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## NATO Under Pressure

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## **NATO Under Pressure**

### **Abstract**

This article examines some of the formidable challenges and concerns of North Atlantic Treaty Organization that could influence its unity and integrity. A combination of issues that encompass military problems, internal political glitches and critical rhetoric from the President of the United States may undermine NATO's capacity to act in the best interest of its members. Now even more than ever before, this causes uncertainty about the future of the Alliance. Therefore, this paper opens a discussion about possible scenarios for NATO's disintegration and how this might affect some of the smallest member states, namely, Bulgaria. Admittedly, the security and stability of Bulgaria, which has limitations in terms of national capacities and capabilities, is at risk. Without the protection of NATO, there is a high probability that the Balkans could once again jump into competition and confrontation. Regional actors and global players might try to impose their influence on the Balkans. For Bulgaria, this means change in the security landscape and uncertain future alternatives. No one on the Balkans will be truly safe.

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## Introduction

“NATO is the most successful military alliance in history.”

- NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg<sup>1</sup>

“NATO is as bad as NAFTA. It’s much too costly for the U.S.”

- President of the United States of America Donald Trump<sup>2</sup>

These two differing statements logically raise questions about the status and the future of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Although the Secretary General states the alliance is the most successful in history, the attitude of the citizens of the European NATO Member States towards the Alliance varies. The organization enjoys extremely high confidence in the Netherlands and Poland, where 79 percent of the population supports it; in Germany, United Kingdom and France about 60 percent of inhabitants have a positive attitude towards the Alliance. The opinions are different in the countries on the southern flank. In Spain 45 percent of residents have a favorable opinion of NATO, in Greece 33 percent and in Turkey 23 percent.<sup>3</sup> In Slovakia 53 percent of the respondents, believe that, despite the positive role of NATO since the end of the cold war, the Alliance is currently not so important and there is a need for a new approach to security.<sup>4</sup> In a study conducted in early December 2017 in Bulgaria, Gallup International reported that 38 percent of the population has a positive attitude towards NATO, and 44 percent perceive the Alliance negatively.<sup>5</sup> Finally, in the United States 62 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of NATO, while 48 percent think that NATO does not contribute enough to solving the world’s problems.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that NATO retains the support of its member states, there are political and military experts who consider that today the Alliance is under pressure. Prominent pundits are raising worries that existing problems with defense spending, concerns with the speed of decision-making, readiness, and interoperability of forces have potential to undermine NATO’s integrity. These are not the only concerns about the future of NATO. Among others, the political rhetoric that comes out from the president of the United States has serious implications on NATO’s integrity. This combination of old, well-known problems, and new political realities may have a devastating effect on NATO’s capacity to act in the best interests of its members, which raises questions about NATO’s

continued need to exist. Even though the possibility of NATO dissolution seems far-fetched, there is a need to discuss what would happen if the Alliance ceases to exist. For Bulgaria, one of the smallest member-states, such hypothetical situation of NATO demise means poor future alternatives with high levels of instability.

## NATO Concerns

NATO suffers from the classic weaknesses of international military alliances. There are political and military concerns, which are the basis of the United States' critical and sometimes harsh rhetoric against some of the member states. Particularly important is the question of defense spending and availability of forces. The breakup of the Soviet Union led to a radical reduction in defense budgets and substantial cuts in major weapons systems in Europe. For example, the Netherlands, which in 1995 maintained 740 tanks, in 2015 has none; the same situation arises in Belgium; Germany had diminished the number of tanks from 2695 to 410; France currently has 200 tanks out of 1016 in 1995, and Italy keeps 160 tanks out of 1077 in 1995.<sup>7</sup> Nowadays, in a different security situation, this post-Cold War reality is difficult to turn around. Europeans are slow in investing in their military capabilities, and compared to Russia, there is a significant readiness gap, which undermines the ultimate purpose of NATO – collective security. NATO member countries are supposed to devote 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defense. In 2017, only six states met this requirement—the United States (3.6 percent), Greece (2.3 percent), United Kingdom (2.1 percent), Estonia (2.1 percent), Romania (2 percent), and Poland (2 percent). Indeed, member-states' failure to properly finance their own armed forces increases the burden on the United States which has to provide more resources for European security. Consequently, this fact has increased the critical rhetoric from the U.S. political establishment.<sup>8</sup> In an open letter published prior to the 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels, fourteen high-ranking security experts emphasized that the inadequate and unjust distribution of burden of NATO funding has a potential to undermine NATO's unity. The authors insist NATO faces a challenging century that requires more efforts from the European Nations.<sup>9</sup> The director of Defense Studies at the Center for the National Interest, Harry J. Kazianis argues that European unwillingness or inability to create credible armed forces puts under question NATO's utility and makes it obsolete to the current security

environment.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the Alliance's ability to provide credible deterrence to a resurgent Russia is under pressure.

