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Roles of Europe and NATO in the New U.S. National Security Strategy

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The U.S. updated its National Security Strategy to reflect new threats from Russia and the so-called Islamic State. In response to Russia's recent aggressive actions, the U.S is ready to increase its rotational military presence in Europe. However, in the long term, it will rely on the increased capacity of NATO to deal with the threats from different directions. To advance its security interests, Poland will have to strengthen the cohesion of NATO and make the most of the defence modernisation programme to further enhance its position in the Alliance and on the bilateral level with the U.S.

Emerging threats from the Islamic State (a.k.a. ISIS, ISIL) and Russia have forced the U.S. administration to update the country's National Security Strategy. However, the new document is in many respects the same as the previous strategy, published in 2010, and will not change the essence of American defence policy. It accentuates the crucial role of Europe and NATO in dealing with the new threats. It also permits correction of U.S. policy towards Europe, including the rotational presence of U.S. troops on the eastern flank of NATO. The updated strategy is also likely designed to generate political consensus in Congress on the Pentagon's budget, which is crucial for temporarily strengthening the U.S. posture in Europe.

Strategic Patience and Allies. As with the previous document, the new strategy published on 6 February 2015 presents the main aspects of U.S. national security, i.e., not only militarily but also in terms of the economy, energy and social issues. Moreover, the document will not change the main pillars of U.S. defence policy during the last two years of Barack Obama's presidency because it is shaped by Pentagon documents—*National Military Strategy* (2011), *Strategic Defense Guidance* (2012) and the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (2014)—which were prepared in line with the first strategy.

Obama's main and invariable strategic goals are strengthening American leadership in the world, combating terrorism and a geostrategic reorientation toward Asia and the Pacific region. Nevertheless, the new National Security Strategy is changing the assessment of some threats and priorities. It lowers the priority of Obama's so-called Prague Agenda, i.e., actions for global nuclear disarmament, denuclearisation of Iran and the DPRK, and combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, the new document underlines threats from the Islamic State in the Middle East (equal to Al-Qaeda, the top threat in 2010), foreign fighters returning to Western countries, and Russia after its aggression in Ukraine in 2014.

Obama's new strategy declares also that it will react to new challenges with "strategic patience and persistence," which is a new description of his promoted idea of building security through international law, alliances and coalitions, with unilateral military actions reserved for the defence of vital U.S interests. If the U.S. is forced to prioritize its interest in times of budget constraints, it will always protect the homeland, American citizens as well as its allies.

NATO as a First Line of Defence in Europe. The updated U.S. strategy emphasizes the role of European allies and NATO as crucial American partners in building international security. It also underlines the commitment to security guarantees within NATO (collective defence) but at the same time suggests that the Alliance will have to develop capabilities for two other main missions, i.e., crisis management (including out-of-area) and cooperative security (including security assistance and training of partners). The document mentions only a few of the most important American allies in NATO: the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Canada. For the first time in this context it

also mentions Poland, which, along with the Baltic and Nordic states, is described as a country strengthening the cohesion of NATO.

Obama's strategy also stresses that the U.S. is willing to react decisively to Russia's aggression towards Ukraine through new sanctions and by increasing the costs of Russian intervention there. The capabilities for deterrence and reassurance of NATO allies will be augmented by the rotational presence of U.S. troops in Europe in a state of constant readiness for action. Washington is also declaring that is ready to assist in ensuring energy security for Europe and supporting the defence capacities of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. At the same time, the U.S. stresses that there are open doors for cooperation with Russia, based on common interests and the condition that the Russian government changes its policies and commits to respect the sovereignty of its neighbours. If there is a lack of positive changes, the U.S might consider long-term and wider support for its allies and partners in the region.

Delayed Cuts in Europe Expected. The U.S. National Security Strategy and other strategic documents indicate that Washington perceives the growing role of China as the main threat to American interests, which is also a factor behind the declining American military presence in Europe. With a much-reduced military budget, the U.S. in 2009–2014 increased troops in the Far East from 73,000 to 135,000 and reduced troops in Europe to 65,000. The permanent military presence of the U.S. has been replaced by a rotational system, new weapon systems (missile defence, F-35 airplanes planned to be deployed from 2020), the growing role of special forces, as well increased capabilities of its allies and partners. The U.S. is also consistent in its demand that European countries increase their military budgets and take more responsibility for their own security, especially since the security environment is deteriorating and new threats have appeared to the south and east of Europe

From the American perspective, the Islamic State is seen as a direct threat to U.S. interests as well as to its allies. At the same time, Russia is not perceived as a challenge to the dominant role of the U.S. in the world but it may become a threat to the newest members of NATO, and if left undeterred, that may undermine the credibility of the Alliance and weaken the U.S. position in Europe. Because NATO countries frequently present a different perception of the threats emanating from the south and east of Europe, it is crucial from the American perspective to strengthen the unity of the Alliance, its capability to defend its territory and conduct crisis management missions, and to enhance the defence capacity of partner nations. This will take time, however.

Hence, it can be expected that the U.S. will suspend further cuts in Europe. This seems to be confirmed by the new phase of the European Infrastructure Consolidation announced by the Pentagon in January 2015, which did not lead to a decrease in the number of troops or the capability to respond to all potential threats. At the same time, the Obama administration is willing to strengthen the deterrence level and credibility of the security guarantees for Europe through more frequent military exercises, forward deployment of equipment, and investments in infrastructure for the rapid deployment of troops to the eastern flank of NATO. These actions would be conducted within the framework of the NATO Readiness Action Plan (RAP) as well through the presidential European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), which received almost $1 billion for 2015. The budget proposal from the Pentagon for 2016 is for another $789 million in 2016 for ERI.

Uncertain Defence Budget. As a result of the economic and financial crisis, the U.S. has been forced to adjust its military policy to a limited and uncertain defence budget. Hence, the ability to strengthen the defence of Europe will depend on political consensus on future budgets. The 2011 Budget Control Act imposed caps on defence spending out to 2023 (after a two-year extension). Unless there is agreement to waive the limits, any attempt to approve higher spending levels will trigger compulsory cuts (sequestration). After the suspension of sequestration in 2014 and 2015, the risk of cuts will return in 2016. At the same time, it will be a challenge to remove this threat through political consensus since the U.S. Congress is controlled by Republicans, who in their quest to limit the federal budget, may agree to cuts in defence spending. Should compulsory cuts hit the budget and the Congress refuse to close military installations in the U.S., further reductions in the American military presence in Europe may be triggered. However, this scenario is unlikely to negatively influence the U.S. rotational presence in Central and Eastern Europe, which is financed from the emergency "war" budget (Overseas Contingency Operations) and is exempted from sequestration.

Fiscal limitations and new threats that require additional funding will probably increase American pressure on allies to increase defence spending, implement the Readiness Action Plan and further develop expeditionary capabilities. If those actions prove insufficient in the face of further aggressive moves from Russia, the U.S. could resort to additional bilateral steps to enhance the defence of the eastern flank in the longer term.

In the context of the new American National Security Strategy, it should be a Polish priority to strengthen solidarity mechanisms within NATO and deepen bilateral relations with the U.S. To this end, Poland should concentrate on the timely implementation of all elements of the RAP that improve NATO's ability to react to territorial threats on the eastern flank, but at the same time also enhance its quick reaction capability for various collective defence scenarios. A demonstration of Alliance cohesion should become one of the Polish priorities for the Warsaw summit in 2016. At the same time, while implementing its ambitious defence modernisation programme, part of which has been accelerated, Poland should demonstrate that it not only is strengthening its national defence capabilities but also that some of its elements will contribute to broader NATO collective defence and crisis management capabilities, strengthening transatlantic security.