NATO Solidarity Under Stress –
The need for stronger transatlantic leadership and unity

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Executive summary

The security threats in Europe have taken a more unpredictable turn since the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine, especially as regards to hybrid tactics employed by Russia to destabilize countries in Eastern and Central Europe, and the Baltics. Combined with the multi-faceted threats coming from continued destabilization of the South, a premium is put on political and military solidarity between NATO Allies and EU Member States, which has been difficult to achieve because of often competing interests, financial or political.

This requires constant efforts and support at the political level to make solidarity more resilient. First, the perception gap among partners constitutes a risk to transatlantic strategic unity, and eventually for the future of the transatlantic partnership. While the USSR was the sole existential threat during the Cold War, the United States and the European powers now face a multiplicity of complex threats both in the East and the South, which has fostered a certain divergence of priorities. A strong transatlantic leadership is instrumental in defining common security priorities and improving the sharing of strategic responsibilities. Second, transatlantic division of labor should not give way to a division of purposes and interests. Transatlantic leadership must promote cooperation at the strategic level in order to avoid the disintegration of the transatlantic identity, while the burden of operations is rationally distributed among partners, based on respective willingness and capabilities. A pragmatic approach to transatlantic security cooperation should encourage an informal and organic division of labor rather than institutionalize the specialization of transatlantic powers. This requires improving communication between partners, especially between the United States and the European powers as well as between the EU and NATO, in order to reach a consensus on strategy and define a case-by-case distribution of security tasks.
**Recommendations for a renewed transatlantic cooperation**

- NATO and the EU have an important role to play, along with U.S. leadership, in fostering dialogue between transatlantic partners, and especially between European powers, in order to define common priorities and build frameworks of cooperation. These two institutions have the political legitimacy and the institutional means to build up and coordinate the actions of smaller coalitions or clusters of countries that share closer priorities and can, or at least want to, operate together. NATO-EU coordination is absolutely crucial since the challenges they face require a combination of tools (military, political, economic) that only an effective institutional coordination can provide.

- A well-conceived transatlantic division of labor represents the first response to current resource constraints and a rational way of improving transatlantic responses to security issues. However, one must bear in mind that dividing the strategic labor could become counter-productive to the general objective of strengthening the alliance. It could foster a *chasse-gardée* mindset and eventually alienate partners from each other, as each country — or small cluster of countries — becomes responsible for issues of respective interest, corresponding to each other’s capabilities. The sustainability of the transatlantic partnership lies first and foremost in the sharing of risks, and therefore the sharing of responsibilities. The division of labor can serve the efficiency of the partnership as a pragmatic way to adapt to the contemporary economic and political environment, but it should not jeopardize the unity of the United States and European powers. The ideas of division of labor and burden-sharing are also conceptually challenging, and can unintentionally block strategic dialogue between transatlantic partners. First, these notions often lead transatlantic powers to adopt a defensive attitude as they try to justify their own political or capability shortfalls. Constructive discussions are made even more difficult due to the lack of clear measures to assess each partner’s efforts to share the burden of transatlantic security. NATO’s military spending requirements do not provide any information on the actual use of capabilities in operations that serve the community’s interests, and therefore cannot grasp its whole reality. Finally, the question of division of labor should not be addressed before agreeing on **what sort of labor is to be divided**. The United States and its European partners already share common security concerns in Europe’s eastern and southern neighborhoods, but these concerns do not share the same level of priority in Washington and in Brussels, or even among European powers.

- Transatlantic partners need to clearly outline the tasks to be divided, and the issues that cannot foster cooperation since they are not among certain partners’ priorities. These pitfalls can be overcome by enhancing leadership at the transatlantic level. Indeed, division of labor should not mean setting security objectives without coordination. The United States plays a major role in leading the definition of common strategic priorities and the coordination with third party countries at the global level, but also in incentivizing all European countries to assume more responsibilities and increase their defense spending. Washington still maintains a unique set of diplomatic and economic assets when working with European political
leaderships — at the EU level as well as at the national level — which enable it to invest more in the transatlantic partnership. Improving U.S. leadership also means improving strategic communication among partners, especially when the United States hesitates, as some argue it has in Syria. The concrete implications of the United States "leading from behind the scenes" for Europe's security could also be clarified to avoid false expectations.

