



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

PARLIAMENTARY TRANSATLANTIC FORUM

REPORT*

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SUMMARY OF THE 19th ANNUAL PARLIAMENTARY TRANSATLANTIC FORUM

1. On December 9-10, 100 parliamentarians from 23 NATO Member countries and 2 non-NATO EU countries, and North Macedonia which is in the final stages of accession to NATO, gathered in Washington for the 19th annual Washington Parliamentary Forum. The meeting was hosted by the National Defense University and co-sponsored by the Atlantic Council. NATO PA Vice President Richard Benyon (UK) greeted the delegations and introduced Vice Admiral Roegge, the President of the National Defense University and Damon Wilson, the Executive Vice President of the Atlantic Council, each of whom discussed the work of the respective institutions. Richard Benyon then outlined the broad themes of the discussions to come and reminded members that the meeting was to be held under the Chatham House Rule. The following is a general summary of the topics discussed during the three-day Forum.

I. THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE AFTER THE LONDON LEADERS' MEETING

2. 2019 was a turbulent year but, beneath the noise, it was an encouraging year for NATO, as the Alliance celebrated its 70th anniversary and the 30th anniversary since the fall of the Berlin Wall. NATO remains the most successful Alliance in history as well as the essential foundation of the transatlantic partnership. At 70, NATO and the Allies are, once again, adapting to new strategic realities. Indeed, the Alliance finds itself in the midst of its greatest transformation since the end of the Cold War.

3. The Alliance made great strides in its adaption process in 2019, in particular, during the Leaders' Meeting in December in London, United Kingdom. Although the Leaders' Meeting was not a full-fledged summit, it endorsed a number of measures that will strengthen the Alliance. The general sense among the Assembly's members and their interlocutors was that the meeting was highly productive and very relevant.

4. China emerged as a key theme of the Leaders' Meeting. Allies now recognise that China presents opportunities as well as challenges. In particular, China's strong position in 5G technology is a serious challenge with security implications. In London, the United States strongly conveyed its concerns about China's position in this key sector, and Allies agreed that the opportunities and challenges posed by China should be on the NATO agenda.

5. In 2019, further progress was made on matters pertaining to defence spending and readiness, although different opinions were aired on these matters in London. Still, between 2016 and the end of 2020, non-US Allies will add an additional USD 130 billion in new defence spending; a number which will increase to USD 400 billion by the end of 2024. Nine Allies already spend 2% of GDP on defence – more than double the number of 2014.

6. A credible Allied defence demands a solid command structure and ready forces that can be deployed quickly into the field. In London, Allies could note that the NATO Readiness Initiative has been a success: Allies can now muster 30 kinetic air squadrons, 30 naval vessels, and 30 mechanised battalions in 30 days.

7. As readiness must be translated nationally, parliaments must remain engaged. This means increasing defence spending, improving readiness, and ensuring military mobility across borders in Europe. For example, parliaments must invest more readiness, training hours, spare parts, munitions stocks, and supply lines etc. All of these are investments that can be made today.

Purchasing too much equipment can strain readiness, and this focus should help NATO member countries achieve the agreed 2% and 20% spending goals. Interestingly, the mobility initiative discussed in London is largely an EU initiative. The United States would like to see parliamentarians playing a leading role on this front as well.

8. At the London meeting, several senior leaders in the Alliance appeared to put forward competing visions for NATO. Indeed, a veritable discussion on NATO's vision occurred at the Leaders' Meeting. This was triggered, in part, by French President Emmanuel Macron's interview in *The Economist*, where he said that "What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO". These remarks were criticised by some speakers as not helpful for Alliance discussions. However, speakers also recognised the larger point behind these remarks: the Alliance needs to adapt to new realities.

9. Transatlantic differences are not new. NATO's path has never been linear, and transatlantic challenges have existed as long as the Alliance. Today, allied countries hold divergent views on a range of topics, including Iran, the Paris Climate Agreement, or trade. However, one should not forget the strengths of the Alliance. Perhaps the chief among these is the ability to be frank and honest with each other in spelling out disagreements, but never to doubt the transatlantic link, which is built upon history, cultural heritage, kinship, values, and shared sacrifice.

10. At the Leaders' Meeting, the Allies also declared space as an operational domain, next to air, land, sea, and cyber; agreed to perhaps the strongest language on Russian hybrid, cyber, and disinformation operations; and the need to adapt to rapid technological changes.

