

**Summary:** A military alliance like NATO is a fragile and evolutionary concept by nature because it must be reactive to geopolitics. Despite periodic fundamental overhauls, NATO's past strategic concepts have struggled to fulfill one of their core purposes, which is to foster consensus among NATO's 28 members on strategic goals and missions for the future. This policy brief offers suggestions for how the Alliance can best adapt to face international security challenges.

## Rethinking NATO's Strategy in A Changing World: Recommendations for the Next NATO Secretary General

by Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer and Bruno L  t  

### Introduction

A military alliance like NATO is a fragile and evolutionary concept by nature because it must be reactive to geopolitics. It constantly adapts to emerging and disappearing threats. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that NATO's three strategic concepts were preceded by major geopolitical events: the end of the Cold War in 1991, the Kosovo war in 1999, and at the highest level of NATO's engagement in Afghanistan in 2010. Each time, NATO's priorities, membership, and partnerships were redefined. With this transformation, NATO evolved from a purely collective defense organization to a collective defense and security organization by engaging in crisis management operations as diverse as counterinsurgency and counter-piracy.

However, despite these fundamental overhauls, NATO's past strategic concepts have struggled to fulfill one of their core purposes, which is to foster consensus among NATO's 28 members on strategic goals and missions for the future. Instead, differences in priorities between transatlantic partners endure, hindering opportunities for a real

discussion between Europe and the United States on long-term security challenges and how to converge their objectives.

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) has a long-standing tradition of strengthening transatlantic understanding and cooperation in the field of security and defense. Debate platforms such as the *Transatlantic Security Task Force* or *Brussels Forum*, along with research and opinion polls such as *Transatlantic Trends*, have fostered a sustained debate on shared priorities over the years and provided an opportunity to confront challenges facing Europe and the United States. In one of the most recent initiatives and with the support of the United States Mission to NATO, GMF also organized various events across European capitals to identify priorities for the Alliance post-Wales Summit 2014. These discussions, paired with the perspectives of the authors, form the foundations for the recommendations of this brief.

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## The Security Environment Has Changed, NATO's Response Lingers

NATO today arguably finds itself in the most difficult security environment in its 65-year history. In the past, the Alliance had to perform only one core task at a time, whether it be collective defense in Europe or crisis management beyond. Now NATO is simultaneously confronted with many very real security threats at once, both inside and outside Europe, and from the east now as well as the south. These threats originate from multiple factors:

- a resurgent Russia that has not only abandoned strategic cooperation with NATO, but is no longer restrained from challenging it directly;
- growing disorder, even chaos in North Africa and the Middle East, obliging NATO to rethink its partnership arrangements with the majority of the fragile states in these regions; and
- the rapid growth of jihadist movements, fuelled by abundant weaponry, control of local economic resources, vanishing national borders and close links to organized crime.

It is not only the broad geographical extent of the deterioration that should worry Alliance leaders but also its speed.

Rather like *Candide* in Voltaire's novel, NATO has to face up to the implications of the end of an age in which it could still hope for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Whatever it does, the Alliance will now be tested, and in this respect finds itself in a less than optimal position to deal with the sudden shift in the security environment.

This is due to a mix of internal and external factors.

On NATO's internal challenges, declining defense budgets leave NATO forces severely over-stretched to implement deterrence vis-à-vis Russia in Eastern Europe while inter-

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vening against al Qaeda's offshoots and other extremist insurgent forces across the Mediterranean. Secondly, Afghanistan and Iraq have left European and U.S. parliaments and public opinion largely disinterested in strategic and defense issues, while generating skepticism about the utility of the armed forces. Third, as traditional notions of security policy have eroded and transformed to tracking individual terrorists across borders or making critical infrastructure at home more resilient against cyber-attacks or natural disasters, it will be difficult to resurrect notions of force-on-force conventional battles, big military bases, and large-scale maneuvers. Fourth, Allies have different perceptions of the intensity and priority of threats. As the security environment deteriorates, it may prove difficult to persuade them to engage militarily beyond their immediate national concerns or regions. Fifth, the United States has always provided those elements that converted disparate military forces into effective deterrence — the immediate response brigades, the reinforcements, the strategic enablers, the pre-positioned equipment, and the command and control and intelligence and surveillance platforms. However, can and will the United States continue to do so at a time when there is increased commitment to the Asia-Pacific and needs to return forces to a disintegrating Middle East?

