

## NATO meeting: solidarity reinforced despite uncomfortable time for alliance to be in the spotlight

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NATO: in search of direction. Steve Parsons/PA Wire

### Author



#### Megan Dee

Lecturer in International Politics, University of Stirling

Anniversaries are meant to be a celebration. They represent a moment of reflection – a marker, a milestone, a time to look back. And therein lies their biggest problem. For anniversaries have that unfortunate effect of turning any subject – be it a past event, a married couple, or indeed an international institution – into an object of intense scrutiny. For the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) celebrating its 70th anniversary in London on December 3-4, that scrutiny has come at an unfortunate time.

Founded in 1949 with the signing of the Washington Treaty, NATO at 70 represents one of the longest-standing and arguably most successful political and military alliances in history. Yet NATO's evolution, longevity and very survival continues to draw debate for academics, practitioners and world leaders alike. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO's *raison d'être* has been constantly criticised, with many seeing it as a dinosaur of a bygone era.

Yet Russia's resurgent efforts to disturb and disrupt the North Atlantic region since the 2014 annexation of Crimea has also seen a renewed impetus for NATO as a security alliance. And new threats are looming, as my own research and teaching on international negotiation has examined.

NATO in 2019 in fact faces an unenviable agenda and a political environment increasingly un conducive to building a consensus. NATO's core geopolitical challenges not only include a

resurgent Russia amid claims of a “New Cold War”, but an increasingly influential and encroaching China. China was on the agenda of this leaders’ meeting for the first time.

The alliance must also address new hybrid threats ranging from cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, to public disinformation. Arms control is again a top agenda item for the alliance, not only over nuclear and chemical weapons, but now also addressing space as a new operational domain. Climate change and migration have also become hot topics for NATO.

NATO’s security environment has therefore become something of a multi-headed hydra, with each head representing a new challenge that only a strong and united NATO can ultimately meet.

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### **Fraying solidarity a NATO hallmark**

Fraying solidarity has nevertheless become a hallmark for the alliance. The Syrian crisis has involved the US and Turkey both undertaking unilateral action without consulting with NATO allies. That action has been further exacerbated by Turkey’s growing ties with Russia, including the purchase of the S-400 missile system.

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, has also challenged the cohesion of the 29-nation alliance by emphasising his own preference for a strong European security architecture, independent of the US and citing NATO’s “brain-death”. Macron’s comments were sharply challenged by both Germany’s chancellor, Angela Merkel and US president, Donald Trump.



Macron’s comments that NATO was suffering ‘brain-death’ set an uneasy tone ahead of the meeting. Olivier Hoslet/EPA

Amid it all, political contentions continue to fester within NATO over **burden-sharing**, and the US push for all 29 nations to meet their spending obligations to **spend 2% of GDP** on defence.

All this would seem to suggest that NATO's anniversary really has come at the worst possible juncture for an ageing, somewhat challenged, alliance. As the London NATO leader's meeting has highlighted, forced family gatherings can be fuelled by squabbling and the airing of past and current grievances rather than affection and unity. While anniversary gatherings are intended to celebrate, they also shine a spotlight on the cracks that fester.

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### **Introverted, yet successful**

For a naturally introverted NATO that **operates most effectively** as a military alliance away from the political spotlight, the London anniversary meeting must have been gruelling. It is only when you remove the spotlight and political grandstanding of this 70th anniversary that NATO's truest successes come to the fore.

For the success of NATO is its longevity, its adaptation, its ability to look out and seek to address the risks of an ever-changing security environment and its ability to maintain the ties that bind among its growing family. As NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg **remarked** at a conference the day before the leaders met, in contrast to most politicians who are criticised for being good on rhetoric but bad on substance, NATO is the opposite – it is “bad on rhetoric but good on substance”.

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"I'm a politician. I'm used to be criticized for having good rhetorics but bad substance. In [#NATO](#), it's the opposite. We have bad rhetorics but extremely good substance." – [@NATO](#) Secretary-General [@jensstoltenberg](#) at [#NATOEngages](#)

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For all of the cracks that this 70th anniversary has revealed, it has provided a moment for reflection. As the declaration published after the three-hour meeting of leaders identifies, what is now needed is a “forward-looking reflection process.”

NATO’s 70-year history is itself testimony of the organisation’s ongoing self-reflection, coupled with a willingness to adapt. But this meeting has provided just such a time for deep reflection on the alliance’s future as both a political and military organisation.

In tackling the challenges facing NATO today, that reflective process must consider NATO’s institutional procedures, decision-making and political structures under a soon-to-be 30-nation alliance, with North Macedonia set to join in 2020. A focus on consultation will also be critical in ensuring the cohesion of the alliance and maintaining solidarity.

Moving beyond this anniversary, NATO has much to do and hard questions to answer. But take away the spotlight and NATO will continue to work away quietly on the substance over the rhetoric ... at least until its 80th.

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