II. THE STATE OF TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

11. The state of the transatlantic relationship and US commitment to the Alliance was a key theme of the Forum. Allies sometimes take the transatlantic relationship for granted. All of them must reinvest in the relationship, as younger generations do not feel the same attachment to NATO as older generations do. Allied leadership must win back the trust of citizens. This was a key responsibility. Leaders cannot be fatalistic about this task. It will require a lot of 'parish work'. A fundamental reserve of goodwill towards Europe exists among the US public. Delegates heard loud and clear that NATO has always been and will continue to be the bedrock of the US national defence.

12. The US Congress has been steadfast in its strong bipartisan consensus on and support for NATO. Throughout NATO's 70th anniversary year, the US Congress demonstrated its strong support. The invitation by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to address a Joint Session of Congress in April 2019 was a very important and symbolic act to celebrate NATO's 70th anniversary. No NATO Secretary General had ever been invited before. In 2019, in an important sign of Congressional support, the House of Representatives also passed the NATO Support Act by a vote of 372 to 22. In a NATO PA context, Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi led an impressive bipartisan delegation to the Assembly's Joint Committee Meetings in February 2019 in Brussels.

13. The Trump administration has also been strong on NATO issues, which it continues to demonstrate through its actions, most importantly through the European Deterrence Initiative. The United States has increased the number of military personnel in Europe and bolstered their readiness, enhanced its presence in the Black Sea and Arctic regions, has pushed for more NATO engagement with the Middle East and North Africa, and furthered NATO-EU cooperation.

III. NUCLEAR WEAPONS, ARMS CONTROL, AND NATO

14. Members engaged in in-depth discussions on Russia's nuclear modernisation, the contrast with US nuclear modernisation, and the future of New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty).

15. On the one hand, Russia is pursuing 'traditional' nuclear modernisation efforts, for example the development of new strategic submarines, modernisation of aircraft, and the development of new air-launched cruise missiles and the Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile. On the other hand, Russia is developing new – even exotic – types of nuclear weapon systems. Russia is developing a range of hypersonic systems; the Poseidon system, which could be described as a large nuclear torpedo and could create a radioactive tsunami; and the Burevestnik nuclear weapon system which is fuelled by a nuclear reactor. Most of the new nuclear weapons are designed to overcome missile defences, which Russia fears will be deployed in the future. Worryingly, many of these new systems would be very destabilising. They are most useful as first-strike weapons and are often dual-capable systems, i.e. it would be very difficult or impossible to tell whether a system is equipped with nuclear or conventional warheads. It was noted, however, that Russian weapon development timelines are often very optimistic. If the past is a good guideline, the new weapon systems will only achieve 80% of the claimed capabilities and are about five years behind schedule; and not all will succeed.

16. The United States also continues to modernise its nuclear forces to avoid their obsolescence and, thus, to preserve nuclear deterrence. US modernisation is in sharp contrast to Russia's. Whereas Russia invests in new and exotic systems and expands its non-strategic nuclear weapons, the United States pursues a "like for like" approach. The United States has also made it very clear that it does not want to develop dual-capable missile systems. The United States is also modernising the nuclear deterrence aspects of its NATO relationships to keep Allied nuclear deterrence viable in the years ahead. European Allies are expected to remain committed to these relationships. To sustain them, some participants and interlocutors argued that a broader role for members of parliament in nuclear discussions is critical.

17. New START – the only remaining nuclear arms control agreement between Russia and the United States – is set to expire in February 2021. New START can be extended by an additional five years. However, the US administration still has important questions regarding New START, and it is not clear whether Russia and the United States will prolong New START before it expires. In general, the administration is more interested in a framework for the long term. Most importantly, such an agreement would require China as a third signatory, as the United States is concerned about China seeking to double the size of its nuclear forces over the next ten years. Moreover, a mere extension would not cover the more 'exotic' weapon system Russia is developing. One suggestion put forward was an extension of New START with the understanding that the next five years will be used to address the new challenges of arms control. Doubts remain if Russia would agree to such a proposal, however. If there is neither an extension nor a new agreement, an arms race still remains unlikely, delegates heard. Still, Russia could feel free to develop increased numbers of nuclear weapons. The lack of verification could also be worrying.

