

The UK and NATO Warsaw Summit 2016: Redefining UK's Role in European Security

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Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) summit in 2016 was held in Warsaw, Poland, just two weeks after the United Kingdom's (UK's) national referendum on EU's membership. During these two weeks, British politics experienced unprecedented turbulence, as the majority voted for leaving the EU after 43 years of membership. This decision is affecting UK's role in international politics, as well as its membership to the NATO. In short, UK's position in European security is now in flux.

The UK has been the most influential European member state of the NATO. In 2015, UK's defense spending made up a quarter of total defense spending by European NATO member states¹. The UK has a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council, and is one of two nuclear powers within the EU. Without the UK, the EU will reduce its weight in global politics, particularly in the field of security policy. Therefore, NATO's Warsaw summit in June 2016 was regarded as an important gathering where the UK government needed to explain its future role within the alliance after the exit from the EU.

UK's defense strategy has been transformed since when David Cameron formed the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010. In November 2010, Cameron's Cabinet published its new National Security Strategy (NSS) and Strategic Defense and Security Review (SDSR). Based upon these documents, the UK faced the necessity to reduce its defense budget as well as its defense commitments overseas.

In the five years from 2010 to 2015 when the Conservative government renewed its NSS and SDSR, new security threats had emerged which required the change in UK's defence policy. The new NSS and SDSR of 2015 stated clearly that the UK was willing to project its military force for playing a larger role in bringing both peace and stability at home and abroad. Ironically, one year after the government introduced these new strategy documents, British voters decided to leave the EU. The Brexit will seemingly influence the evolution of UK's defence strategy, since the UK government is going to face unexpected financial difficulties which will be caused by the Brexit. Lisa Aronsson, a visiting fellow at the Atlantic Council, argued that "It is not certain that the UK will be able to meet its NATO spending targets through 2020, as Cameron promised should GDP growth fail to materialize after the

¹ Paul Belkin, "NATO's Warsaw Summit: In Brief", CRS Report, Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., November 14, 2016, p.6.

Brexit vote²".

Against this backdrop, this paper will examine UK's strategy up to NATO's Warsaw Summit in 2016. It will be argued that UK's Brexit referendum had undoubtedly influenced UK's membership to the NATO in two directions. On one hand, the NATO is becoming more important international institution for the UK than before in defining UK's relationship with Europe, as the UK will cease to be a member of the EU. On the other hand, it will become more difficult for the UK to play a larger role in the NATO, as the UK will undeniably face both financial and political problems with other NATO's European member states. This will make UK's position within the NATO more isolated than before.

US President Barak Obama described a NATO summit in Warsaw as "the most important moment" for the alliance since the end of the cold war³. This is also the case for the UK, as it needed to clarify its new role in European security without its membership to the EU. It will be argued that the UK is now in the middle of redefining its role in European security in facing the Brexit. This process of redefinition should also be placed in the context of changing environment of international security.

1. Two New Strategies: UK's SDSR and NATO's New Strategic Concept of 2010

In 2010, both the UK and the NATO published their respective new strategies. The UK published its Strategic Defense and Security Review in October 2010⁴. In this review, British Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg argued that "bringing the defence budget back to balance is a vital part of how we tackle the deficit and protect this country's national security⁵".

It was obvious that the priority of this review was to recover British economy from severe financial crisis. However, it was also mentioned that "because of the priority we are placing on our national security, defence and security budgets will contribute to deficit reduction on a lower scale than some other departments⁶". Therefore, Cameron's Cabinet clarified its intention that UK's defence budget "will meet the NATO 2% target throughout the next four years⁷". This promise has been fulfilled by Cameron's administration.

At the Lisbon's NATO Summit in November 2010, its heads of state and government adopted its New Strategic Concept⁸. It was written in its "Preface" that "this Strategic Concept will guide the

² Lisa Aronsson, "NATO Summit Special Series: United Kingdom", June 24, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/nato-summit-special-series-united-kingdom>.

³ Julian Borger, "NATO summit: US says I will deploy 1,000 troops to Poland", *The Guardian*, 8 July, 2016.

⁴ Ministry of Defense, *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Cm 7948 (London: The Stationery Office, 2010). Hereafter cited as SDSR 2010.

⁵ David Cameron and Nick Clegg, "Foreword", SDSR 2010, p.3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ On the creation of this Strategic Concept of 2010, see, for example, Stanley R. Sloan, *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union and the Transatlantic Bargain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) pp.262.266.

next phase in NATO's evolution, so that it continues to be effective in a changing world, against new threats, with new capabilities and new partners⁹".

NATO's Strategic Concept of 2010 was also aware of the importance of having sufficient financial resources to fulfill its missions. It is argued in the document that "NATO must have sufficient resources – financial, military and human – to carry out its missions, which are essential to the security of the Alliance populations and territory¹⁰". For this purpose, a new concept of "Cooperative Security" was introduced. This means that "the Alliance will engage actively to enhance international security, through partnership with relevant countries and other international organizations¹¹". NATO was also finding a way to the most efficient measures to fulfill its responsibility.

UK government under Cameron stated clearly in its SDSR that "alliances and partnerships will remain a fundamental part of our approach to defence and security¹²". Among the five priorities for UK's international engagement, UK regards "NATO as the bedrock of our defence¹³". In addition to the NATO, "an outward-facing European Union that promotes security and prosperity" was considered as one of UK's five priorities¹⁴. In the SDSR 2010, it was stated that "UK membership of the European Union is a key part of our international engagement and means of promoting security and prosperity in the European neighborhood¹⁵". This naturally means that UK's exit from the EU undeniably affect its own security and prosperity.

2. The Return to Geopolitics

Since 2010, security environment surrounding Europe had been deteriorated. First, Russian forces seized Crimea, violating international law and agreements. Second, China aggressively claimed its territories both in South China Sea and East China Sea, while rapidly building up its military power. In addition to these, the Islamic State (ISIS) had expanded its area of occupation both in Iraq and in Syria. European optimism after the end of the cold war was fading with these events.

In May 2014, Walter Russell Mead, an influential foreign affairs expert, wrote to *Foreign Affairs* magazine an article entitled "The Return of Geopolitics¹⁶". Mead argued in this article that "Twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, whether one focuses on the rivalry between the EU and Russia over Ukraine, which led Moscow to seize Crimea; the intensifying competition between China and Japan

⁹ "Preface", in *Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon 19-20 November 2010. Hereafter cited as NATO's Strategic Concept of 2010.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² SDSR 2010, p.59.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.62.

¹⁶ Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014, pp.69-79.

in East Asia; or the subsuming of sectarian conflict into international rivalries and civil wars in the Middle East, the world is looking less post-historical by the day¹⁷.” He continued that “In very different ways, with very different objectives, China, Iran, and Russia are all pushing back against the political settlement of the Cold War¹⁸”.

Prime Minister Cameron was preparing for the hosting NATO’s Wales Summit in September 2014 in this turbulent strategic environment. This was the first NATO summit in the UK since the landmark NATO's London summit of 1990 when Margaret Thatcher hosted it as a prime minister. At the Wales NATO summit 2014, the UK' government had been particularly tough among NATO's European allies on Russian annexation of Crimea. Regardless of the fact that Britain had deteriorated its diplomatic relationship with Russia, the Cameron's government worked hard to include NATO's strong criticism over Russian policy towards Ukraine¹⁹.

The UK government presented a policy paper in which it declared "5 priorities" for the NATO summit in Wales in 2014. The top priority among the five was to respond to "Crisis in Ukraine and our relationship with Russia". It is written that "6 months after Russia illegally violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of her neighbour Ukraine, we must agree on long-term measures to strengthen our ability to respond quickly to any threat, to reassure those allies who fear for their own country’s security and to deter any Russian aggression²⁰." This directly relates to collective defense and deterrence. Therefore, it was also stated in this policy paper that "Now, we should agree how we can sustain a robust presence in Eastern Europe, consistent with the NATO Russia Founding Act, to make clear to Russia that neither NATO nor its members will be intimidated²¹."

In the first clause of "Wales Summit Declaration" adopted on 5 September 2014, it was declared that;

"We, the Heads of State and Government of the member countries of the North Atlantic Alliance, have gathered in Wales at a pivotal moment in Euro-Atlantic security. Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace. Growing instability in our southern neighborhood, from the Middle East to North Africa, as well as transnational and multi-dimensional threats, are also challenging our security. These can all have long-term consequences for peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic region and stability across the globe.

In the second clause, the NATO agree to enhance its capabilities for collective defense. It was

¹⁷ Ibid., p.73.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Rhiannon Vickers, "Foreign Policy and International Development", in Matt Beech and Simon Lee (eds.), *The Conservative Liberal Coalition: Examining the Cameron Clegg Government* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015) p.237.

²⁰ Prime Minister's Office, "Policy paper: Our 5 priorities for the NATO Summit Wales 2014", 1 September 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-5-priorities-for-the-nato-summit-wales-2014/our-5-priorities-for-the-nato-summit-wales-2014>.

²¹ Ibid.

agreed that; "Based on solidarity, Alliance cohesion, and the indivisibility of our security, NATO remains the transatlantic framework for strong collective defence and the essential forum for security consultations and decisions among Allies." Then, "The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territories and our populations against attack, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. As stated in the Transatlantic Declaration that we issued today, we are committed to further strengthening the transatlantic bond and to providing the resources, capabilities, and political will required to ensure our Alliance remains ready to meet any challenge."

The NATO's London summit of 1990 marked an important beginning to shift NATO's attention from collective defense to eastward enlargement. Then, NATO summit Wales 2014 returned to the original concept of collective defense defined in the article 5 of the treaty. While the war on terror remains relevant, the NATO needs to be fully aware of the importance of defending the territories of the member states.

Prime Minister David Cameron stated at his press conference after the summit meeting that; "there has been a clear message sent out from this conference to Russia that what President Putin is doing is indefensible and wrong²²." Furthermore, Cameron argued that "We stand firmly behind Ukraine's right to make its own decisions, not to have them dictated by Russian tanks rolling over the border. And we will continue our efforts to support Ukraine, including by providing financial assistance to improve their command, control and communication capabilities".

Cameron's attitude seemed the toughest among all the NATO's heads of state and government. As he hosted the NATO summit Wales 2014, his words are firmly included in the document of the joint declaration. Therefore, Stanley Sloan wrote that, assessing UK's role, "on the leadership front, the UK's host Prime Minister David Cameron struck a strong chord before and at the summit²³".

3. Towards NATO 4.0

From NATO's Wales Summit of 2014 onwards, the UK government was aiming at enhancing NATO's collective defence and modernizing deterrence. Geopolitical consideration remained at the centre of these efforts.

UK Permanent Representative to NATO, Sir Adam Thompson, stated in his speech on 11 November 2015 that "NATO is in the middle of geopolitics but is uncertain whether to play²⁴". Sir Adam continued that "I do think explicit recognition that the Alliance is unavoidably in the geopolitics game -

²² The speech by Prime Minister David Cameron, "NATO Summit 2014: PM end of summit press conference", 5 September 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nato-summit-2014-pm-end-of-summit-press-conference>.

²³ Stanley Sloan, *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union and the Transatlantic Bargain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016) p.290.

²⁴ The speech by Sir Adam Thomson, "NATO and unconventional threats", 11 November 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/speech-nato-and-unconventional-threats>.

in direct, strategic competition with some other competing, hostile and quite threatening world views - would improve the quality of NATO policy making and strengthen the Alliance²⁵".

At the same time, he understood the importance of security engagement with Russia. Therefore, anticipating the important agendas for the NATO Warsaw summit of 2016, he also argued that; "NATO's Warsaw summit is bound to do quite a lot of hard defence. But that needs to be balanced with practical security engagement with Russia if Warsaw is not in some respects to be destabilizing in its turn²⁶."

Ambassador Thomson considers that NATO today needs to be transformed into "NATO 4.0". In his speech, he explained that;

"If NATO 1.0 was the Cold War, 2.0 the Balkans and 3.0 Afghanistan, NATO 4.0 should not be about Russia. Or about threats from the South. Or continuation in Afghanistan. NATO 4.0 should be about adaptability, so that NATO can defend its members in continuously evolving mixes of collective defence, cooperative security and crisis management."

The task for the Warsaw summit was becoming clearer. Ambassador Thomson was presenting his view on how to modernize NATO's deterrence in his interview with Defense News, by saying that;

" I think modern deterrence is referred to in order to emphasize this is not a return to the Cold War. Basic concepts of deterrence haven't changed, but the way we choose to implement it in order to dissuade potential adversaries from doing bad things, persuade them that the costs outweigh the benefits, are going to be, and you'll see this at Warsaw, really quite innovative — light, mobile, responsive, heavy emphasis on situational awareness, a recognition of the enduring importance of clear messaging. But not heavy divisions standing toe to toe as they did in the Cold War²⁷."

While the UK government was playing an important role to prepare for NATO's summit in Warsaw in 2016, the question of UK's membership to the EU bewildered many officials and experts. Five ex-NATO secretary generals delivered a joint message that leaving the EU would "give succor to the west' enemies." They said it would be troubling if the UK voted to leave, citing its lead role within the EU in imposing sanctions on Russia and Iran²⁸. Other leading figures echoed likewise.

NATO chief, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that fragmented Europe would add to uncertainty and instability. "I don't have a vote. It's up to the people of Britain to decide," Stoltenberg said. "What I can do is tell you what matters for NATO, and a strong UK in a strong Europe is good for the UK and it's good for NATO, because we are faced with unprecedented security challenges, with terrorism, with instability and an unpredictable security environment, and a fragmented Europe will add

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Interview with Sir Adam Thomson, UK Ambassador to NATO, "The power of NATO is as much political as military", 11 May 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-power-of-nato-is-as-much-political-as-military>.

²⁸ Rowena Mason, Anushka Asthana and Diana Gangan, "Nato and US defence chiefs issue security warnings over Brexit", *The Guardian*, 10 May 2016.

to instability and unpredictability²⁹."

Against these warning, the British voters chose to leave the EU at the national referendum on 23 June 2016.

4. NATO Warsaw Summit 2016

The main focus of the discussion at NATO's Warsaw summit was an enhanced NATO forward presence in Eastern Europe³⁰. In Warsaw Summit Communiqué, it was mentioned that;

"Since our last Summit in Wales in 2014, we have taken a range of steps to reinforce our collective defence, enhance our capabilities, and strengthen our resilience. We have committed to providing our armed forces with sufficient and sustained resources³¹."

At the Warsaw Summit, Allies agreed to enhance NATO's military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance, with four battalions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, on a rotational basis³². In Estonia, the UK will lead a battalion with additional contributions from Denmark and France³³. In Poland, the United States will lead a battalion with additional contribution from Romania and the UK. Thus, the UK firmly commit to collective defence of the NATO.

There existed various different stances how the NATO should respond to security threats coming from Russia. Some NATO member states have resisted calls to permanently deploy troops in countries that joined after the collapse of the Soviet Union due to concerns that doing so would violate the terms of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. Accordingly, the enhanced NATO presence has been referred to as "continuous" but rotational³⁴.

Some media express its concern over the future of solidarity of the NATO, due to the result of the Brexit referendum. *The Financial Times* argued that "following the Britain's vote to leave the EU, the Warsaw summit is shaping up as a crucial test of the coherence of the western alliance – which must follow through on tough and potentially divisive decisions, intended to strengthen western deterrence of Russia³⁵". FT worried that "there is a legitimate concern that the Brexit vote reflects an increasingly

²⁹ Julian Borger, "Nato chief says UK staying in the EU is key to fighting terrorism", *The Guardian*, 22 June 2016.

³⁰ Paul Belkin, "NATO's Warsaw Summit: In Brief", p.3.

³¹ NATO, Warsaw Summit Communiqué, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016, 9 July 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

³² NATO Fact Sheet, "Warsaw Summit Key Decisions", February 2017, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_02/20170206_1702-factsheet-warsaw-summit-key-en.pdf.

³³ Paul Belkin, "NATO's Warsaw Summit: In Brief", p.3.

³⁴ Ibid., p.4.

³⁵ "NATO's Warsaw summit is a test the west must pass: After Brexit, NATO needs to send a message of unity and strength", July 4, 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/f36c7b2a-3f7d-11e6-9f2c-36b487ebd80a?ftcamp=published_links%2Ffrss%2Fcomment_ft-view%2Ffeed%2F%2Fproduct.

inward-looking mood among UK voters." It continues that "What is more, if Britain now faces a sharp slowdown in the economy or a recession, it may be hard to maintain public spending on defence at current levels³⁶."

Prime Minister Cameron needed clear these concerns. Cameron underlined the importance of the NATO for the UK, by saying that "Britain's membership of NATO is vital for our country because it helps to keep our nation secure and our people safe³⁷." Then, Camron said that "here at Warsaw, we have reaffirmed Britain's commitment to this Alliance with concrete action to tackle the threats we face from Russia, from terrorism and from illegal migration³⁸". As a conclusion, Prime Minister Cameron clarified the position of the UK government, by saying;

"To conclude, I think this summit has underlined one very important message – that while Britain may be leaving the European Union, we are not withdrawing from the world, nor are we turning our back on Europe or on European security.

We will continue to be an outward-looking nation that stands up for our values around the world – the only major country in the world to spend 2% of our GDP on defence, as promised, and 0.7% of our GDP on overseas aid, as promised. Only Britain, amongst the major countries, has kept those 2 vital pledges. And they massively enhance our standing and our ability to get things done in the world and our ability to keep people safe at home.

We are a country that is willing to deploy its troops to reassure our Eastern partners or to help countries further away defeat terrorists.

A country with the ultimate deterrent. And above all, a proud, strong United Kingdom that will keep working with our allies to advance the security of our nation and people for generations to come."

It seemed that British membership to the NATO became furthermore important than before after the Brexit referendum. The question is whether the UK can continue to fulfill its responsibility as a leading NATO member state³⁹."

5. The UK after Warsaw

In the House of Commons debates on the outcome of NATO Warsaw summit, Defense Secretary Michael Fallon reiterated Cameron's statement at Warsaw. First, Fallon explained that "2015 strategic and defence and security review reaffirmed NATO's position at the heart of UK defence and security⁴⁰."

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ The speech by Prime Minister David Cameron, "NATO Summit, Warsaw: PM's press conference – 9 July 2016", <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nato-summit-warsaw-pms-press-conference-9-july-2016>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The Secretary of State for Defence Michael Fallon, "NATO Warsaw Summit", the House of Commons at 4:39pm on 11th July 2016, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-07-11/debates/5626C56F-0712-4527-B6E2-7CE34E772180/NATOWarsawSummit>.

He underscored that "the UK remains a leader within the alliance, with the largest defence budget after the United States, and the largest in Europe".

Fallon also stated that there would be no impact of the Brexit referendum on the UK's commitments to the NATO;

"Our strong message to our allies and our partners was that the result of the referendum will have no impact on any of our NATO commitments and that NATO remains the cornerstone of our defence policy. The United Kingdom will be leaving the European Union, but we are not reducing our commitment to European security—we are not turning our back on Europe or on the rest of the world."

Acting UK Ambassador to NATO, Paul Johnston, echoed Defense Secretary Fallon's statement on the continuing UK's commitments to the NATO, as following;

"The UK is proud to play its part. We do so for reasons of profound national interest, in effective European and trans-Atlantic security. The range of our effort is considerable. The UK is the largest military power in Europe and the second largest international bilateral aid donor. We are one of the few Allies to meet the NATO target of spending 2% of GDP on defence and 20% of our defence spending on new equipment. Uniquely, we also meet the UN target of spending 0.7% of our GNI on development, as tackling poverty is integral to tackling insecurity. We're the only major country in the world to do meet all three goals⁴¹."

The UK government under Prime Minister David Cameron was trying to clear the existing anxiety over the future of British commitments to the NATO. However, Cameron stepped down from his post as a prime minister just two days after the Warsaw Summit Communique was adopted on 9 July 2016. The next prime minister, Theresa May, needs to continue her predecessor's efforts to reassure the NATO on British security commitments.

Conclusion

It would be still early to predict the impact of the Brexit upon the future relationship between the UK and the NATO. It would be probable, as Prime Minister Cameron and Defense Secretary Fallon reaffirmed, that there would be no big impact of the outcome of the Brexit upon British security commitments to the NATO. However, this closely relates to the fate of British economy. British influence within the NATO is perhaps going to be reduced with the increasing difficult relationship between the UK and the other EU member states which are also member states of the NATO.

Since NATO Wales summit 2014 until its Warsaw summit 2016, UK's contribution to enhance collective defense and to modernize deterrence. The UK contributes to them by fulfilling the Defence Investment Pledge. Besides, the UK will lead a battalion in Estonia with its around 500 troops deployment as a rotation force.

⁴¹ Paul Johnston, Acting UK Ambassador to NATO, "NATO Secretary General to visit London", 22 November 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nato-secretary-general-to-visit-london>.

Having said these, the UK's position in the NATO is going to be ambiguous if not less important. Malcolm Chalmers, the deputy director general of the Royal United Services Institute, said "I think it will diminish UK influence in NATO as one of the things it has brought to NATO is its ability to influence and bring along other European member states⁴²".

Much depends on the future course of the Brexit negotiation between the UK government and the EU. Without a successful outcome of this negotiation, the NATO will probably suffer from distrust and friction which will emerge from more confrontational relationship between the UK and the EU.

⁴² Julian Borger, "What will Brexit do to Britain's place in the world?", *The Guardian*, 25 June 2016.