An additional concern is the speed of the NATO decision-making process. Here the major problem stems from the necessity to achieve consensus for future actions including use of force. The authorization to use force might be difficult to obtain because it depends on the members' internal political dynamic and legal regulations, which in some cases requires prolonged parliamentary work. The former deputy secretary general of NATO Ambassador Alexander Vershbow maintains that getting a consensus decision from the member states represents a serious problem, which can greatly hinder NATO in taking appropriate and timely action.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, with a lack of political will, a delay in the NATO decision making-process provides opportunities for adversaries to advance their goals and undermines the security of the member states. Such scenario challenges the credibility of NATO and can have a damaging effect on its stability and unity. In other words, a situation in which the Alliance is slow to respond to a crisis in a member-state, including hybrid threats, will raise questions among some member states about the value of its continued existence.

One long-standing question, which brings additional concerns, is NATO enlargement and its effect on Russia. There is a consensus to keep an open-door policy to new members, but this should not be overstated. Some of the great European powers are opposed to accepting Georgia in NATO because of the possibility of alienating Russia. In Washington, there are critics that insist that new members will not contribute to U.S. security. For example, Senator Rand Paul claims, "there is no national security interest that an alliance with Montenegro will advance. If we invite Montenegro into NATO, it will be a one-way street, with the United States committing to defend yet another country, and you, the taxpayer, being stuck with the bill."<sup>12</sup> More troubling are the remarks of the President Trump considering the possibility of entering in the World War III because of aggressive moves of the newest member of NATO—Montenegro. In addition, some security experts and analysts assert that NATO expansion makes America less safe because it increases the possibilities for a war with nuclear super power such as Russia.<sup>13</sup> This argument has another impact – stopping NATO enlargement provides additional opportunities for Russia to influence the domestic politics of some of its

neighbors and contradicts one of the Alliance's founding principles – to keep an expansionist Russia contained. Thus, it sends a negative message that the interest of the small countries may be neglected for the sake of the great power politics, which in the end challenges NATO's integrity.

NATO's purpose to act in support of the security interests of its members depends on the availability of military resources and on the capacity of states to provide and maintain their forces. Currently there are substantial issues about the readiness and interoperability of forces, which undermine NATO's capability to fight and win in a war against a peer competitor. Rand Corporation reported that France, Germany, and the United Kingdom might have substantial challenges in case of a need for rapid deployments to the Baltic States. The report estimates that most probably France might have the ability to deploy one Battalion Battle Group in about a week and could provide one Brigade after one month. The UK may be able to position one Battalion in about one month and one Brigade after an additional 30 to 90 days. Germany could muster and sustain one Brigade only after a longer period. In addition, there are many uncertainties about the status of their capabilities to confront and survive in a war with Russia.<sup>14</sup> According to another study, Germany has multiple problems with the readiness of its forces and their equipment. The Washington-based Atlantic Council argues that the German Navy does not have submarines in operational readiness and only 4 out of 128 Eurofighter jets are mission capable. Their Army also has issues with the quantity and readiness of tanks and armored personnel carriers.<sup>15</sup> In another report, Rand Corporation summarizes NATO's interoperability issues in several areas—problems with command and control; differences in operational planning and mission execution; difficulties in exchange of classified information; problems with identification of forces; and growing technological gaps.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, interoperability suffers from the differences in traditions, training, and the practice of war as well as on the wide range of combat support such as spare parts, ammunition, and armament. If Russia scrambled its forces and actively engaged in security competition, such constraints in NATO's military capabilities seriously undermine its capacity to defend its members. Finally, this may have damaging effect on NATO's credibility and capacity to deploy and successfully engage its forces.