IV. UKRAINE

18. Members received in-depth briefings on the current situation in Ukraine. The 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections, which led to clear victories for new President Zelensky and his Servant of the People party, have been widely regarded as steps forward for Ukraine. President Zelensky ran an anti-establishment campaign against corruption and in favour of growth

and a peaceful settlement in Eastern Ukraine. Political renewal is clearly visible in the Ukrainian parliaments. In total, 80% of the members of parliament are new to parliament, and the average age is 41. Interlocutors agreed that change is badly needed.

19. In terms of reforms, Ukraine did extremely well in 2019. The new president and parliament could hardly have done more, passing about 100 good laws in a few months. The new Ukrainian authorities can also build on reform success of the previous government, in particular those focused on macroeconomic stability. The current government's budget is in line with World Bank expectations, and inflation is falling. The IMF has still granted Ukraine a new programme for three years (at USD 5.5 billion), which may not be needed but is a good buffer. The International Monetary Fund and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development are also fully supporting Ukraine. However, the EU could do much more, one expert argued.

20. The next big reform issues are mainly structural, for example, land reform, privatizations, and corporate governance reform. Judicial reform, strengthening the rule of law, and fully securing property rights must be further priorities going forward. Investment levels still remain too low, and Ukrainians do not keep their money in the country, as property rights are unstable. The new team around President Zelensky has begun to deliver on some of these agendas. It has fully established an anti-corruption court and judicial reforms are also firmly on the agenda. Moreover, a new law on illicit enrichment by members of parliament has been passed and parliamentary immunity has been lifted. However, reforms of the security services have not been tackled yet. In short, the view at the 2019 Forum was that there has been very substantial change for the better.

21. Participants noted that the recent meeting on Ukraine in the Normandy format has been a step forward but has only achieved modest results. The hardest parts have not yet been addressed. The conflict in Donbas has seen large numbers of casualties, internally displaced people, and refugees, and the damage to infrastructure could amount to USD 100 billion. However, the illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea could be far more damaging to the European security order. It was deemed unlikely that Russia would leave Crimea any time soon. There was general agreement that the international community must continue non-recognition of Crimea's incorporation into Russia.

V. RUSSIA

22. The relationship between Russia, the United States, and the other NATO member states was a central issue during the 2019 Forum. The US-Russia relationship is at a 30-year low – a situation no one is happy with in Washington D.C. Key issues include the demise of the INF Treaty, missile defence, NATO enlargement, and Russian aggression and interference. Russia's aggressive actions in Europe aim to reshape the European security landscape, with which it has not been happy since the end of the Cold War. Domestic political issues also played a role in President Putin's actions after his turn as Prime Minister.

23. In the eyes of most experts, if the West does not push back against Russian actions, Russia will not change its behaviour. The United States has reacted since 2014, including by increasing military deployments to Europe and materiel prepositioning. In Ukraine, the US government and Congress has bolstered support, including non-lethal and lethal military aid and loan guarantees. The sanctions regime acts as a signal to Moscow. Sanctions on Russia have had an effect, delegates learned, as Russia appears to have lost about 1% of GDP per year since they were imposed. One expert argued that this effect has deterred Russia from worse actions since 2014. Moreover, personal and financial sector sanctions work, including the so-called Magnitsky acts.

24. Some interlocutors at the Forum argued that Europe would have to do more to counter Russian aggressive behaviour, including through living up to the Wales Defence Investment Pledge.

VI. AFGHANISTAN

25. At a time when the US administration was engaged in efforts to reach a peace deal between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, members heard that Congress and the administration continued to firmly support Afghanistan. In the weeks preceding the Forum, visits by the US President and a large Congressional delegation had visibly demonstrated this support.

26. Opinions were split on the matter of whether a peace deal could be reached in Afghanistan. While some expressed genuine optimism, others argued a sustainable peace deal was unlikely, as it remained highly questionable that the Taliban would disarm, reintegrate, and become a regular political force. Many questions remained before a credible peace deal in Afghanistan could emerge.

27. Discussing the security situation in Afghanistan, it was pointed out that the strength of the Taliban was often overstated. While they controlled rural domains, they controlled no provincial capitals. Even if they could capture bigger cities, they would probably face a very difficult time controlling them. Delegates heard that the Taliban still maintained contacts with terrorist groups. A Taliban victory would, thus, undermine the prime goal of the international mission in Afghanistan: to prevent the country from becoming a sanctuary for terrorists which could target Western countries and destabilise the region. Concern over the presence of Daesh and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan remained widespread.