- On the European side, **key powers such as France, Germany, the U.K., and Poland should also work to encouraging other European powers to increase their financial efforts despite the economic crisis.** The division of strategic costs between European partners, as in the case of the sanctions imposed on Russia, needs to be addressed by leading European powers. A strong intra-European leadership is crucial to increase the sense of ownership of the transatlantic alliance by European powers and a culture of more equal burden-sharing, and thus to avoid the feeling of U.S. domination on transatlantic foreign and security policies. Finally, the recent events in Ukraine have also provided a new momentum for the transatlantic security partnership. **The strength of NATO and EU strategic coordination is a vital deterrent to further Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere.** Whether via common institutions and frameworks such as NATO and the EU CSDP, or at the bilateral level, the United States and European powers have a new incentive to improve transatlantic strategic cooperation and foster dialogue on the division of labor. This is true not only when it comes to the multiple dimensions of hybrid and conventional warfare, but this momentum is also essential to improve public diplomacy and obtain the support of the population for increased political and financial investment in security. The Ukraine conflict may not provide a long-term raison d'être for the transatlantic partnership, but it should help build structural mechanisms to share security responsibilities between the United States and its European partners.

- **Responsibility for ensuring Western unity and for facing up to Russia rests primarily with the U.S. and Germany.** The former has to acknowledge that it is the ultimate addressee of Kremlin policy, whose end goal it is to curtail U.S. leadership in global affairs. Consequently, Washington should re-prioritize Russia, re-engage with its European allies and strengthen its presence as a key guarantor of security in Europe. Germany, in turn, is central to cohesion among EU members. Berlin will have to take the concerns of those EU members and neighbors that are particularly exposed to Russian pressures more seriously and to formulate its position accordingly and unambiguously. Enhanced shuttle diplomacy and a focus on Russia as the EU’s key foreign policy challenge will have to be ingredients of German leadership, as will stronger political, financial and military commitment to securing the EU and NATO’s Eastern flank.

- It is necessary not only that defense spending increase, but also that **spending become more efficient and effective in providing the military capabilities NATO and the EU need to defend their interests and deter conflict in the broader region.** The capabilities debate often seems abstract, and the **2 percent GDP criteria of NATO** is a constant subject of tension between partners. However, the question cannot be avoided, and the need for military resources must be answered in order to build a credible security partnership. The transatlantic division of labor is highly affected by the inability of some European partners to provide more
capabilities, which hampers the extent to which they can actively participate in the implementation of a transatlantic strategy. NATO's 2 percent criteria is necessary but not sufficient, and the Alliance also emphasizes the need for modernization and research and development in national defense budgets. A renewed effort by European countries to increase both quantitatively and qualitatively, their defense capabilities is a priority to avoid further widening the technology and capacity gap with the U.S. military, and to enable sustained operations without heavy U.S. support. The Libya intervention provides interesting lessons: whilst the military cooperation between transatlantic partners was a success, operations also revealed significant capability shortfalls and new concerns regarding the European capacity to act singlehandedly and in a sustainable manner in its neighborhood. A geographic division of labor, which would give strategic preeminence to European powers in Eastern Europe and North Africa, therefore depends on the European ability to significantly increase its defense capabilities.

- **Transatlantic powers should not narrow their strategic ambitions, despite the multiplicity of challenges.** The U.S. and its European partners should keep the broadest possible perspective, and continue to engage with security issues in the Eastern European neighborhood, in the MENA region and in Eastern Asia. Different levels of priorities can be agreed upon, but a strict geographic division of labor would ultimately undermine the transatlantic unity and credibility. Political and financial constraints define the framework in which the U.S. and European powers can effectively operate, but the transatlantic partnership cannot afford to be limited in purpose and vision. The values and norms promoted by transatlantic powers at the global level can still be attractive for other societies, and encourage the evolution of totalitarian regimes.

- **The economic and political future of Russia is a major concern to transatlantic security.** As a former major power struggling against the effects of globalization, Russia constitutes a unique case in the contemporary strategic environment. Deep socio-economic structural issues may not be fixed in the near or middle-term future, which may lead Russia to become a fragile state. Making sure that Ukraine does not fail from a security and economic standpoint should also be part of transatlantic thinking, and extended approach to collective defense. **Anticipating potential crises with Russia therefore requires thinking beyond Putin's foreign policy and focusing on the long-term evolution of Russia's strategic interests and fears.** Transatlantic partners may be more affected by the implications of a decline of Moscow's authority than by a reaffirmation of Russia's power on the international stage. The geopolitical stability of the Eurasian space, and ultimately the success of the transatlantic engagement with China, will largely depend on the future of U.S. and European ability to deal with a revanchist Russia. The Warsaw summit should take a broader take on deterrence, by factoring in all its dimensions, from non-conventional threats, including cyber, to nuclear deterrence. The summit should also take a sharper look at the Black and Baltic Seas and design regional responses, by including Sweden and Finland politically.
CHANGING THE TRANSATLANTIC MINDSET ON DEFENSE AND SECURITY ISSUES

The Alliance is currently confronted with two existential challenges. First, its credibility and ability to respond efficiently to the Russian revisionist agenda in Ukraine will deeply influence the future of the transatlantic partnership. Second, transatlantic partners continue to reduce their defense spending despite the multiplicity of security threats in the European neighborhood. These challenges have not led NATO member-states to significantly re-invest materially and politically in their foreign and security policy and the question remains as to what would trigger a real change in the transatlantic mindset on defense issues.

The reactions to the rising instability in Eastern Europe illustrate the reluctance of both the U.S. and European partners to fundamentally re-think their policies. Despite alarming reports, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war did not help transatlantic powers realize Russia’s ability to threaten the transatlantic community, and more specifically the European project. This conflict did not provide the much needed lessons-learned on the risks of Putin’s chasse-gardée mindset and great power vision for Russia. Transatlantic diplomacy failed to convey a strong message to Moscow, re-asserting dedication to European security and stability after the war in Georgia. As a result, the use of military force in Ukraine remained a viable option for the Russian leadership, and the transatlantic partnership would eventually not be able to deter the escalation of the conflict.

The question of transatlantic mindset towards defense issues also highlights a division between the strategic community and the populations. Transatlantic leaders and publics often perceive the level of threat differently and therefore do not prioritize security matters the same way. While the Russian threat to liberal norms and the European project is generally condemned by the populations, the transatlantic strategic community struggles to foster public support for potential solutions. Increasing defense spending, encouraging market integration and procurement integration would strengthen the transatlantic unity and credibility vis-à-vis revisionist actions. Yet, public consent for these policies remains a challenge, as Euro-skepticism and hesitations to engage in what is perceived as a distant conflict have impacted levels of popular support. These divisions weaken the credibility of the transatlantic security partnership and provide opportunities for revisionist powers to challenge transatlantic solidarity, notably by promoting alternative narratives inside transatlantic societies. The apparent gap between transatlantic leaders and their populations may well enable Russia to test the potential ambiguity of NATO's article 5 in case of hybrid warfare tactics against a NATO member-state. While governments have strongly reaffirmed their commitment to collective defense principles, the credibility of such statements is openly questioned if they cannot guarantee the safety of their people. Political leaders have a lot to do before the Warsaw summit, to convince public opinions of the need to prepare for, deter and if necessary, respond to a Russian attack. After a quarter-century in which NATO worried little about defending its territory against Russia, this complete change of mindset, discourse and set of capabilities will take time. The U.S. has a particular role to play by showing leadership at the transatlantic level and encouraging European leaders to prioritize security issues in political debates. Putin’s recent actions in Ukraine have entailed a momentum that has increased the public interest in such questions and can help the European strategic community raise awareness on the threats and risks facing transatlantic powers today.
Nonetheless, although the Ukrainian crisis may not have triggered a long-term change in the transatlantic security mindset, the actions that have been taken to increase transatlantic military pressure in Eastern Europe should not be underestimated. Transatlantic unity has passed Putin’s test and both the U.S. and European powers must continue their efforts to sustain the sanctions and transform reassurance measures into long-term deterrence. For example, the U.S. “symbolic” military presence in the Baltic States has sent an important message and such operations should be maintained in the future, as the Minsk agreements fail to deliver positive results on the ground. The economic and diplomatic pressures on Moscow should be increased in order to avoid being trapped in a perpetual state of negotiations, which would lead to the normalization of a frozen conflict at the European border. In parallel, non-NATO members such as Sweden and Finland have a role to play in the future of the transatlantic relations with Russia. The renewed debates, within Swedish and Finnish societies, regarding their integration into NATO are interesting signs of the strengthening of transatlantic unity around collective defense. Finally, transatlantic partners should show solidarity towards countries that are directly threatened by Russia’s strategic vision. Recent experiences have proven that soft diplomacy cannot deter Russia’s revisionist policies; stability and security in Moldova, Georgia and Armenia will also depend on the transatlantic powers’ ability to engage in more assertive foreign and defense policies.