Whatever one may believe about the importance of NATO to the security of Europe and America, it is obvious that the Alliance faces numerous problems. To some in the United States, a lack of action by the European Allies to solve these problems and rely on American power causes even the supportive politicians in Washington to become harshly critical. In February 2017 during the Defense Ministerial Meeting, then Secretary of Defense James Mattis said, “If your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to the alliance, each of your capitals needs to show its support for our common defense.”<sup>17</sup> There are also politicians in Washington who argue that NATO is not suitable to the current security environment and the organization is not a central instrument of American foreign policy. At the center of the political rhetoric is President Trump who acts as if the Alliance might be an obsolete relic from the Cold War. He also claims the Alliance helps and benefits the wealthy European nations more than the United States. On July 5, 2018 in Great Falls, Montana the U.S. president said, “So we have \$151 billion in trade deficits with the EU and on top of that they kill us with NATO. They kill us.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, the New York Times reported that in 2018 the president discussed with his closest advisers a possibility to pull the United States out of NATO.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, according to the Washington Post, the Pentagon is conducting an analysis on the costs and benefits of keeping American forces in Germany. There is a possibility that the Americans might decide to reduce the composition of its forces in Europe. Considering the rise of China there is a chance that the United States may conduct a thorough and in-depth rethinking of the extent of its NATO commitment.<sup>20</sup> These statements and actions raise alarming signals that the leadership of America may not be ready to support Article 5 from the Washington Treaty and send troops to help its allies. Obviously, the Alliance has its opponents and supporters; it faces multiple political and military challenges. However, undermining NATO’s unity and capacity to act in the best interest of its members might have devastating effects on the Alliance’s ability to defend its members.

## Scenarios for NATO’s Disintegration

Despite the criticism against NATO, the Alliance is as a guarantor not only of European security but also of the United States. The pivotal assumption is that the existence and participation in international organizations creates legal conditions for security, expansion of democracy, and

increases the economic benefits to the parties involved. James Goldgeier claims this is not the case anymore, when the U.S. president demonstrates a radical disagreement with the liberal international order. In fact, Goldgeier insists the president is trying to undermine the unity of the EU and to promote nationalistic ideas.<sup>21</sup> President Donald Trump believes NATO and the EU are organizations that harm America's interests and which benefit from the power of the United States. His rhetoric for defending the economic interests of the United States and his requirements for transactional politics intensify the sense that the country is no longer a guarantor of the stability of the Alliance. There are opinions, which hold that the current political establishment in Washington will support those states that demonstrate loyalty, and will abandon those that do not concede with America. In such a case, without the United States as a major political and security unifier NATO would become a meaningless organization.<sup>22</sup> The existence of the Alliance is at stake, says the former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden-Carl Bildt. NATO's fate depends on the behavior and decisions of President Trump. One of the main issues is the Alliance's political unity and will. In the center of this observation are suspicions that, in case of direct attacks, NATO will fail to reach consensus and to activate Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. The latter arises from the current political rhetoric of President Trump.<sup>23</sup> The problem is that without the leadership of America NATO will face the most disturbing scenario – its breakdown.

Are there any scenarios for dissolution of NATO? Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall consider this question in their essay "Ahead of the Curve: Anticipating Strategic Surprise". They insist that in the future the fundamental strategic interests of the US and Europe will diverge. The Americans will not be willing to pay billions for the protection of rich European countries. The Europeans will refrain from participating in peacekeeping operations in places such as Africa. Europe's main goal will be to deter the rising power of America. The United States will withdraw their forces from Europe. The United Kingdom is suspicious of its continental allies and generally follows the United States. Consequently, without America and Great Britain, NATO will collapse.<sup>24</sup>

The collapse of NATO may be a sequential result from several correlated events. They might include partisan actions from the U.S. leadership and responses from the European states that will increase political and military



disparity. For instance, a reason for possible dissolution of NATO could be the difference between America's national interests and those of the European allies especially with regard to military interventions outside the Euro-Atlantic area. America is likely to feel frustrated by the lack of reciprocity, considering the fact that during the last seventy years the United States invested enormous funds in the reconstruction of the European continent. Americans might have some additional disappointments based on the probability that European partners will delay or will not implement the commitment to provide 2 percent of their GDP to mutual defense. Consequently, the probable European failure to commit to the common security may increase the financial responsibility and may raise the military burden on the United States. The latter may increase the level of dissatisfaction with NATO from U.S. citizens. The possibility of a continued lack of European investment in the area of defense will widen the technological gap and will affect the ability of Allied Forces to act as one entity. Conceived in this way, these factors combined with the traditional American rhetoric about isolationism may lead to the withdrawal of the United States from NATO. Canada without the American military machine will not be able to ensure the survivability of the transatlantic link, which means the effective disintegration of NATO.<sup>25</sup>