Externally, NATO has to confront new forms of warfare based on hybrid operations that combine aggressive information and propaganda campaigns, social media exploitation, cyber-attacks, creeping infiltration of special forces, militias and weapons, economic embargoes and sabotage, political and business networks of influence, and the exploitation of minority grievances. Dealing with these varieties of new threats also necessitates a different approach. Cyber defense, for instance, requires more systematic inter-action with national intelligence services and information-sharing and supply chain management partnerships with industry. Energy security requires interaction with national critical infrastructure protection agencies and emergency relief services; and counter-terrorism efforts require stronger links between the military, police, and customs authorities, especially in disrupting trafficking in explosives and bomb-making technologies or impeding the flow of illicit finance. The new threats come in the form of networks and it takes a similarly well-organized network of international and cross-sector cooperation to defeat those threats.

It is only four years since the NATO Lisbon Summit adopted the 2010 Strategic Concept, but the realities of the

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rapidly changing security environment urge a dramatic rethink of Alliance core strategies. The 2014 Wales Summit has been a positive step towards reversing the order of current NATO priorities by refocusing the alliance on the importance of traditional deterrence. But as NATO returns back to the basics and reasserts traditional conventional defense capabilities, such as heavy armor, fighter aircraft, and frigates, it has also to stay in the game of 21<sup>st</sup> century threat response. This requires strategic foresight and analysis, good tactical intelligence, and the right rolodex of public and private sector contacts to forge military-civilian partnerships. The challenge will not only be in mission multi-tasking, but also to be able to apply a far broader spectrum of capabilities — from a 1950s-style big-platform, visible presence to 2014-style intelligence driven, cyber-assisted, special forces and networked interventions.

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## To Endure as an Alliance, NATO Needs to Tackle its Vulnerabilities First

In such a context, it would be easy for NATO's incoming secretary general to be overwhelmed by the number of challenges coming from multiple directions: the U.S. demand for greater burden-sharing, the debate between Easterners and Southerners over NATO's future strategic direction, those who wish to push ahead with enlargement and those who prefer to consolidate, and those who want to limit NATO's mission to classical conventional deterrence versus those who want to boost NATO's political and strategic role in addressing hybrid and globalized threats.

As the security environment is changing rapidly, differences among member states threaten to increase in magnitude and to weaken the Alliance from the inside. Ukraine, for instance, has been widely interpreted as a boost for NATO's strategic unity, but the crisis has also highlighted divisions. These divisions magnify a pattern of vulnerabilities that Stephen M. Walt already identified in his 1997 article "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse." If NATO is

to endure as the most successful alliance in history, it will need to dedicate attention to five key vulnerabilities.

## *Closing the Gap on Diverging Perceptions of Threats and Priorities*

Within the Alliance, diverging perceptions occur at two principal levels: first, among NATO member states, and secondly, between European countries and the United States. Among NATO member states, those close to the Russian border will continue to seek reassurances and practical demonstrations of NATO's commitment to their security, whereas those further from Russia will be more concerned about the potential of provoking Russia, while using NATO to prioritize other national or regional security interests. Between Europe and the United States, Europe's supreme strategic interest will increasingly become the stabilization of its borders with Russia and the Mediterranean, while the United States will continue to think and act globally and will want NATO to be able to operate beyond European borders. Bridging this gap inside the Alliance should be a priority and will necessitate NATO to rethink its long term strategy. This strategy must consider the most pressing challenges, which include the simultaneity of complex crises east and south of Europe, cyber threats, failed states, and the resurgence of power politics across the globe. This will obviously have an impact on NATO solidarity, as major powers will not be able to respond to multiple crises at the same time. In this regard, the European allies will also have to adjust and cope with a new reality where the United States is increasingly rebalancing away from Europe.

## *Addressing NATO's Declining Strategic Credibility*

The attention paid to NATO's Article 5 since Russia's annexation of Crimea has again put the spotlight on effective deterrence and on member-state capacity and willingness to defend their allies. Most importantly, the Ukrainian crisis is not only testing the willingness, but also the capabilities of NATO to deter revisionist states from threatening the stability of Europe and its neighborhood. The lingering doubt in some of NATO's most eastern member states of whether the Alliance would come to their rescue if they are to face an attack forms a dangerous precedent that undermines Alliance credibility internally and externally. In the case of NATO partner countries, the issue of NATO's credibility has also become particularly crucial. Unlike member states, these countries cannot rely on Article 5 guarantees to deter potential aggressors. Many in Europe's neighborhood — and around the world — have closely watched

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NATO's reaction as Russia invaded parts of Georgia in August 2008 and recently parts of Ukraine. Questions remain as to whether the reassurance measures offered by NATO to these partner countries have effectively strengthened the Alliance's image as a power to be taken seriously. In the long run, NATO's credibility as a powerful, even formidable military machine has to be restored in the eyes of its members, its publics, its partners, and antagonists. After years of trying to be loved, the Alliance has to go back to being respected, and perhaps even feared. Solidarity can no longer be presumed, it has to be demonstrated, both within the Alliance and toward the outside world. Allies need to recommit to NATO on the understanding that they can trust it — and each other — to be there for them.

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## *Reconciling U.S. Leadership in NATO with the U.S. Rebalance to Asia*

The centrality of U.S. leadership in NATO must be prominently discussed and is essential to the future of the Alliance. Since Libya, the United States is increasingly shifting to a post-war-on-terror strategy. European allies need to adapt to the reality that Washington will now be more likely to provide military assistance without taking the actual political lead of any military intervention. At the same time, the misperception in Washington that the less the United States does in Europe's neighborhoods, the more Europeans will get their act together and assume their security responsibilities needs to be reversed. What we are actually seeing is quite the opposite trend, i.e. a "less for less" scenario, whereby the less the United States does, the less the EU does as well. No other power can replace today the unique U.S. capacity to build coalitions, and in the absence of U.S. leadership, any coalition-building effort within NATO will become much more difficult.

## *Making NATO More Flexible in General*

From Cold War-era classic deterrence strategies to Afghanistan's lessons learned in civilian-military crisis management techniques, NATO needs additional policy instruments to allow it to more easily balance between the tasks of collective defense and collective security. Whether a major cyber-attack on U.S. or European critical infrastructure, the fragmentation of the Middle East and the rise of terrorist groups, or a crisis in the Baltic states that would provoke a Russian intervention, there are many credible scenarios to support the need for NATO's ability to perform complex operations of varying natures simultaneously. In this regard, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan has shown that NATO's partnerships model can be of great use to fill certain capabilities gaps. In this instance, particular attention should be devoted to NATO-EU cooperation. In recent crises such as Libya, Mali, or Ukraine, this would have been particularly favorable, but the relationship continues to suffer from a lack of adaptability and flexibility. Hence, NATO should continue to improve its force-multiplying functions and offer effective command, enablers, and enhanced interoperability between allies and partners. In comparison to the past, the security challenges of today require quick responses — necessitating flexible policy frameworks in which quick coercive reactions can be decided among networked actors.

## *Recognizing the Lack of Public Understanding and Support for NATO*

Arguably, one of Iraq's and Afghanistan's biggest casualties has been Western public opinion. The political elite and the strategic community as a whole have been largely unsuccessful in outlining clear goals for the use of military force and the conduct of large-scale counterinsurgency and reconstruction operations. The German Marshall Funds' 2013 *Transatlantic Trends* showed that a majority of Americans and Europeans wanted all troops to withdraw from Afghanistan. The refusal of the British parliament to support military intervention in Syria was the latest illustration of the "crisis of confidence" that has been growing between governments and their populations. The growing war fatigue has complicated the task of convincing legislators and publics of the utility of continuing to invest money and capabilities in NATO, and hence has affected political willingness across the Atlantic to react firmly to aggression. Moreover, the generational change of political leadership in the United States — or the fading of the Atlanticist policy-

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maker — will have a dramatic impact on the way NATO is perceived in both Europe and the United States.