28. Afghanistan's economic situation remained a crucial problem, delegates learned. Past economic growth was fuelled by high amounts of international assistance, which had given a false sense of optimism. Despite the difficulty of improving an economy in the midst of a war, international assistance needed to be continued, especially funding for long-term economic projects, interlocutors argued, particularly to bring the younger generation into the workforce.

VII. CHALLENGES IN ASIA

29. There is a growing sense among the public both in Asia and the United States that China's economic influence in Asia is rising while that of the United States is declining. Only one third of respondents in a recent poll believed that the United States has the most commercial and strategic influence in the region. This represents a precipitous decline from previous public surveys. In fact, China is now the largest trading partner for virtually every Asian country with the exception of Afghanistan and Bhutan. South Korea and Japan, for example, are now deeply embedded in Chinese value chains as is South East Asia. Countries like Indonesia and Malaysia rely on Chinese credit to finance critical infrastructure programs. India has drawn significantly from the Asian Infrastructure bank even if it has refrained from participating in large bilateral projects with the Chinese.

30. Although the United States pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a new regional comprehensive economic programme, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) emerged in its wake. Eleven countries signed on to the CPTPP,

although the United States chose not to. The new agreement, however, does not take on the new impediments to trade, particularly those affecting service trade. It does lower tariffs and other impediments to agricultural and industrial trade. China continues to resist liberalizing its internal market and imposes numerous restrictions on non-Chinese firms operating and investing in the country.

31. The Trump Administration chose not to participate in this initiative. The United States has moved from a multilateral to a more unilateral approach to trade, according to some interlocutors. It has imposed a series of tariffs on China, and while some in the region are happy to see China challenged on the trade front, there are some concerns about US tactics and the economic consequences of its trade war with China. The US business community has been upset by rapid policy changes towards China but has moderated its complaints. Analysts suggest that it would be helpful if the Administration engaged more actively with the business community on how best to engage with China.

32. North Korea has been another source of concern for US policy makers. The young leader, Kim Jon-un, was 25 when he began to develop a public profile by travelling with his father and by systematically acquiring titles. He was quickly made a four-star general and was acclaimed for his book on artillery and military strategy. Yet, many analysts did not feel that he would last long as leader after his father's death as he was shy and appeared overly cautious. Kim, to the surprise of many, soon purged the ranks of his father's former confidants and even had relatives killed. He also ramped up the national nuclear weapons programme, including the development of nuclear weapons with significantly large yields. He embarked upon a dramatic expansion of nuclear weapons testing while initially showing little inclination to engage with the West. In 2018, however, Kim pivoted again, and began to show an interest in diplomacy.

33. Although President Trump began his engagement with the regime by conducting a rhetorical battle with Kim, the Administration opened back channels for discussion to set up a summit meeting. In fact, two summits were subsequently held but nothing substantial has been accomplished. The risks emanating from North Korea have not been mitigated and US policy has been plagued by a constant change of personnel and poor coordination with regional partners like South Korea and Japan as well as Europe. China has moved quickly to provide a backstop to its ally and to remind the United States that it too has interests in the region.

34. There is also a risk, according to some experts, that Kim will exploit President Trump's claims to have successfully engaged North Korea and use this as leverage. Despite President Trump's claims of success, there has been no movement on nuclear weapons, human rights and North Korean threats to the region, and many analysts believe that the legitimacy President Trump has extended to the North Korean ruler has strengthened Kim's hand.

35. For its part, the South Korean government has confronted enormous difficulties consulting the regime to the North. The US has not paid sufficient attention to the problem according to some, arguing that the President has focused more on lamenting that South Korea is not doing more to pay for deterrence on the peninsula. The US has also suspended military exercises with South Korea and has received nothing in exchange from the North for this major concession, some interlocutors argued. Many regional experts argue that this has weakened deterrence in the region.

VIII. CHALLENGES IN IRAN AND THE BROADER MIDDLE EAST

36. The United States confronts an impasse with Iran that makes it very difficult to resolve outstanding tensions between the two countries. The United States will also need to engage with those states that helped negotiate the JCPOA to forge a common approach. The Iranians themselves were initially surprised by President Trump's hostility to the country and to the nuclear deal. They thought that as a businessman who was not captive to the political elite, he would have leeway to establish a new kind of relationship with the Islamic Republic. But hardliners in Iran saw him as vindicating their own narrative about the inherent corruption of the United States but also as someone who backed their own claims that US interventions in the Middle East constituted a failure.

37. Iranians of all factions were, in any case, shocked by the hard line that the Trump Administration took, beginning with the decision to systematically deny Iranians visas to travel to the United States. Although then Secretary of State Tillerson had opposed abandoning the JCPOA, his view did not prevail within the Administration and the decision compelled the Iranians to pivot in their own policies. They also recognized, however, that President Trump was deeply reluctant to engage forces in the region. There was a sense that this instinct outweighed US commitments to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

38. When the United States withdrew from the JCPOA and reinstated sanctions, Iran initially decided to adhere to its terms. Europe worked both to save the deal and to make it possible for European firms to continue doing business with Iran. It set up a so-called Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) for this purpose. This, however, failed to stem a rush to the exits by European firms concerned that they would lose business in the United States by continuing to conduct commercial or financial relations with Iran. The critical blow was the decision of SWIFT to cut off banks not in compliance with the sanction's regime.

39. The reimposition of sanctions has had a significant impact on Iran. Inflation has soared while the sale of gas and oil has fallen by 80%. Revenues could not be repatriated and the country has confronted serious difficulties acquiring needed consumer products and foodstuffs like tomatoes that are staples of the Iranian diet. Meat has been rationed. Retrospectively, it might have made sense for Europe and the United States to have discussed how to maintain humanitarian oriented trade with Iran to reduce the burden on Iranians, according to some analysts.

40. These measures ratcheted up the pressure on Iran which responded by launching missile attacks on several energy sites in Saudi Arabia to demonstrate their own capacity to cause problems and even shut down regional oil exports. The signal they sought to communicate was that no part of the Gulf would be safe. Their policy was deliberate and, in a sense, prudent. This was more a case of messaging than seeking to undermine the Gulf economies. It was also an attempt to test President Trump. The Iranians wanted to find out if the United States would respond but the President initially chose not to. This may have left the Iranians emboldened.

41. At the same time, the Iranian regime confronts a domestic crisis. The crisis has exacerbated an employment problem and a growing crisis of expectations. The nuclear deal had been designed, in part, as an opening to the country's middle classes but instead, they now confront a catastrophic economic situation made worse by the reimposition of US sanctions. Iranians have taken to the streets and the regime has used violence to cope with the challenge. Many of those now on the streets represented a constituency that was hoping to benefit from a redistribution of economic wealth that would theoretically have come to pass as sanctions were lifted. They seem

to be turning against the regime at a time when parliamentary elections and presidential elections are looming.

42. The signals from the Trump administration have been that while it wants to apply pressure on Iran, it has no appetite for a war in the region. On this, there is a basic agreement with US partners and Iran for that matter. Many countries in the region, although concerned about Iran, hardly relish the prospect of an American war with it.

43. Although China seems to be an emerging player in Gulf politics, it is moving very slowly and they too neither relish the idea of a regional conflict nor do they seek to provoke the United States in any way. China would need at least 8 years to project force into this region but it is not clear whether it intends to move in this direction.

44. Iran has begun to move away from the strictures on its nuclear programme that it accepted in the JCPOA. It has, for example, activated some centrifuges and engaged in research and production of enriched uranium. So far, it has moved relatively cautiously. Some in Europe deeply regret this turn of events and feel that this outcome could have been avoided. The problem now is that it will be very difficult to return to the status quo ante due to lost trust. Iran has also begun to transfer missiles to its proxies, and these could be used in various theatres.

45. The Iranian problem, however, is only one element of an increasingly dismal regional outlook. The Middle East, some might argue, is no longer a place for American dreams and aspirations. It is broken, angry and dysfunctional, and it has proved enormously frustrating for those great powers that have sought to play a role there. The problems are myriad. To begin with, many of the region's states are dysfunctional and the so-called Arab Spring only illustrated and exacerbated the problem. That process began with the promise of young Arabs seeking to claim a political identity and a role in their societies. But this has not worked out well. Libya, Syria and Yemen are in a state of chronic disarray, while other countries like Lebanon, Egypt and the Gulf are likely to be shackled by political problems for decades to come.