Richard Jordan from the conservative website the Federalist asserts that the Alliance will crumble slowly and gradually. The author claims the world no longer needs the Cold War's NATO. Furthermore, he insists that NATO has had a privilege to behave irrationally, there are no reasons for its existence, and there is no force, which might transform it. Nowadays the world is in a different paradigm—America is not willing to pay any price and bear any burden. The current Administration sees the world through the prism of realism, which general assumption is that each party acts only in their own narrow interests. Since the United States has a number of domestic political differences and external economic concerns, Washington does not want to invest resources and efforts to subsidize the luxurious European lifestyle. In five to ten years, the writer proclaims, Europe will experience a crisis, which Europeans will not manage to solve. In addition, Jordan thinks that, due to exhausted political patience the United States might not support Europe which ultimate result is a collapse of NATO.<sup>26</sup>

Ian Kearns discusses the future of NATO in relation to the conditions and the status of the European Union. NATO may disappear because of deep political and structural problems of the EU. Political turmoil in Europe and the inability to deal with the complex issues of refugees, the financial stability of the Euro zone, the rising voices for national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs can deepen the processes of decay in the EU. Hence, the diminished confidence between the member countries and the deviation in the specific national interests may increase the tensions between them. With lowering levels of integrity and trust among European members of NATO, the Alliance may slowly collapse. Kearns writes NATO can continue to exist, but on paper only, which means that the solidarity and consensus that is the core of the collective security no longer exist. The results of these and similar scenarios will be destructive for European stability. Moreover, due to incorrect interpretation of signals and actions there are chances for crises between the great European powers. There are risks for conflicts and wars in Eastern Europe and resumption of war in the Balkans. European states may once again focus solely on their individual needs and ignore the value of working collectively, a world in which the interests of small countries will be totally ignored and power will be the only thing that matters.<sup>27</sup>

### The Consequences of the Alliance's Collapse

For the security experts, it is clear that without NATO's protective umbrella small European countries will not be able to defend themselves from threats. A good example is Bulgaria. In 2010, the White Book on defense of Bulgaria rationally proclaimed that Bulgaria alone is not capable to defend its national sovereignty. Therefore, Bulgaria organized all of its plans around NATO's collective defense. Despite all the problems and challenges that the Ministry of Defense confronted, the Bulgarian Armed Forces took all necessary measures to prepare its troops, to contribute to missions and operations, to participate in exercises and to conduct training within the framework of NATO and the EU. The Alliance has become part of the State's everyday life, an integral point of its strategic analysis and a fundamental part in the military decision making process. In fact, Bulgaria's membership in NATO has become the pivotal military strategic leverage and the biggest external political advantage. None of Bulgarian military personnel and security experts questioned the

credibility of the Alliance and no one assumed that the organization is failing.

The situation has changed when the NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated, "nowhere is it written in stone that the transatlantic bond will always thrive."<sup>28</sup> Mr. Stoltenberg declared the Treaty of Washington is the only hope for peace, and Europe and North America should remain united. In addition, he considers that despite the existence of some serious political controversy between the United States and Europe the Alliance is an example of success. First, the member states had some diverse points of view and opinions, but history confirms that differences were not an obstacle for the NATO's coherence. Second, the future of NATO is secure, because Canada and the United States gradually increased their contribution with troops and forces in Europe. Additionally, the European allies have started to increase their defense spending gradually. Third, America and Europe share common interests to retain its unity because they are stronger, more secure, and prosperous together.

## A Bulgarian Perspective

First, the disappearance of the Euro-Atlantic security system means a regionalization of security. Currently, the organization brings together the divergent strategic interests of Western, Eastern, and Southern European countries. Without the United States as a unifying center, there is a high chance that states will concentrate on their regional issues and narrow concerns. Actually, this might destabilize current political stability and military cooperation. In fact, Europe will witness rise of a new security environment, in which each State will look how to negotiate his or her own deals with Washington or Moscow. It is likely that the countries from post-Soviet space will fall into the sphere of influence of Russia. As a result, common European security will weaken which will bring instability in the EU. The geopolitical winners from the break-up of the Alliance will be Russia, as well as those who insist on the necessity of building a multipolar world.<sup>29</sup> In reality, there will not be incentives for countries of the Western Balkan Peninsula to accept deep political reforms. This opens the door for a possible active involvement of external geopolitical players in the Balkans. The latter can affect the probable reemergence of old, historical

alliances, but in a new and different international context which does not mean stable region.

