitors. In the first month following D Day more soldiers died than in all the wars fought by the western powers since 9/11. On average 27.000 people died every day during the Second World War which makes the casualties of the NATO countries in Afghanistan and Iraq during the last 15 years seem relatively modest by comparison. D Day was certainly a useful reminder not to stumble into another “total war” between super-armed major powers ever again.

Later in June we mark the 20th anniversary of the end of the Kosovo air campaign. It is a reminder of an age of greater optimism back in 1999 when the NATO countries believed in interventions to protect human rights and hold violent regimes to account. After the disillusionment of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, Kosovo shows that stabilisation operations and nation building can be successful if supported by adequate resources, a comprehensive approach in which all the major international institutions work together and the political will to stay the course. Unfortunately by the time Syria descended into civil war in 2011 this will have largely dissipated.

Also in June we mark the centenary of the Treaty of Versailles that formally brought the First World War to an end. This war witnessed the worst carnage in human history up to that point and yet the peace that followed isolated major powers such as Germany and Russia, was not

¹ Jamie Shea is a Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe, a Brussels-based think tank. Previously he was a senior official with NATO (1980 to 2018).

supported by the only power able to guarantee it – namely the United States – and failed to provide Europe with an effective collective security system based on the League of Nations that could keep revisionist ambitions in check.

Finally in November comes the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was a moment of euphoria and hope in European history when barriers came down and the peoples of Europe were not only liberated but also reunited. The unification of Germany proved not to be the end of the process of European integration but marked a new, more dynamic phase. It brought hope that the long divided western and eastern halves of the continent could come together in a common sharing of liberal democratic values and standards; and that this closer union would make the EU into an autonomous and powerful actor on the world stage.

In short, these four anniversaries recall what could happen to Europe when its member states got the politics wrong and what it was capable of achieving when it got the politics right. Now back in 2019, Europeans are confronting a world which is losing all its familiar bearings and collapsing rapidly around them. The events that will dominate the anniversary recollections in 50 or 100 years hence are being shaped as we speak. They are a reflection of the new security environment and the challenges it is imposing on governments and populations alike.

In the first place is the disappearance of the four pillars on which Europe's security after the Second World War rested.

The first was the nature of the Soviet Union as the west's principal adversary. It was mainly a status quo power as far as Europe was concerned, happy to hold on to its sphere of influence in the east but ready to accept peaceful co-existence with the rest of the continent. It accepted the logic of deterrence and when its periodic threats were countered (as in the euro-missile crisis of the early 1980s), it was ready to negotiate and entangle itself in transparency measures and arms control agreements. It also was fragile economically and in irreversible decline. It was weighed down by expensive overseas commitments and was ready to reform and liberalise in the hope of solving its internal problems. This gave the west an increasing leverage over it. The Soviet Union could only compete realistically in the military sphere but in the nuclear age it had to be risk averse. NATO therefore could meet this

challenge through deterrence and wait out the demise of its adversary without having to engage in a costly and even catastrophic conflict.

The second pillar was the relative stability of the international system. Despite a number of conflicts and crises, the period after 1945 marked the heyday of the liberal multinational order. The western based institutions increased their roles and their memberships. As trade increased massively, globalisation pulled countries closer together but also required common rules, such as in the WTO and G8 and G20, to manage. New norms also appeared in the security field as UN doctrines such as the responsibility to protect put limits on national sovereignty and legitimised interventions to safeguard human and minority rights. For the first time since Nuremberg the perpetrators of atrocities could be tried by international tribunals serving not only the cause of justice but also future deterrence.

A third pillar of stability was the willingness of the one superpower, the United States, to underwrite this system both through financial and military means, as well as active engagement in the key institutions that symbolised but also structured this order. It did this not only because of formal treaty obligations (as in NATO) but because it recognised that upholding the order served its key economic and security interests. Otherwise and alone in the world the United States would lose over time its position as the leading power. Allies needed to be protected but they also provided the United States with support and legitimacy for its own operations. So burden sharing worked both ways. To relieve the burdens on itself the United States was constantly pressing its European allies to do more and spend more; but it also recognised that if the Europeans were to do this in a cost-effective way they would need to form their own security and defence union and become less dependent on the United States. But Washington saw this as a challenge to NATO and its own leadership role. So it grumbled about free-riding allies but largely lived with the status quo.