The Southern front appears more problematic than the Eastern one to the transatlantic partnership. Firstly, while the threats of Russia’s aggressive foreign policy in Eastern Europe jeopardize the European territory, NATO partners, and potential NATO members, the conflicts in the MENA region to date have more (significant?) indirect implications on transatlantic security. Secondly, transatlantic security tools have not been successful at addressing Southern front issues such as terrorism, failed states, and the security implications of massive migration waves. The lackluster results of recent interventions and the difficulty to deter, or even anticipate, these questions have made transatlantic powers reluctant to engage in new costly operations. The cases of Iraq, Libya, and Syria, where different forms of intervention or non-intervention were adopted and were not successful, have also fostered a feeling of hopelessness. Finally, transatlantic powers, due to the variety of their security interests in the Southern neighborhood, support different — and sometimes opposing — proxies in the region. This prevents the United States and the European powers from building a united approach to regional security providers, and therefore delays the definition of a common transatlantic strategy in the MENA.

Nonetheless, the transatlantic partnership will have to articulate a common approach to both Eastern and Southern fronts because growing perception gaps could easily create opposing priorities and strategic incoherence. Security threats that are coming directly to the Alliance’s borders cannot be sidestepped; the transatlantic powers will not be facing wars of choice. The evolution of U.S. foreign policy, which has reassessed its priorities and “pivoted back” to the Middle East and Eastern Europe in light of the recent crises, illustrates the seriousness of the threats in the European neighborhoods.
EXPLAINING OURSELVES TO OURSELVES: EUROPE’S STRATEGIC RELEVANCE TO U.S. INTERESTS

In a changing security environment, the strategic role and interests of each partner must be regularly redefined. While Europe continues to struggle with slow economic growth, the rise of populism, general budget cuts and the refugees crisis, U.S. interests in enhancing transatlantic cooperation can be called into question. The challenges and internal tensions that are faced by European powers and the EU are often misunderstood by Washington, and it is essential to reassert the mutual benefits of the transatlantic partnership.

The first misunderstanding stems from EU political fragmentation and the vulnerabilities it has created. The U.S. seems to have never fully apprehended the complex mechanisms framing the European project, and naturally blames European structural weaknesses for most of the continent’s lack of unity. The absence of clear European leadership also complicates the relationship with Washington, which thus perceives the cooperation with the EU as often inefficient and too process-oriented. The second misunderstanding stems from the U.S. strategic community's multiple and opposing views of Europe. The White House has shown renewed appreciation for the EU sanctions on Russia and acknowledges the European – and especially German and French – efforts for leadership, while the State and Defense departments have constructive transactional relations with their European partners based on a shared sense of urgency. On the other hand, other actors of the relationship, notably in Congress and the think tank community are desperate to see Europe assume more security responsibilities and question the short-term benefits of investing in the transatlantic partnership. With the different agencies that influence U.S. foreign policy therefore expressing various levels of frustration, it is the role of all transatlantic organizations, including think tanks, to explain the strategic importance of Europe.