46. There has also been a genuine power shift in the region. Iraq, Syria and Egypt were long the most powerful players in the Arab world. But all three have retreated and are not exercising the kind of influence that they once did due to internal crisis. That vacuum has been filled partly by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel, which are now among the most powerful regional actors. These three states have been relatively stable, they have competent and powerful militaries and have the capacity to project power conventionally and unconventionally and for both helpful and unhelpful ends. Turkey is a NATO member, and Israel is a close ally of the United States although it seems increasingly consumed by a domestic political stalemate. All three states will likely remain important players.

47. Another permanent and difficult feature of the region is the ongoing Iran-Saudi rivalry which is essentially political and not religious in nature. It would seem that the United States would seek to play a balancing game among these states, according to some experts, but the United States has refrained from returning to this kind of approach.

48. Another feature of the region is prevalence of empty spaces in which non-state actors of all kinds are injecting themselves. It took the allied powers six years to destroy the Nazi regime, but it is now 19 years since the 9/11 attacks and the war on terror is ongoing. The problem here is strategic as the United States simply cannot wage war on terrorism. It can, at best, contain it. This

requires management, not endless war. The civil war in Syria has obviously helped DAESH and Al-Qaeda in their recruitment efforts. Knocking out the physical caliphate in Syria and Iraq alters but hardly eliminates the terrorist threat not only to the region but also to the transatlantic community of nations. NATO countries will need to increase investment in intelligence programmes targeting terrorists in Syria. Some of these groups have also established support networks in Europe including the Western Balkans where their presence can be a factor in domestic political polarization.

49. The tragedy of the Syrian situation is that there is no end state. External actors are now working out their next moves. The Russians clearly want to defend Assad's state and see their support as a strategic investment. The Iranians want to deepen their powerful position in Syria and expect Assad's consent as payback for their support of his regime. Yet, Assad does not want to be overly dependent and Israel wants to make sure that no Iranian missiles are deployed in Syria. The Turks have their concerns about an autonomous Kurdish region and momentarily seemed to have helped remove American forces from the theatre although they have since returned albeit in a more limited capacity.

50. Finally, there is an enduring Palestinian-Israeli conflict with little prospect for a peace agreement. To achieve peace, leaders who are masters of their constituencies and not prisoners of them are needed. A sense of ownership in the outcome is essential. Past agreements between Israel and Jordan and Israel and Egypt were driven by the central protagonists who began discussions in secret outside the purview of the United States. This means that these states care about the outcome more than the United States. This does not seem to be the case in the current environment.

51. That said, effective mediation is also essential. The last time the United States played this role, James Baker was the Secretary of State, and he capably wielded both carrots and sticks to advance the peace process. This is not at all the case today and the United States is no longer perceived as acting as an honest broker, according to some interlocutors. President Trump has clearly prioritized Israel's goals for Jerusalem and, in the view of some experts, dismissed Palestinian interests. The United States has now recognized Israel's sovereignty in the Golan which even Israel has not done. This is further polarizing a very polarized situation and is making a two-state solution all the more elusive. The alternative to that solution, one speaker suggested, is conflict in perpetuity and this is ultimately in no one's interest. For the moment, however, US credibility as a mediator has been undermined, argued some analysts, and this will make achieving peace all the more difficult.

52. It is also worth considering that the United States is weaning itself off hydrocarbons from the Middle East. Oil, however, is a fungible commodity and the United States still has an interest in the flow of energy out of the Middle East even if it is not directly importing that energy. Still the sense that US strategic stakes in the region have declined is palpable. Beginning with the Obama Administration, US governments seem ever more reluctant to engage forces in the region. President Obama was determined not to involve the United States in the Syrian conflict and his view was conditioned by the very difficult US experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States has had forces in Afghanistan for 18 years and there is a strong sense in the United States that the achievements have in no way matched the costs. The Trump Administration inherited a broken Middle East, but it has not handled the situation deftly, in the view of some analysts, and there has been a perception that personal sensibilities have become conflated with national ones. The United States seems stuck in a region that it cannot transform and that it cannot leave. One solution might be to engage in smart transactional policies, of which the JCPOA might have been an example.