Finally, and organised in NATO, the Europeans only had to focus on one challenge in one place at one time. During the Cold War this was the Soviet Union. Then in the 1990s the former Yugoslavia as it collapsed into separate states and ethnic conflicts. After 9/11 came the turn of Afghanistan. With all three challenges NATO was not only dealing with an immediate threat but also convinced that defeating this threat would in itself produce a better world, safer for the democra-

cies and building bridges across ethnic, religious and ideological divides. So the immediate challenge held the key to what President H.W. Bush described as the “New World Order”. One challenge in one place at one time gave NATO’s member states time to build consensus, to figure out the best strategies through trial and error and to concentrate their resources on one particular campaign.

As Europeans face up to the next seventy five years the question is whether these four pillars of stability will endure. The evidence so far is that they will not. This does not mean that the cause of European integration is lost or that NATO, like all previous alliances, will disappear, even in the longer term. But it does mean that a period of luck in European history is now over. Both the EU and NATO will need to work much harder in future, and more creatively and strategically, to sustain the security and prosperity that our citizens have come to take for granted.

To begin, the international system is far less stable and predictable than in the past. The major military powers are revisionist in that they all find the system rigged against them. The United States feels cheated by ungrateful allies; Russia feels excluded; China sees a west that is trying to shut out its products and constrain its natural rise as a world power and civilisation. The perception of countries like Russia, China or Iran is of a west in decline. This encourages these countries to be assertive and even to take risks to probe the weaknesses and responsiveness of the democracies. Competition becomes the new constant. It has seeped into all the classic domains, such as land, sea and air, and also into the new domains, such as cyberspace, outer space and the information and communications space exemplified by the Internet and the social media. Competition means that powers that used to be apart both geographically and functionally are now in constant friction with each other as old spheres of influence are contested and new ones are in the process of forming. As war between major powers remains too risky, given the destructiveness of modern weaponry, challenges in this domain have to be gradual until one side has achieved a clear technological edge and decisive margin of superiority over its rivals.

For now this also means the return of arms races as the major powers push ahead to exploit new technologies such as hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence, automation and robotics and quantum computing. Here speed and synergy for both offensive and defensive opera-

tions across all domains, both traditional and new, and making command and control seamless from one domain to another, has become the key to success in modern warfare.

More competition has produced a more contested environment in which more players are gaining the technology and more cheaply to join the fray. If they do not acquire the power to inflict mass destruction, they at least have the capacity to disrupt their adversaries and act as spoilers. Unsurprisingly the security strategies of both the EU and NATO as well as the individual member states today list numerous adversaries and strategic competitors as well as a mix of state and non-state actors, such as cyber hackers, organised crime syndicates, terrorist groups and militias. The ranking order of these threats and players can change quickly and go from an abstraction such as terrorism or climate change, to a specific state, such as Russia, China, Iran or North Korea. Many of the sub-state actors, such as Al Qaeda or the Somali pirates, have been around for some time already. Yet the return of great power antagonisms after years of striving for great power cooperation in dealing with common threats like terrorism, pirates or climate change has been sudden and brutal.

NATO is once again balancing Russia and the EU has been imposing comprehensive sanctions against this important trading partner for the past 5 years. Both institutions are also closely following China which the EU recently proclaimed is as much a competitor as a partner. It is not that NATO sees a major role for itself in Asia but rather that China is already a European power and in economic, technological, diplomatic and cultural ways. This has already induced certain EU member states to block EU declarations criticising China for its policies on human rights or vis a vis Hong Kong. Beijing may not threaten European security in the direct, military manner of Moscow; but it increasingly affects the choices of allied governments more than Russia is capable of doing. After all, security is as much about freedom of choice and the ability to withstand coercion as it is about protection from physical harm.

The flip side of multiple adversaries is multiple dependencies. Economic wealth and technological innovation or investments no longer come primarily from the partners that are providing your security. Whereas the United States has proved to be a steadfast albeit often critical partner in NATO, even increasing its force levels in Eastern Europe, it has become a major disruptor of EU integration, championing

Brexit, imposing tariffs on EU exports and even describing the EU as a threat. Yet it is largely the same countries that are involved in both organisations. This forces allies into difficult choices and balancing acts, as seen in the debate in Europe whether to cut new energy deals with Russia or to embrace or reject Chinese tech giants such as Huawei as a provider of fifth generation telecommunications equipment.