The successful promotion of Europe’s strategic relevance in Washington also determines the issue of transatlantic division of labor. Due to its outstanding economic development, Eastern Asia is considered as the key strategic region in the 21st century by the U.S. The increase of U.S. diplomatic, financial and military investments, symbolized by the so-called ‘rebalancing towards Asia’ strategy, were designed as a geographic division of labor: while the U.S. focuses on its interests in the Pacific, its European partners were expected to take more responsibilities in the MENA region. This simplistic vision is dangerous for the future of the transatlantic partnership for two reasons: first, the European powers need U.S. support and leadership to address the dramatic security issues in the Middle East and North Africa, and second, the U.S. needs a strong European presence in Asia to engage with China in the long-term. Indeed, Washington should not address the question of China’s emerging power at a bilateral level, but rather include its allies to discuss the integration of China in the international order. Despite unbalanced capacities, both the U.S. and European powers would benefit from closer relationships to defend the transatlantic model at the global level. The affirmation of Europe’s importance will make the prospect of a geographic division of strategic labor much less relevant.

Finally, U.S. concerns and frustration with the EU’s ongoing economic and political difficulties could lead to a growing bilateralization of transatlantic relations. As the EU members struggle to define common strategic priorities, Washington will continue to look for an even closer cooperation with a group of willing and able countries rather than continuing to promote European unity. Left unchecked, the implications could be particularly damaging for European integration as
well as for NATO, and eventually affect the European project as a whole. Washington should clarify to what extent it is willing to see EU institutions and instruments such as the CSDP and the EEAS play a more prominent role in the world in order to avoid any confusion.

THE NEED FOR A TRANSATLANTIC WAKE-UP CALL TO ADDRESS COMMON VULNERABILITIES

A successful transatlantic division of security labor requires a shared understanding of the security environment among partners. Unfortunately, both transatlantic leaders and populations have shown signs of delusion in recent years, being unable to face the consequences of the defense and foreign policy budget cuts, and downplaying the reality of the threats that they face. The need for a transatlantic "wake-up call" concerns three issues in particular: transatlantic responsibility over their neighbors’ security, the resilience of the transatlantic societies, and the lack of a transatlantic long-term vision for the European neighborhoods.

The international order is challenged by a multiplicity of revisionisms, which contest and attempt to change its rules and norms. The growing tensions in the European neighborhoods and in Eastern Asia are often the concrete expressions of a deeper opposition to the international order, and should not be reduced to local security crises. The outcome of the conflicts in Ukraine and in the Middle East will bear important implications for the future of the international balance of power. The vulnerabilities of the transatlantic partnership are therefore deeply linked to vulnerabilities of the transatlantic powers’ neighbors. The Russian threat to the security of the Eastern European countries should be perceived as a threat to the entire European project, and although the U.S. and its European partners should pursue their work to avoid any military escalation, transatlantic partners cannot afford to underestimate the seriousness of the situation. Moreover, the discussion about Russia should not be simply framed around the question of reassurance, as it could be detrimental to transatlantic solidarity. Indeed, limiting the transatlantic response to reassuring Baltic and Eastern European countries would imply that the transatlantic partnership is divided among security consumers, which are in fact threatened by Moscow’s foreign policy, and security providers, whose security interests are not directly at stake.

The second wake-up call concerns the vulnerabilities of the liberal system. The future of the European project is put at risk by the lasting economic difficulties and the political fragmentation inside and among European societies. These difficulties could ultimately jeopardize the transatlantic strategic partnership due to the level of interconnection of transatlantic economies. Similarly, the risks of “Grexit” and “Brexit”, as well as the heated debates about German leadership in European affairs weaken the credibility of the EU as a global actor. Transatlantic partners need to recognize these issues as sources of potential defense and security issues. Structural reforms to strengthen economies and the energy market, and improve the functioning of the social contract should be the first stage in enhancing the resilience and deterrence power of the transatlantic partnership. A new momentum towards more unity is necessary in order to reaffirm the transatlantic political and economic model. The integration of Sweden, Finland and Montenegro in NATO and Norway in the EU, as well as the signature of the TTIP could also help reinforce the cohesion and send a strong message to revisionist powers.

