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What Would a Policy of ‘Restraint’ Mean for the Warsaw NATO Summit?

Steven Keil (GMFUS) and Tim Oliver (LSE IDEAS)

NATO summits have long been accompanied by a litany of complaints, dire predictions and critiques about the future and utility of the Atlantic Alliance. However, numerous security concerns in Europe’s neighbourhood have reinvigorated a need for serious conversations on Europe’s defence capabilities and NATO. What becomes clear in conversations is that NATO’s ability to deliver on these concerns remains in question. Given this, heading to Warsaw, five familiar topics hang over the Summit. First, continued low levels of European defence spending. Second, European divisions over everything from defence cooperation to the future of the European Union. Third, European frustration at perceived U.S. indifference and high-handedness. Fourth, the spectre of Russian aggression. And fifth, political rumblings regarding the utility of the Alliance and its ability to help address non-traditional threats such as the refugee crisis and instability along the southern and eastern sides of the Mediterranean.

These problems are heightened by five current issues: continued cuts to European defence spending as part of wider policies of austerity; the potential for a British exit from the EU (or, should it vote to remain, continued unease and tensions in the relationship) or the ongoing refugee crisis to engulf the EU and unravel the European project; a U.S. electoral cycle pushing an aggressive, demanding and potentially isolationist and nationalist direction; continued Russian activity in Syria, destabilization in Ukraine, and the belief Russia is trying to divide Europe; and hopes NATO forces can be restructured to serve some end in securing the Mediterranean or tackling ISIS.

Over recent years, several publications have examined changes in the international system and the relative U.S. power position. Many of these works have sought to address U.S. management of its position relative to other emerging powers through policies of decreased engagements or renewed commitments. Given political developments in the U.S. and the continued lion’s share of the NATO burden shouldered by the U.S., it should come as little surprise that these persistent challenges have reaffirmed the opinion of some in the US who feel a policy of withdrawal or restraint would be in the U.S. interest. An ideal-type of these opinions, ‘restraint’ is the policy recommended by MIT’s Barry Posen. His 2014 book *Restraint* remains a must-read for anybody – presidential candidate, policy wonk, diplomat, European or American – seeking a nuanced, unconventional and considered analysis of wider U.S. foreign policy. Posen argues that the American foreign policy elite’s dominant view of what he calls ‘liberal hegemony’ has ill served U.S. interests. As he sets out in great detail throughout the first part of his book, it has been costly in blood and treasure, unnecessary and even counterproductive. His proposed alternative of ‘restraint’ would see the US resist the desire – one often encouraged by allies – to utilise military power to intervene overseas as often as it has done since 1945. Given a global ‘diffusion of power,’¹ Posen argues that the U.S. should start down a path of ‘phased reduction in political commitments and military deployments.’²

¹ Barry P. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 174.

² *Ibid*, p 71.

For NATO, Posen's approach would mean a fundamental change in the Alliance, transforming it from the military to political realm.³ It would also result in the U.S. eschewing the commitments of the current North Atlantic Treaty.⁴ This does not mean the US entirely retreats behind the geographical fortifications that still provide its greatest source of security: two oceans to west and east, unthreatening neighbours to north and south. However, the U.S. would instead pursue restraint as a guiding principle. In Posen's view, when combined with a military force structure suited to implement such a strategy, it would allow the U.S. to maintain global access through naval, air and space power. But the garrisoning of troops overseas – the most expensive and one of the most politically fraught aspects of the U.S. global role – would end. For Posen, a smaller, cheaper and more flexible military would benefit the U.S. tax payer; shift strategic thinking away from large, costly and counterproductive interventions; and make allies – in Europe, Asia and elsewhere – cease free-riding on the U.S. and start looking after their own affairs. Posen's argument would not necessarily mean the end of NATO or of close military relationships with allies such as the UK or Japan. But it would see a shift from military to political commitments with allies and place security 'squarely on their shoulders' with the potential for strategic autonomy.⁵

Would a U.S. grand strategy of 'restraint' solve the abovementioned challenges facing NATO member countries? First, would a policy of 'restraint' reverse low levels of European defence spending, something made worse by the wider politics of austerity? It is reasonable to believe that the necessity caused by a decreased U.S. presence could force spending among European NATO member countries upward. Yet, it is also reasonable to believe that threat perception plays a considerable role in driving European defence expenditures regardless of U.S. action. From 2014-2015, 18 NATO member countries increased their defence spending in real terms. This happened in the middle of Russia's aggression, as well as following a decreased U.S. military footprint in Europe. It is important to point out the biggest increases in spending were nearest the aggression in the eastern reaches of Europe, particularly Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.⁶ It is hard to create linkages to these changes. It is clear, though, that threats are not uniformly shared across the EU. And this complicates Posen's belief that the EU is a clear foundation for building 'an autonomous defence capability'⁷ in Europe that would be responsive to threats. This perception differs greatly depending on where one is standing.