IX. ELECTION CAMPAIGNS IN THE UNITED STATES

53. Congressional and presidential elections are unfolding at the same time an impeachment process is underway on Capitol Hill. Although some have claimed that impeachment should be bipartisan, it has, in fact, become highly partisan. The Republican party has shown itself highly unified in its defence of President Trump, and the President has managed to rally to his defence even among those Republicans who were previously bitter critics. American parties seem to have become more akin to parliamentary parties, and it is not clear how this will work out in the framework of the American constitutional order which defines very separate powers for the three branches of government. Analysts of the Congress suggest that the US constitutional order has traditionally required a modicum of bipartisanship to function properly. Senator Ted Kennedy and Senator Orrin Hatch were on two different ends of the ideological spectrum, for example; yet they were able to cooperate for years to produce important legislation on criminal justice reform and on other matters. There are very few examples today of this kind of cross-party cooperation.

54. Indeed, the political system has become highly contentious and claims are flying from both sides which challenge the very legitimacy of political opponents. This could well lead to a crisis of governance, according to some experts. Because of this changing political culture, there is a degree of pessimism in the country, reflected in myriad polls, about the direction in which the country is headed.

55. President Trump began the campaign for his re-election virtually the day he was sworn in as President. The team running the current campaign is more experienced than the President's first election team. They are working far more closely with the Republican National Committee and have established a very effective joint fundraising operation with it.

56. The coming national Presidential election will be competitive in five or six states and these states likely will decide the outcome. The President comes into the elections with a number of advantages. His strategy relies on cultivating his solid political base, and his policies aim to do this. His strategy will be highly focused on the electoral college and he, as well as his opponent, will focus on those traditional Democratic Party states like Pennsylvania and Wisconsin that supported his previous campaign. He is very likely to continue to stress immigration issues as these are very important to his base supporters, many of whom come from rural and less economically well-off regions and feel that immigration has harmed them economically. While rural voters have turned to support Trump, there has been a move in the other direction in many suburbs, and the gender gap has increased. Women are increasingly oriented to the Democratic Party while white men are more likely to vote Republican.

57. President Trump will also have the advantage of overseeing a strong economy characterized by low unemployment and low inflation. The President will also herald his Administration's strong support for deregulation. Finally, he will benefit from the long nomination process that will likely characterize the Democratic Party's candidate selection. This will leave the field open to him for months and it means that while Democrats are spending money to win the primaries, he will be able to spend only to pursue the presidential election itself. It is very conceivable that the Democratic candidate will only emerge at the party convention which would give that person very little time to focus on the national race.

58. President Trump's greatest challenge, however, is that his current overall approval rating is not high, particularly in light of the strong economy. He is faring very well among registered Republican voters but only about one third of independents give him strong marks. His campaign will thus be focused on getting those Republican supporters to the polls and winning over as many

independent voters as possible. The upcoming campaign will be characterized by a great deal of micro-targeting through social media like Facebook. But there is also a real risk of non-US manipulation. Far more safeguards are needed to protect the integrity of the election system.

X. THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

59. Delegates also reflected upon the three decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the 1990s, the West declared a so-called “peace dividend”, downsized armed forces, and thought the world would be safe, neglecting what a proper post-Cold War strategy should look like.

60. Today, many challenges remain on the international stage:

- While the physical caliphate of Daesh has been diminished, the group is still operable. A governance crisis exists in the whole MENA region.
- Although NATO is a vital Alliance, certain rifts exist in the transatlantic Alliance, and it may need inventive thinking to adapt to the current international security environment, especially in light of threats related to emerging technologies.
- Brexit remains a challenge and could perhaps rip a hole into the EU.
- Deep partisanship exists in the United States, and the political centre is disappearing.
- While NATO’s Afghanistan mission was a correct response to the threat of Al Qaeda, the results have not been particularly impressive. Allies and partners needed to learn the right lessons.

61. In light of these challenges, the West must deal with the world and its problems as they are: the post-Cold War movie cannot be re-enacted. The West needs to move forward and discard outdated approaches to security. Some Allies are still building platforms which seek to fight the last war. A fixation on the 2% goal would be misguided, one expert argued. The “rightsizing” of NATO member states’ armed forces should be the focus. As interlocutors made clear, however, the leadership in NATO is capable and the US Congress and administration fully support NATO, which are favourable conditions for new thinking.