Finally, transatlantic partners need to overcome the divergence of strategic priorities in the Eastern and the Southern European neighborhoods. The transatlantic division of labor is
directly affected by the lack of common vision, especially in the case of the MENA region. Different historical perceptions of Russia and national interests have complicated the coordination on the Ukraine crisis too. The division between countries promoting a more assertive foreign and security policy such as Poland, Romania and the Baltic States, who ask for a more permanent NATO presence, and countries with a more passive attitude such as Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovakia, who feel less threatened by Russia and whose defense budgets are decreasing, is widening. Gaps also exist in the implementation and carrying out of the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), with certain Allies being strongly in favor of a reinforcement of its measures, leading to the permanent positioning of forces on the Eastern flank, while others plea for the politically acceptable version decided at the Wales summit to constitute the upper limit of Allied engagement. The successful implementation of the decisions taken at the Wales Summit will be crucial to bring together diverging threat perceptions. However, the lack of transatlantic coordination is even more dramatic in the case of the MENA region. While the crisis in the Eastern neighborhood has, at least in part, united transatlantic partners around the notion of collective defense, the transactional and crisis management questions of the Middle East have remained largely unanswered. Transatlantic powers have failed to offer a comprehensive and coherent strategy to address the Syrian civil war, the rise of ISIS, the failed state in Libya and the spread of Islamic terrorism in the Sahel region. The U.S. has not been able or willing to take the lead efficiently on these issues, and it is unlikely that Washington will engage more actively in the region before the 2016 elections.

**Enhancing Transatlantic Strategic Readiness and Anticipating Future Crises**

While paradigms from the Cold War and “War on Terror” continue to frame the transatlantic understanding of the current strategic environment, the U.S. and its European partners need to update their strategic lenses and improve their strategic readiness in order to respond to new security challenges.

In this process, the experience of recent operations is particularly useful in highlighting the assets and drawbacks of the transatlantic security partnership, and improving the strategic preparation of transatlantic powers for future conflicts. The NATO-led ISAF mission – the longest in the Alliance’s history – ended in 2014 to let the Afghan forces fully assume the security of the country and has provided valuable lessons-learned. The nature of the NATO mission in Afghanistan has enabled members of the coalition to acquire a unique training in crisis management. Despite the renewed focus on collective security in the context of the Russian threat in Eastern Europe, the concrete practice of crisis management operations will undoubtedly benefit member-states’ military in the years to come. Moreover, the outstanding combat experience of decade-long ground operations constitutes an incomparable advantage for future transatlantic use of force. It is crucial to continue to plan real exercises in order not to lose the know-how and interoperability gained during the ISAF mission. In parallel, NATO needs a better mechanism to collect the feedback from exercises and apply it usefully to combat situations. Finally, transatlantic partners must also look beyond the Afghan legacy: actively studying other countries’ operational experience, especially in Africa and the Middle East, should be a priority in order to prepare any future assistance missions.
Transatlantic powers also need to invest in contingency planning in order to improve their ability to anticipate the next crises and design appropriate responses. Operational planning and force planning are therefore essential tools in answering future capability and strategic needs, and imagining the new forms that security challenges will take in the short and middle-term. On the other hand, failing to develop regular scenario planning to create more predictability can hinder transatlantic strategic readiness and weaken the credibility of the transatlantic military. Such planning should not be limited to defense issues, but on the contrary, include political and economic dimensions within a long-term perspective. As recent operations have shown, transatlantic strategy cannot be based on multiple rapid military engagements and disengagements. It is therefore crucial to improve the sustainability of transatlantic military actions and to take into account the political costs of the use of force in democratic societies.

Finally, the tensions in Eastern Europe have highlighted the necessity for NATO to define a clear set of parameters on what constitutes military escalation and how to respond to it. For instance, the definition of what constitutes early warning can be particularly difficult in the case of hybrid warfare tactics. Transatlantic partners should be prepared for the possibility of hostile non-military actions against a NATO member, and assess situations where the use of force is pertinent. Consequently, they also need to define the situations where NATO should not be employed as a primary response. By outlining clear rules for the use of NATO's capabilities, transatlantic partners would reduce the risk of NATO-EU duplication and the multiplication of frameworks. In addition, it would help design comprehensive deterrence and reassurance policies, and sustain cooperation between non-military and military instruments.