Continuing the thread, Posen suggests a U.S. emphasis on maritime strategy, one of defending the global commons should be advanced, and therefore, Europeans should focus on ground and territorial defence, leaving the U.S. to police the commons. Posen argues that this policy of restraint could see U.S. defence spending cut from nearly 4% to around 2.5% of GDP. Yet, it remains uncertain what impact this would have on defence spending in Europe and Europe's ability to take on the lion's share of responsibility in Europe and its periphery. In a recent interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic*, President Obama indicated the failure of Europeans stepping up in post-Qaddafi Libya and a moment of U.S. 'restraint,' commenting, 'I had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya's proximity, being invested in the follow-up,' and then pointed to the UK,

³ Ibid, p 160.

⁴ Ibid, p 91.

⁵ Ibid, p 71.

⁶ Kedar Pavgi, "NATO Members Defense Spending, in Two Charts," Defense One, June 2015, accessed 29 April 2016, <http://www.defenseone.com/politics/2015/06/nato-members-defense-spending-two-charts/116008/>.

⁷ Barry P. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 87.

commenting that they – in the form of Prime Minister David Cameron – became ‘distracted by a range of other things.’⁸

Second, would ‘restraint’ encourage European cooperation as opposed to division? The NATO summit takes place only weeks after the UK’s referendum on its continued membership of the EU. In the run-up to the referendum, President Obama repeated his view that the UK – and Europe and the transatlantic relationship – would be better off if Britain votes to remain a member of the EU. Would a message from Obama that the US was to pursue a policy of restraint shift the UK debate, warning Britain of an era in which Britain and other European countries would need to look to themselves to cooperate more to secure their continent? Sadly the state of the debate in the UK points the other way. Britain’s debate on leaving the EU is already framed by a British version of ‘restraint’. The experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq – from both of which the British military did not emerge with a glowing reputation at home or abroad – have left a deep scepticism as to the utility of a large interventionist force. The EU’s own problems – the Eurozone, Schengen and Russia – have seen the UK act in an almost indifferent way. The withdrawal of British troops from permanent bases in Germany means the UK now lacks a key military commitment on the mainland of the European continent. If Britain votes to leave we may find that it tries to take up a pre-1939 policy of off-shore balancing. Britain deludes itself into thinking it pays its way on defence, just about keeping defence spending above the 2% NATO guideline thanks to some creative accounting.⁹ Restraint would need to threaten the ‘special relationship’ to have any real impact. But even here the impact could be limited. If there is a ‘special relationship’ it is focused on the three areas of intelligence, nuclear weapons and special forces. In all three the UK and US gain substantially, and a policy of restraint would do little to shift the relationship in these three areas, areas which Posen himself notes the US should maintain a lead in as part of a grand strategy of restraint. If anything, a policy of US ‘restraint’ would be one the UK could seek to align itself with.

But does that mean the rest of Europe – whether in the EU or NATO – will fail to take the hint and get their act together? Posen himself is prepared to consider the restructuring of NATO or its lapsing, with the EU taking over. A British exit would remove one of the main obstacles to European defence cooperation, albeit also taking out of the EU one of Europe’s most important military powers. Yet, other divisions would remain, such as that over Cyprus that causes tensions with Turkey. And again, however, European divisions may be such that ‘restraint’ may if anything see European security and defence follow the pattern seen in many areas: renationalisation. Granted, the degree of Europeanisation in this area is nothing compared to those achieved in economics or the environment, but what little has been achieved could be reversed. That EU policies have been under intense pressure has led some to speculate about the future unity of the EU as a whole. Could we be witnessing the disintegration of the European project? Posen argues that Europe is ‘inherently stable,’¹⁰ but the real concern for renationalisation of Europe is palpable and calls into question this assumption. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry commented on the challenges facing Europe and the potential disintegration of the European project, stating his concern it could lead to “nationalism and fascism and other things breaking out. Of course we have an interest in

⁸ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, accessed 29 April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

⁹ House of Commons Defence Select Committee, 2016....

¹⁰ Barry P. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 87.

this, a huge interest in this.”¹¹ Given this, would a Brexit, another crisis in the Eurozone or a major terrorist attack break the Union that currently stands as Europe’s predominant organisation for economics, politics and non-traditional security? With the UK potentially leaving and a U.S. withdrawal vis-à-vis ‘restraint’ a vacuum for leadership in collective European security could easily appear. As Posen rightly points out in the early parts of his book, ‘coalitions are always subject to collective action problems’ and democracies struggle ‘to cooperate in security matters without a powerful leader.’¹² Without the UK and U.S. the short-list of security leadership in Europe shrinks considerably, as does its capacity to coalesce a unified security policy.

Third, Europe has a long history of being riled at U.S. indifference and high-handedness. That was kept in check during the Cold War by the threat of the USSR. While the dangers facing Europe today are not to be dismissed, they no longer clearly define the importance and necessity of the Atlantic Alliance. The NSA spying activities have left some in Europe wondering if the U.S. itself is not a threat in some way. Suspicions of an underlying hostility toward Europe (and, to be fair, the rest of the world) are played out daily on European TV screens and laptops. Posen’s strategy of restraint may not alleviate this reality, but could potentially enforce it and, in Europe, embolden those with anti-American sentiments. The open frustration voiced time and time again by senior U.S. officials sounds like a scolding rather than encouraging Europeans to take on a larger share of their burden. At the top of this list is then-U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates’ comments that NATO may face ‘a dim if not dismal future’ if Europeans fail to do more in the Alliance.¹³ And more recently, President Obama openly aired his frustration at ‘free riders’ (read Posen’s cheap-riding), characterizing the continued lack of defence spending as ‘aggravating.’¹⁴ Add to this that Europeans watch a presidential election in which an ugly nationalism in U.S. politics has been on display led by presidential candidate Donald Trump. Any policy of ‘restraint’ forwarded by Trump would likely be delivered in such a blunt, nationalist and antagonistic way that it would surely undermine rather than change the transatlantic relationship in a positive way. On the campaign trail, Trump has already commented that NATO countries are ‘ripping off the United States’ and ‘either they have to pay up for past deficiencies or they have to get out. And if it breaks up NATO, it breaks up NATO.’¹⁵ One may assume this is not the policy of ‘restraint’ that Posen has in mind, in rhetoric, but it is somewhat the argument in practice. Any policy of greater ‘restraint’ in Europe will easily be perceived as added indifference and abandonment by the U.S. in regional European affairs. Recognizing the numerous achievements made by U.S. investment in Europe will be crucial, but given the security climate in Europe, Posen’s policy of restraint would not likely relieve the feelings of indifference, while messaging would be critical in manging the perceptions of U.S. high-handedness.

¹¹ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, accessed 29 April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

¹² Barry P. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 9.

¹³ Thom Shanker, “Defense Secretary Warns NATO of ‘Dim’ Future,” *The New York Times*, June 2011, accessed 29 April 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/11/world/europe/11gates.html?_r=0.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, accessed 29 April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

¹⁵ Elizabeth McLaughlin, “NATO: What You Need to Know About the Organization That Donald Trump Called ‘Obsolete,’” *ABC News*, April 2016, accessed 29 April 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/organization-donald-trump-called-obsolete/story?id=38136443>.

Fourth, the spectre of Russian aggression ahead of the NATO summit remains problematic for Posen's policy of U.S. 'restraint.' Even some of the proponents of restraint in the American foreign policy establishment are signalling the need to do more to effectively deter Russian antagonisms. And the conclusions of many in the Alliance are to add to NATO capabilities in Europe, with the need for Europeans to shoulder more of the burden. Subsequent disagreements are more about location and volume, not if something needs to be done. Arguing that the decreased engagement of the U.S. would not be a threat to European security, Posen suggests that 'if Europeans large and small hang together, Russia cannot do much.'¹⁶ Yet, continued Russian activity in Syria and the belief Russia is trying to divide Europe add complexity to this assumption. Moreover, given the aforementioned challenges facing the EU and a policy of restraint for the U.S. in NATO, there may be significant doubt regarding the legitimacy of transatlantic and European unity and policies. Russia has redrawn the European map with force and the response by many Europeans has been largely one of indifference, and in some cases, support. Moreover, given the varying threat perceptions across Euroatlantic partners, the NATO consensus requirement and an active U.S. in the Alliance may prevent impulsive responses to Russia's aggressions by Allies. As Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry and William Wohlforth argued in 2013, U.S. security commitments can 'dissuade U.S. partners from trying to solve security problems on their own in ways that would ended up threatening other states.'¹⁷ In this case, it could be that U.S. engagement in NATO may have only deterred additional violence from Russia, but also tempered the response across the Allies (perhaps even including the U.S.).

Russia should not be seen as a military challenge alone. Its economic and demographic situation means it might not be the power it likes to believe it is, and certainly not one comparable to the likes of China. But it has served as a model for the relative staying-power of a system built on nationalism, authoritarianism and a commitment to 'sovereignty' in the face of the challenges presented by globalisation. While not a 'great power,' Russia has effected change on its neighbours' borders through force on more than one occasion in the last decade. Moreover, Moscow has shown an ability to use a spectrum of disruption against Europe and the transatlantic partnership through unconventional methods capped by informational warfare. Posen accepts that maintaining a balance of power in Eurasia should be a key aim for the US. It, along with managing nuclear proliferation and suppressing international terrorist organisations that target the U.S., are the most important security challenges he identifies. Yet, he views Russia as incapable of hegemony, itself a declining and flawed power. But does he overlook the authoritarian model in Moscow? Given the low-intensity and unconventional nature of Moscow's threats, coupled with more overt aggressions, it is worth evaluating the appropriate scope for a large military budget that can drain resources from a powerful and successful U.S. economy, which underpins its democratic society and is one of the strongest rebuttals against authoritarian models.

Fifth, doubts regarding the ultimate direction of the alliance remain and wider discontents in transatlantic relations could mean it would fail to achieve any clearly defined mission, if one could be agreed. For Posen, his thesis would gladly answer this

¹⁶ Barry P. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 87.

¹⁷ Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2013, accessed 29 April 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2012-11-30/lean-forward>.

question by saying that NATO today has outlived its initial purpose.¹⁸ Posen argues that NATO's role to ensure stability at the end of the Cold War has passed and now the policy is wrong.¹⁹ Yet, looking at Europe today, as this article has done, stability doesn't seem to be the theme of the day. Security concerns abound. Yet, whether NATO is the proper institution to address these challenges remains worth asking and so is whether the U.S. should continue to foot-the-bill or pursue a course of greater 'restraint.' This is particularly true in addressing the challenges to Europe's south. Hopes remain that NATO forces can be restructured to serve some end in securing the Mediterranean border for Europe (namely the sea). A NATO naval mission may launch off the coast of Libya to control migrant flows, but there seems to be a clear lack of will or purpose for NATO to directly address the ongoing violence across the Middle East and North Africa. In fact, conversations about Libya reconstruction efforts have been taken up by Italy without the involvement of NATO. Following the Paris terrorist attacks, rather than pursuing NATO Article V, the French government sought an obscure EU treaty provision for European solidarity. And when the U.S. has contemplated military intervention, it has not often looked to NATO (anti-ISIL coalition).

A more deliberate pursuit of 'restraint' would clearly set out a new mission for U.S. engagement in Europe and its role in NATO. Posen argues for a policy of 'restraint' that rewrites Article V, and results in a Euroatlantic partnership that operates in consultations and agreed upon concerted actions, when necessary, but never with obligation. Clearly, even for any restructuring of NATO, strong U.S. leadership will still be needed: one that leads while moderating its ambitions and the ambitions of the Alliance. However, it is unclear that such actions would lead to greater European security or strengthen the transatlantic partnership. Many of the questions heading in to the Warsaw Summit would likely remain for some time. Throughout his book, Posen clarifies that he is not a fan of radical, fast-paced change, admitting that a slow transition will be necessary, but whether the speed of the transition will enable or encourage Europe to take up greater defence measures is hard to predict in such a volatile political climate. Rather, it could just expose greater divisions and deficiencies among Euroatlantic partners. It would be difficult for any Washington drawdown be seen as anything other than abandonment by Allies in the current context.

Posen is under no illusions as to the challenges faced in seeing his idea implemented. And he signals that the fight to convince the foreign policy elite in the U.S. is only half the battle. The fight to convince European allies to play along with this new policy would be another part, to say nothing of allies in Asia and the Middle East. And he acknowledges many strong counter arguments to what he has proposed in his book. The changes that have occurred over the past few years in the transatlantic relationship have seemed to only complicate the potential for advancing a policy of 'restraint' like the one proposed by Posen. Yet, while the ideal-type of Posen's policy may be difficult to implement, the concerns and ideas behind it are certainly worth consideration by Washington's policymakers. Limited budgets and competing security priorities simply mean that the U.S. cannot be everything to everyone or fix every problem across the globe. In many cases, its attempts to do so may only further complicate the US position and exacerbate tensions among Allies.

¹⁸ Barry P. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

However, in advance of the NATO Summit and contrary to the belief of many, European partners have been doing much more in their regional security affairs. But considerably more remains to be done. Consequently, many of these familiar topics overhanging the upcoming Warsaw Summit will continue to be part of European security conversations despite or in spite of U.S. policies for quite some time. In some cases, the policy of 'restraint' as proposed by Posen could potentially alleviate some pressures facing NATO. However, as discussed, they could also exacerbate the security situation of European partners who have little capacity to fully take on the wide-range of security concerns facing the continent. This lack of an effective deterrent and balance of power on the Eurasian landmass will invite Posen's feared hegemon, and could easily recommit the U.S. to more costly endeavours away from its home shores. If a policy of 'restraint' would be a long-term goal for U.S. foreign policy makers, it must be sensitive to the challenges presently facing its Euroatlantic partners and today's geopolitical realities.

Posen, Barry, *Restraint: A new foundation for US grand strategy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014.