## **A List of Priorities for the Next NATO Secretary General**

In less than a decade, global strategic trends have changed dramatically, and the dream of expansion of transatlantic security has been replaced by a general feeling of uncertainty. The events in the Levant, the Sahel, and Ukraine have revealed a deeply unstable European neighborhood, combined with an economic crisis that has led to unhelpful military restraint. Transatlantic cooperation is now facing a very different security environment, in which both Europe and the United States will have to realistically analyze the consequence of defense cuts in order to remain credible security providers. The ability to think strategically about containment and deterrence should also be supported by the much-needed expertise on potential revisionist powers. Questions surrounding resources, capabilities, political willingness, and support of public opinions should be addressed by each Western power individually before engaging in a transatlantic dialogue on security cooperation. Having NATO members define their individual objectives first will help the transatlantic partners to synchronize common policies more effectively.

Following up with its Wales Summit, NATO should assess the shifts taking place in its strategic environment and undertake an audit of existing capabilities and capacities across the Alliance. Moreover, the question of NATO's relevance — how should NATO transform itself to meet the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges — should be turned on its head by asking what is it that unifies NATO members states in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? It is certainly not Russia. While the answer to that question remains ambiguous, one thing is clear: the world's major crises are located on Europe's periphery, from Syria and Iraq, to the Sahel, to the Southern Caucasus and Eastern Europe. It is in this context that we identify eight recommendations for the next NATO secretary general to consider once he takes office.

### *Think About a Clear Policy to Deal with Russia*

Today Russia is no longer a partner of NATO and is unlikely to become one again for years, even decades if Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime survives his rule. But do we want Russia to become an implacable enemy, like the Soviet Union? As former NATO Secretary General Pierre Harmel taught us 50 years ago, defense and deterrence also need détente and dialogue — and mutual

understandings, hot lines, and arms control at the very minimum. In other words, while NATO is not giving in on Putin, can it afford to give up on Russia? Surely, the Alliance will face a need to engage with Russia on arms inspections and confidence building measures, Afghanistan, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and other common threats. The problem is that NATO will need to talk to Russia but will find it difficult to do so because Russia will be more reluctant, and some allies will be as well. Since the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) is now in indefinite abeyance, allies will need to define which forum should replace it for this dialogue, or whether the NRC will be retained to continue to offer Russia a special status as an incentive. Can NATO have a transactional relationship with Russia that balances strategic competition in Eastern Europe with cooperation elsewhere, say in Afghanistan? Here the new secretary general will need a clear and convincing vision.

## While NATO is not giving in on Putin, can it afford to give up on Russia?

### *Develop an Alliance-Wide Strategic Direction, which Goes Beyond Russia and Ukraine*

NATO's ability to distinguish long-term strategic issues from short-term crises is crucial if the Alliance is to deal with common threats from different perspectives. The Ukraine crisis may have attracted the attention of the media and public opinion, but deeper analysis demands focus on underlying long-term trends. Historical analogies and the idea of a return to a "Cold War rhetoric" provides only little analytical help since today's context is not comparable to the world of yesterday. In other words, the future of NATO cannot be determined by the prospect of tensions with Russia solely. Instead, much of the transatlantic security framework for decades to come will be shaped by the U.S. rebalance toward Asia, Europe's alleged strategic independence, and budget constraints. Moreover, the question of the geographical scope of NATO operations will remain paramount. In the long run, the United States will want NATO to be able to operate beyond the European borders once again, and NATO members will need to define how they are willing to establish security and stability in a rim that extends at least from Eastern

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Europe to Central Asia and from the Middle East to North Africa. Lastly, addressing the implications of the economic crisis and the general Western sentiment of war fatigue will remain an unavoidable task for the next secretary general if NATO is to engage in any future expeditionary foreign policy.

## *Embrace NATO's Readiness Action Plan as a Concrete Tool to Show Resolve and Reassure Allies*

NATO's Readiness Action Plan, a centerpiece outcome of the Wales Summit, must underpin deterrence with a continuous military presence in Eastern Europe and the proven capacity to reinforce quickly. The elements of the plan must not only provide for short-term reassurance but adapts NATO's overall posture to the new geo-strategic reality. This will mean continuing the rotation of NATO forces in Poland, the Baltic States, and the Black Sea region; improving NATO's early warning surveillance and intelligence gathering along its eastern frontiers; and building up a command and control structure in the East, so as to be able to receive and direct reinforcement forces. Stocks can be prepositioned and a regional multinational headquarters designated to plan and conduct Article 5 exercises, as well as to draw up standing defense or enhanced contingency plans. Getting the Readiness Action Plan right is critical because NATO will not present a united front if certain allies continue to feel inadequately protected, while others feel that enhanced security in one region is at the expense of NATO's presence in their own neighborhood. If allies are being asked to contribute more in terms of finance and capabilities to NATO, the quid pro quo will be a confidence that they are receiving most, if not all the benefits.

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## *Keep Lobbying Member States for More Defense Spending and Smarter Cooperation*

If all allies had agreed in Wales to meet the NATO commitment of spending 2 percent of their GDP on defense, the Alliance would have had an additional US\$90 billion a year to spend on upgrading its forces. But such commitment is unlikely to happen — at least in the near term. NATO will get extra money, but not as much as it needs to fill all its major capability shortfalls identified by the two strategic commanders, Allied Command Operations and Allied Command Transformation. Thus, like his predecessor, the new secretary general will have to encourage and pressure allies to form capability clusters, to invest in Smart Defence and multi-national enablers, to pool and share, to identify rapid response niche capabilities, to use more off-the-shelf, commercial capability, and to streamline research and development efforts while forming new industrial partnerships to preserve the Alliance's defense industrial and technology base. At the very least, NATO's defense planning process has to shape the long-term investments of allies rather than merely record their existing plans and inventories. To make progress, the secretary general must divide his time between lobbying allied governments for more spending and smarter defense and working behind the scenes to broker multinational capability programs, as was done in the past for NATO's AWACS fleet, Allied Ground Surveillance drones, or the C17 airlift consortium. At a time of public skepticism regarding the cost-effectiveness of major capability and equipment programs, NATO has to demonstrate not just success in multinational cooperation, but real savings as well.

## *Revalue the Role of Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications*

The new NATO secretary general must make the public case for defense and the link between armed forces and the interests, diplomatic objectives, and values of Allied societies. This cannot be achieved by talking about threats alone or about inadequate defense spending and capability gaps. NATO needs a narrative about why armed forces matter beyond public fatigue with individual operations, such as ISAF, or the belief that because major war is irrational somehow it will not happen. What do armed forces do that the other security agencies of the modern state cannot do? Which armed forces do we need rather than which can we afford? Beyond public sympathy for the sacrifices of individual soldiers in Afghanistan, NATO's societies need to be exposed to strategic debates through

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parliaments, the media, NGOs, and the academic community. Externally, the Alliance must adapt to a new reality that countries hostile to NATO will continue to use their own massive state propaganda organizations to discredit NATO and everything it does. NATO has to be able to engage in and win this information war at the elite decision-maker and opinion-former levels rather than simply raise awareness of its existence and activities among a global public. The return to collective defense is an opportunity for the Alliance to rebuild a solid bipartisan base of political support, but it will not happen automatically. It will need better NATO strategic communications.

## *Reinforce NATO's Existing Partnerships, Develop a Dialogue with Others Across the Globe*

NATO's partnerships have been a success story, with 24 non-NATO countries contributing to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. Partners have become accustomed to the close involvement in NATO consultations that a contribution to a NATO operation brings. The danger here is that post-ISAF, this closeness to partners — largely driven by operational needs on both sides — begins to fade. This might be especially true if partners perceive an Alliance focusing on Article 5 core business and narrowing its vision to the European hinterland. Yet, it would be folly to allow all these connections, such as status of force agreements, overflight rights, and intelligence-sharing arrangements to wither on the vine, as they will take years to renegotiate when NATO has to do the next big operation beyond its borders. Partners come in many shapes and sizes; they require individual attention and a sense that NATO genuinely cares about their problems rather than seeing them mainly as force providers. The new secretary general may not have time to constantly travel to all 40+

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current NATO partners, but he will need to maintain the relationships with the most willing and able among them. As Georgia and Ukraine have shown, partnership has to mean something when a close partner of the Alliance (especially with a future membership perspective) is the victim of aggression or intimidation. It cannot be either Article 5 or nothing. Without extending security guarantees, NATO has to think more creatively about how it can help partners respond to aggression and to be more resilient, especially against hybrid warfare. This could be a reflection that NATO's next generation of leadership could foster.

## *Step Up Efforts to Make NATO-EU Cooperation Work*

Today, NATO and the EU are in the same boat, whether it be hybrid threats from Russia, the assistance to Ukraine and the countries “in between,” the Balkans, and the blowback from the Arab Spring. Their interests are overlapping, their policies largely identical, and their instruments complementary. But how can this relationship be operationalized between NATO and the EU in the same way that EU member states constantly chart their strategies and harmonize their actions? The new secretary general will need to reach out early on to the new EU leadership team (and not only to the high representative) and set up staff-level mechanisms for daily information-sharing and policy/activity coordination. Of course, a full NATO-EU institutional dialogue would be the optimal solution. But as the Libya and Ukraine crises, as well as Kosovo and the Gulf of Aden, have shown, there is much that can be done at the informal or staff levels. Moreover, an EU increasingly preoccupied with defense and hard power issues will perforce show more receptivity to cooperation with NATO. So there is an opportunity to be seized.

## *Engage Europe and the United States on the Future of a More Balanced NATO*

The Ukraine crisis has been good for U.S. leadership in NATO. The United States was the first to send troops to Poland and the Baltic states or to bring forward exercises and deploy ships in the Black Sea. But in the long run, the transatlantic relationship has to change. The United States cannot indefinitely support the burden of reassurance in Europe or its periphery, nor pay 73 percent of the total allied defense budgets. It can neither be the sole source of many strategic enablers, nor spend nearly four times per soldier as the European average. As a global power, the United States will need to disperse its forces in many corners of the globe and will be increasingly stretched to do

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so. So the Alliance will need a mental road map to adjust to a world where the Europeans will need the structures, capabilities, and political will to do hard power. There is no doubt that the question of the European strategic responsibilities and autonomy remains central to the transatlantic relationship. After the crisis in Ukraine, any U.S. re-engagement in Europe should be followed by higher levels of European engagement. European strategic autonomy will necessitate more capabilities, as well as strategic thinking in order for European nations to be able to act alone when necessary. Can, for instance, the Europeans do regional deterrence without the United States? Where do they have to duplicate U.S. assets to have guaranteed availability and where can they continue to rely on U.S. capabilities? Can the United States be persuaded to earmark a certain percentage of its forces for Europe and Article 5? What, in return, could the Europeans usefully contribute in the Asia-Pacific? Many of these questions have been around for decades and have no ready answers. Yet if we are to believe former U.S. Defense Secretary Bob Gates' valedictory speech in Brussels three years ago, Europeans should not be complacent in thinking that Washington will always grumble, but that ultimately nothing ever changes. The Ukraine crisis may be less of a game changer for Washington than for Brussels. As the hero of de Lampedusa's *The Leopard* famously put it, "things have to change to remain the same." Engaging the United States and Europe on the future of a more balanced NATO rather than merely short-term Alliance management will be a daunting, but ultimately unavoidable task for the new secretary general.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

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## About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.