A Global Crisis of Defence Alliances

Yauheni Preiherman

Originally published by Caliber.az

Summary

The acute contradictions within the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), which have surfaced yet again, raise questions not only about the future of NATO. Modern geopolitical realities challenge the entire concept of collective defence. For most countries in the world, including those in Europe, it cannot be effective amid the skyrocketing global uncertainty.

Contents

1 Is NATO finished?
2 Not only NATO
3 Systemic uncertainty contradicts rigid bloc logic

On 4 April, the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance marked its 77th anniversary. Over nearly eight decades of its history, it has gone through various periods and challenges, but it is now facing its deepest and, arguably, most transformative crisis. This is not a historical coincidence linked to the specific policies of the current U.S. administration led by Donald Trump. Rather, it is a natural consequence of the total uncertainty in the global system. For the same reason, all other military-political blocs are also experiencing a crisis today.

Is NATO finished?

The tension between the current U.S. administration and its European NATO allies did not emerge overnight. The sceptical stance of Trump himself—and many figures in his circle—toward the Alliance has long been well known. This issue accompanied his first presidential term, during which he, without any diplomatic finesse, pressured other member states to increase defence spending and direct orders in favour of the U.S. military-industrial complex. Concerns about his intentions toward NATO were also

voiced ahead of his return to the presidency. For instance, his former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, confidently claimed that the 47th president would inevitably withdraw the United States from the Alliance.

> Although last year's NATO summit in The Hague seemed to ease tensions—after European member states agreed to raise defence and related spending to 5 per cent of GDP, seemingly safeguarding the Alliance from unilateral moves by Washington toward disintegration—everything changed with the U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran.

From the outset, the Trump administration made no secret of its expectation that European allies provide either direct participation, logistical support, or some other form of assistance.

European states, in turn, openly expressed their reluctance to get involved in a "war that is not theirs." Especially since the U.S. authorities did not consider it necessary to inform European states of their Middle Eastern plans, let alone consult them. Moreover, the collective defence mechanisms embedded in the North Atlantic Treaty—including the famous Article 5—are largely irrelevant in the context of the war in the Middle East.

Initially, only Spain firmly refused to grant the United States the right to use its military bases or airspace for Middle Eastern operations. The rest of Europe, it seemed, hoped to navigate the situation quietly—either by remaining silent or offering only rhetorical support to their transatlantic ally.

However, as the war dragged on and its global repercussions became more complex, European leaders began to speak and act more boldly. They not only started to openly criticise the very act of attacking Iran but also rejected any possibility of their participation in unblocking the Strait of Hormuz. A growing number of European capitals are now denying the American ally the right to use their airspace for military flights headed toward the Middle East—and this number may continue to rise.

It is clear what reaction all of this provokes in Washington. Donald Trump has repeatedly shared his thoughts about European allies in no uncertain terms. The pinnacle of his statements came with the suggestion that the United States might withdraw from NATO. And the president is not the only figure whose rhetoric poses a genuinely threatening perspective for the Alliance's future.

Perhaps even more telling are the words of Secretary of State Marco Rubio: *"But if NATO is just about us defending Europe if they're attacked, but then denying us basing rights when we need them, that's not a very good arrangement. That's a hard one to stay*

engaged in and say this is good for the United States. So all of that is going to have to be reexamined."

Of course, this is not the first crisis in NATO's nearly eighty-year history. During the Cold War and after its end, transatlantic allies experienced several sharp disagreements that, at the time, also appeared highly serious for the Alliance's future. Yet it can be boldly asserted that the current crisis may prove the deepest. Partly, this stems from the specific circumstances: the consequences of the Middle Eastern war have struck directly at the heart of Europe's socio-economic systems—and, by extension, its political stability. Words and actions from Washington have only poured salt into Europe's bleeding wound.

> However, the main reason lies elsewhere—in the growing irrelevance of the North Atlantic Alliance, as we know it, to current global realities.

NATO's mechanisms and logic of collective defence are increasingly inadequate in addressing the challenges faced today by its member states.

Not only NATO

Before focusing on this reason, it is worth noting that NATO is far from the only military-political bloc facing a crisis today. Hardly anywhere in the world can one find a formal—or even informal—mechanism of collective defence that is thriving or boasting far-reaching ambitions and prospects.