In fact, from Bulgarian point of view the breakup of NATO might increase the risk of extreme political rhetoric and use of force between neighboring countries in the Balkans. Moreover, the breakdown of the Alliance implies a distortion and fragmentation of the existing balance of power.

Furthermore, the demise of the Alliance means the emergence of a regional super power on the Balkan Peninsula. Turkey. A rise in the geopolitical ambitions of Turkey is likely, with a possible use of the Muslim minorities to strengthen its political influence on the Balkans. The former Minister of Foreign affairs of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu argues in his book “Strategic Depth” that Turkey has two major political goals – to strengthen Bosnia and Albania and to create grounds for international deployment of a protective umbrella over the ethnic Muslim minorities in Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Kosovo and Romania.<sup>30</sup> Essentially, this means open interference in the internal affairs of these Balkan states, which could lead to a new Balkan catastrophe.

Likewise, the collapse of NATO means a loss of intelligence gathering and security cooperation, which will limit Bulgaria’s global and regional situational awareness. This implies a reduction of control over the actions of terrorist groups, competitors, and adversaries. It may bring a rise in crime, corruption, and internal instability. Additionally, the dissolution of NATO involves an extremely high financial price. Achieving a reliable defense without partners against internal or external threats will be extremely costly. The Bulgarian Government will have to make difficult tradeoffs between state’s foreign policy goals, internal security concerns, social needs, and military necessities. Moreover, the Armed Forces will experience issues with modernization, training, and preparation of forces, readiness, and capability development. Without proper financial resources, the Bulgarian military establishment will stay far behind its competitors in the areas of technology and science. Actually, those Balkan states with more investments in their military inventories will have more capabilities to intimidate and harm others. The result of it may increase suspicion and distrust between Balkan neighbors. It might bring wrong interpretations, instability and resurgence of old conflicts, leading to a confrontation. This does not necessarily mean war; however, it means a high likelihood for interference in internal political affairs, through the

application of information warfare and hybrid strategies. In other words, left alone, without the protective umbrella of Article 5's collective defense and NATO's regulatory apparatus, for Bulgaria the collapse of NATO will bring a high level of volatility in the Balkans and might increase the likelihood of conflict.

## Conclusion

The preceding review examined some of the formidable challenges and concerns of North Atlantic Treaty Organization that might have influence on its unity and integrity. It expresses worries that a combination of issues that encompass military problems, internal political glitches and critical rhetoric that comes out from the president of the United States may undermine NATO's capacity to act in the best interest of its members. Now even more than ever before, this situation brings uncertainty about the future of the Alliance. Therefore, this article initiated discussion about possible scenarios for NATO disintegration and the effect this might have on the smallest member states – namely Bulgaria. In such an event, the security and stability of Bulgaria, with limitations in terms of national capacities and capabilities, is at risk. Without the protection of NATO, there is a high probability that Balkans could become an environment of competition and confrontation, with regional actors and global players trying to impose their influence on the Balkans. For Bulgaria, this means change in the security landscape and uncertain future alternatives. The level of insecurity and instability will increase regional volatility; the Bulgarian government may have to make difficult future choices between economic interest, social stability, and military capabilities. In the end, no one on the Balkans will be truly safe.

In the current security environment, NATO's fate is at stake and its future depends on the United States political will to keep Alliance alive and running. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, European members have to find the way to increase their defense spending rapidly and to prepare themselves properly for the existing and possible security threats. Europeans have to show to the American political establishment that they are dedicated to preserve their common security through trust and mutual support. The United States has to keep its presence in Europe under the NATO umbrella, which will provide additional opportunities to project its influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East. The rapid withdrawal of

the United States from NATO will hurt Washington's image and strategic interests not only in Europe but also around the world. It sends a message to Russia that everything is possible. America's withdrawal from the leadership positions in the Alliance may play well for the Russian president who will strengthen his influence and power domestically and internationally. Sadly, the result from such development might bring unthinkable challenges and might contest the peaceful existence of small European countries. The forces of the day will play their game, which in the words of the ancient Greek philosopher Thucydides—the strong do what they will, the weak suffer what they must.

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