At the same time, the new dependencies in technology, energy, communications or critical infrastructure ownership make hybrid warfare much more attractive as a means of competition and gaining leverage. Hybrid campaigns sow dissent and undermine public trust in conventional politics. They polarise public opinion and spread conspiracy theories as a simple explanation and solution for complex problems. The very notion of truth becomes confused and seemingly beyond reach as every event is surrounded by dozens of different theories and interpretations. Hybrid activity has the benefit of stealth and deniability. If successful, it can gain the objectives of war without the risks. It is often difficult to attribute hybrid activity that hides behind false flags and multiple layers of collusion between states and proxies. Moreover much of this activity is legal as when China buys European ports or Russia manipulates western social media companies to boost its narratives. Hybrid activity can produce high gains for its perpetrators at an acceptable level of risk.

Great power competition plays out along the east-west axis in Ukraine, Georgia and Central Asia, in the south where Russia and China are increasingly active in Africa and the Middle East, and even closer to home in the western Balkans where the EU has been reluctant to open its doors to Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Kosovo. Russia and China have concluded security, training and economic agreements with a number of states. Both present themselves as more reliable than the west and less demanding when it comes to human rights and democratic standards. They laud authoritarianism and managed democracy as a better guarantee of stability and long term development. Dealing with the problems of the south, such as terrorism, uncontrolled migration and weak state structures and endemic corruption would already constitute a major problem for both the EU and NATO. But the growing presence of Russia and China in these regions, combined with the pressures from the east and unrelenting hybrid campaigns, add an unwelcome further layer of complexity.

The situation is complicated still further by the unpredictable and constantly gyrating nature of US foreign policy in the era of President Donald Trump. It keeps the allies in a constant state of anxiety as to whether the United States will remain engaged or suddenly disengage. This cannot be solely about burden sharing because the United States today has historically low levels of troop deployments in Europe and the Middle East, and it is reducing the already very modest number that it has in Africa. The entire campaign against ISIS cost just 5 American combat fatalities as the local partners of the United States did the bulk of the fighting. The irony is that Washington is questioning the value of its security commitments when they have never been cheaper in manpower or finance to uphold.

The challenge facing the NATO allies as the alliance embarks on the eighth decade of its existence is to manage complexity as the long term and defining characteristic of the strategic environment. After decades spent facing adversaries – whether in Moscow, Belgrade, Baghdad, Kabul or Tripoli, who were well inferior to the west, NATO is now up against much tougher opponents.

China and Russia have learned the lessons of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their autocracies are well entrenched with much tighter forms of surveillance, media domination and social control. They are much more integrated into the global economy giving them more levers of influence. Sanctions against them exact a heavy price in markets lost by the western powers. China and Russia have learned that power is not about having more resources than the democracies but about being able to marshal their own, lesser resources more effectively. It is also about being willing and able to move decisively to exploit openings while the democracies hesitate. China and Russia are up against a much less cohesive west than during the Cold War or for twenty five years after it. Rather than find their place in the traditional western order, they are tempted to rewrite the rules and impose their own distinct order. This involves a better marshalling of those countries that were anti-western in the first place as well as attempts to prise away from the western camp countries that were on its periphery. We see this in Russia's courting of Serbia and Turkey and China's pressure on countries recognising Taiwan to withdraw that recognition.

Beijing and Moscow cannot be defeated by a quick and relatively painless air or ground campaign as happened to NATO's adversaries in the

1990 to 2011 timeframe. The alliance now has to dig in for the long haul and use its resources far more efficiently to contain its new great power rivals, confront them when they cross certain red lines, but also seek to cooperate with them when it is safe and practical to do so. With the four pillars of stability now gone, and in a more crisis prone international system, NATO will need to combine a deft handling of the day to day issues with a long term strategy to constrain its rivals and push them back towards cooperation. This will put a premium on leadership.

It also carries four particular strategic implications.

The first is that the Alliance has to be able to fight multi-domain warfare. Exploiting the new domains of cyber, AI, data fusion and outer space, where hostile activity can be conducted all the time because it is below NATO's Article 5 mutual defence clause, adversaries will try to defeat NATO in the electro-magnetic spectrum before tanks, artillery and fighter aircraft come into play. The preparation for the war has become the war itself.

The United States is already moving in this direction, but it needs to engage its allies on how NATO can mainstream the new technologies throughout its force posture. The risk is of a digital divide in the alliance in which a minority of allies have acquired the new technologies and have integrated their command and control seamlessly across all the six domains while the majority have neither acquired the technologies nor tried to think through the ways to use them. As a result they will be able to fight only limited, low intensity engagements.

NATO also needs to make its exercises more demanding and incorporate the lessons learned faster into its operational procedures and organisation. The alliance needs a Senior Group of scientific advisers who can make policy makers understand earlier and better the impact of technological change by drawing more on private sector expertise and contributions. Declaring space as a domain of operations would be a good move in this direction.

The second implication is in the area of hybrid or grey zone warfare. This activity may be difficult to attribute but it is planned and intentional and as such constitutes hostile behaviour. It cannot be tolerated lest it invite still more hybrid attacks. So both NATO and the EU need to respond robustly and consistently. Only in this way can some

form of deterrence be established over time. This will also be a culture change for NATO in particular because it means taking lots of smaller decisions all the time rather than very big decisions only once a decade or so. We should remember that Article 5, the mutual defence clause, was invoked only once in NATO's first seventy years and then in response to a terrorist attack that it was not designed for. Generating solidarity in response to lesser affronts may be more difficult than when facing existential military threats. Moreover devising a playbook of mainly civilian and economic measures will be new for an alliance that is more accustomed to military contingency planning. NATO will need good situational awareness to respond adroitly and not be drawn into unwanted escalation.

The third implication is the relationship between burden sharing and European defence integration. The United States is calling on Europe to do more and spend more. This is justified but it can be properly achieved only if Washington wholeheartedly supports the current EU efforts to develop its own capabilities and to pool its research and development programmes through such schemes as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund. These initiatives can reduce the high degree of duplication and give the Europeans more capacity for autonomous action. The EU's problems are in its immediate neighbourhood, from Ukraine, to the Western Balkans, Libya and the Sahel. The United States is not going to stabilise these regions. On the contrary it is seeking to reduce its footprint in the Middle East and Africa. Yet the United States has a vital interest in the EU succeeding in this venture. So instead of seeing the goal of European Strategic Autonomy as something anti-American or a threat to the primacy of NATO, Washington needs to get behind them as Europeans will accept higher defence spending if they believe this serves their own priorities and interests. After all, the EU is the only emerging power that is intrinsically friendly to the United States unless Washington forces it to go in another direction

Finally, the alliance needs to think and plan for the long term. China and Russia are good at this and they do not allow themselves to be blown easily of course. NATO by contrast has become adept at responding to immediate crises in line with the news cycle and the different security interests of its member states. This means shifting priorities and a loss of breadth and focus.

The creation of an Intelligence Division in NATO HQ bringing together civilian and military inputs has greatly improved the alliance's ability to understand Russia and China and to analyse their moves real time. This facilitates NATO's messaging and signalling and helps to identify diplomatic openings. A long term approach can also help NATO to be less reactive and taken by surprise, as with Russia's recent moves in the Middle East. The alliance can learn to apply its own diplomatic and military instruments to better effect. Yet above all the first step is to stop giving China and Russia free and easy victories through the west's own self-inflicted divisions and wounds.

The lessons of the twentieth century are that no catastrophe or triumph was ever inevitable. Everything depended on decisions that political leaders took for better or for worse. Certainly today the west is on the back foot in a way that few would have predicted when the Berlin Wall came down and we proclaimed the "End of History" thirty years ago. But this does not mean that the illiberal autocracies are set to dominate the twenty first century. There is no evidence that they can durably out-perform the democracies or make humankind happier and more prosperous. They can win only if we let them by losing faith in the liberal order that we constructed so patiently in the years following the Second World War and which NATO and the EU have so successfully nurtured and expanded. But we cannot continue to live off the heritage of the past. We need a different transatlantic relationship and a different NATO and EU to take us safely through the next seventy five years. The time to deliver on the necessary reforms is now. Tomorrow is already too late.