In this respect, NATO's crisis is all the more telling. Until recently, it was truly the most successful and powerful consolidated military bloc in history. At least, this is how it was perceived—both by its own member states and by many beyond its borders. And perception, as they say, is everything in international relations.

Collective defence organisations that were previously perceived with various reservations—or that did not assume commitments as extensive as NATO—have also entered a state of crisis.

For example, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) has, for several years, been operating in a mode in which one of its members, Armenia, has effectively frozen its participation. Moreover, the CSTO's core state, Russia, is fully occupied with carrying out large-scale military operations in its conflict with Ukraine. These actions are conducted unilaterally, which inherently constrains the functioning of the entire CSTO

mechanism. For obvious reasons, other member states, much like NATO's European countries, are keen to avoid being drawn into a war they do not consider their own and over which, as CSTO members, they have no influence.

This does not mean that CSTO institutions have ceased to function or that the organisation's traditional activities at various levels—including military exercises—have stopped. Nevertheless, the prevailing spirit of the times is hard to miss within its walls.

> It is also evident that member states simply cannot rely exclusively on CSTO agreements and mechanisms as the primary foundation of their national security strategy.

The same holds true for several other international structures, which, while not full-fledged blocs, deal with military matters and are intended, to varying degrees, to strengthen collective security.

For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). In the context of the Middle Eastern war, it is almost completely absent from the discussion, even though Iran is a member. A similar situation exists with U.S.-centric formats in the Asia-Pacific region, such as AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), which includes Australia, India, the United States, and Japan.

These and similar interstate formations are not mechanisms of collective defence, as they are not founded on the principle of "one for all and all for one." Yet there has long been speculation that they might eventually evolve toward such a principle. Such speculations were hardly justified in the past, and there is even less basis for them under current international realities.

Systemic uncertainty contradicts rigid bloc logic

This relates to the already mentioned irrelevance of the very idea of collective defence—the foundation on which military-political blocs are built—under current global realities. A collective defence mechanism, that is, a military alliance, can be effective only if the states united within it have clarity on two key points.

First and foremost, they must have clarity regarding the external threat that the military bloc is meant to deter. This threat must be perceived not only clearly but also uniformly. In other words, all members of the mechanism must share a common understanding of the source and seriousness of the threat posed by a third actor. This shared perception is what cements the rationality of pooling defensive efforts against that threat.

This is precisely why strong and stable military-political blocs typically emerge when a group of states perceives a common threat from a powerful third country or alliance that is inclined to use military force to alter the regional *status quo*. For this reason, NATO was established in 1949—and by the same logic, it became so successful at the height of the Cold War.

Second, there must be clarity regarding one's own allies: the stability of their objectives, intentions, and methods in foreign and security policy. Trust in allies is built on this clarity, and without it, close cooperation in defence—the most sensitive area of interstate interaction—is difficult to imagine. Such trust underpins basic forecasting and planning, leading states to conclude that collective defence mechanisms best serve their security needs.

It is evident that today, clarity on either of these two points is little more than a dream. The defining feature of international relations now is the exact opposite: systemic uncertainty. The level of uncertainty is off the charts, manifesting almost everywhere—from the balance of military capabilities and intentions on a global scale to the interpretation of risks and threats in various regions. As a result, fewer and fewer states—even those located within the same region—are likely to identify the sources and severity of external threats in a uniform manner. Even formal allies are increasingly diverging in their interpretations of current events and their expectations for the future.

> The natural reaction of states to systemic uncertainty contradicts the logic that typically leads to the formation of collective defence mechanisms.

Collective defence relies on clearly defined mutual security obligations. In contrast, the natural behavioural model under uncertainty is hedging against risks.

Effective hedging requires the widest possible space for foreign policy manoeuvring and maximum flexibility in decision-making. This is achieved, among other things, by diversifying partners, expanding one's own capabilities, and maintaining a range of foreign policy options. Much of the success of hedging lies in ambiguity—a state of affairs that, by definition, is intolerable to the rigid logic of collective defence embodied in strict military blocs.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations