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"How NATO Adapts"

Seth Johnston, Georgetown University

Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to a new episode of the HCA podcast, coming to you from Heidelberg University; my name is Anja Schüler. As tensions grew in Eastern Europe, the role of NATO is crucial for our understanding of the reaction of the West to Russia's troop build-up at the Ukranian borders. The organization has undergone significant changes since it was founded more than 70 years ago, when twelve countries came together to, as a British diplomat famously put it, "keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down." Today, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has almost 30 members, and its missions have changed significantly. We will take a look at these changes in NATO's organization and strategy today with Seth Johnston. He is assistant professor in the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a U.S. Army officer. I do want to stress that Doctor Johnson is with us today in his personal and academic capacity. His views do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or any other government agency. I would also like to point out his previous academic appointments. They include fellowships at Harvard University and a position as assistant professor of International Relations at the Military Academy at West Point. As a scholar practitioner, he has also served in the Pentagon and the State Department, as well as in many multi-national overseas missions. So he really is the ideal person to give us some insight into NATO's changing strategy and organization. It's a great pleasure to have you with us today on the HCA podcast. Welcome!

Seth Johnston: Thanks so much. It's great to be with you here in Heidelberg.

Anja Schüler: So let's start by telling our listeners a little more about the findings of your book: *How NATO Adapts*, in which you look at changes in the organization of the Atlantic Alliance since its founding. Now the world has, of course, changed profoundly since the beginning of the Cold War when NATO was founded. How does NATO adapt to the multipolar world of the 21st century?

Seth Johnston: It's remarkable just how long the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has been with us. It was created period after World War II, where the creation of international institutions was a really popular approach to dealing with international politics. You can think of so many institutions that are with us today that were created in that period, including the United Nations, the international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, but also regional organizations like NATO. But NATO is not just a Cold War alliance, as your introductory remarks pointed out. It is remarkable just how much NATO has adapted and changed over time. My argument in the book *How NATO Adapts* is that there is a

consistent pattern of change in NATO. NATO changes to adapt to new security challenges. It does so in a pretty consistent way, and we can talk about the process by which it changes. But what's probably most important is that this adaptation has not made NATO simply a historical relic of a bygone era. This adaptation is at the core of what makes NATO, what many consider it to be: one of the most successful and strong alliances of modern times. NATO endures, and NATO is relevant to the challenges of the 21st century.

Anja Schüler: So that can maybe be classified as external changes that NATO is adapting to. Could you give us an example for that?

Seth Johnston: For those that are interested in the academic background, yes, it's true that I think that the best way to model the consistent pattern of change in NATO is to say that what begins this change are external challenges to the security environment. Something changes in international politics, and NATO recognizes that its strategy and that its organization is not fit for those new changes. But once it recognizes that, it then undergoes a period of discussion and consultation about what kind of changes need to occur; the simplest way to think about the changes that occur is that there's an internal dimension to the change, which is to say NATO, as a pretty well organized international institution, adapts its organizations internally. But NATO also adapts its external strategy, and this is one of the things that is really current in the news now about NATO. Right at this moment that we're speaking, NATO is in the middle of revising its new strategic concept. The last NATO strategic concept was published in 2010, back when NATO was very heavily engaged in Afghanistan, back when NATO included language that, for example, Russia was a partner in international security affairs. Right now, NATO is changing and revising its strategic concept and has announced that it plans to unveil and adopt this new concept at its summit meeting in Madrid this summer, in June of 2022.

Anja Schüler: But what would you say up until now posed the biggest challenge to NATO in its history? Maybe the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union?

Seth Johnston: I think there have been big challenges all along the way. You mentioned the famous quip attributed to NATO's first Secretary General, Lord Ismay of the United Kingdom, who said that that NATO was created to keep the Americans in Europe, the Russians out, and the Germans down. You know one has to recall that in 1949, when the Washington Treaty was signed, that was the third such treaty among western European nations creating a military alliance in as many years. In 1947, there was the so-called Dunkirk Treaty. In 1948, the Brussels Treaty. Both of these were military alliances that were explicitly anti-German, quite frankly. This was right after World War II, France, the Low Countries, and the U.K. still had those lessons of the Second World War in mind. One of the things that was really different, though, about NATO was that the NATO treaty was written not against any specific external threat or country, but rather, and this was really unique and probably has a lot

to do with NATO's successful adaptation, NATO wasn't written *against* anyone. It was written *for* certain things, and these were enduring values, values about democracy, values about individual freedom and the rule of law. Those are attractive values. Those are enduring values. Those values are at the core of Western civilization, and they have acted as an organizing principle for NATO to deal with all of the challenges that have occurred in its long 70-year history. The threats may change, but the values and reasons for the Alliance have not.

Anja Schüler: So before we zoom in on more current challenges to NATO, let's maybe stick with your book for one more question. We have looked at how NATO as an organization adapts. If I understand you correctly, you also looked at the role of actors in the Alliance, the role of persons. What room do they play in these adaptations?

Seth Johnston: This is a really interesting aspect of NATO and one of the things that makes it truly unique. Most military alliances are just that. But NATO is also, and this is what makes it really unique, not just a military alliance, but it's also an international organization. It has a large bureaucracy at its headquarters in Brussels to serve the political functions of the Alliance. It has a standing, permanent, peacetime, multinational military structure. This is entirely unique among alliances and international organizations, and it's one of the distinguishing features of NATO. So, when it comes to how NATO adapts, one of the things that that I wanted to look at was NATO's unique organization. How important were the people that work in that organization in actually making the changes? Most International Relations theory really focuses on what countries do, and that makes sense. What I found in the research for how NATO adapts is that these institutional actors, these members of the international bureaucracy, they play an underappreciated and sometimes consequential role in these changes. Let me give you just one example of this role. The easiest positions to focus on here are the positions at the top of the International Secretariat, the Secretary General of NATO and then also the top military officer or really the top military commander in the Alliance, which is the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. Over time, the nations have come to rely on the Secretary General and his staff. (I say "his" because so far every Secretary General has been a gentleman, usually from Europe.) Every Supreme Allied Commander so far has been an American military officer. But countries have asked the Secretary General to take on more and more responsibilities for the Alliance. Right now, I mentioned, for example, that NATO is revising its strategic concept for the first time in a dozen years. It's actually the NATO Secretary General staff that's holding the pen, if you will, and drafting what they think the NATO allies, the countries want to see and will adopt by consensus. By contrast, and we can talk about it more, you've also seen those top military leaders taking an important role in the Alliance as well, because, for a time, even in the early days of NATO, before the creation of the Secretary General and his staff, the Supreme Allied Commander was really the first high profile

international post in the Alliance and sort of the face of it in those early days and still today in many ways.

Anja Schüler: Now you said that NATO is probably looking at its biggest change of strategy in probably more than a decade. So let's zoom in on current events a little bit. Would you say that the standoff we're witnessing at the Ukrainian borders these days is the biggest challenge NATO had to face in that last decade or so?

Seth Johnston: There is no doubt about it. The crisis in Ukraine is a very important challenge. The build-up of Russian forces around Ukraine, something like a 150.000 troops according to the media reports, represents the largest buildup of conventional military forces in Europe in decades. The Russian invasion of Ukraine back in 2014, and actually, let's just be clear about that: as much as the crisis today has focused on whether Russia will invade Ukraine, it's really a question of will Russia invade Ukraine again or in a different way, because Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and has supported separatists in two regions of eastern Ukraine ever since. This is the first time since World War II that there's been an attempt to change the borders of countries in Europe through the use of military force – that's a big deal. The purpose of things like the United Nations, of the Helsinki Final Act and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe - now the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe – was to prevent exactly this kind of resort to military conflict as a way of solving problems in international politics. So, no doubt about it, the Ukraine crisis is a challenge of historic dimensions, not just for NATO but for everyone who is concerned with international peace and security, and that means everyone. At the same time, Ukraine is just one of many challenges. I would recommend for the reading pleasure of the audience: There was a great report from Harvard Kennedy School on the 70th anniversary of the Alliance called: "NATO at 70," written by two former ambassadors to NATO, Doug Lough and Nick Burns, who summarized in that report sort of a series of top ten really significant challenges facing the Alliance. Some of them are external, like Ukraine and Russia. Some of them are internal, maintaining alliance cohesion with an alliance of 30 countries, not just twelve like in 1949. And there are also some other challenges on the horizon. NATO has recently acknowledged the relevance of cyberspace and outer space as domains of military activity. China, for the very first time, has appeared in NATO document. And there are even more broad challenges as well. NATO Senior Leaders increasingly refer to climate change, for example, as what they call a "threat multiplier." So Ukraine is a very important challenge, but NATO is also, as all of us are, grappling with other challenges that are also quite significant.

Anja Schüler: So, in this crisis there has also been a lot of talk about sanctions against Russia. Do you think in a crisis like this sanctions can play a bigger role than military action, or maybe they can't?

Seth Johnston: I think this is a great question because, as it relates to NATO. I think it introduces the underlying issue of what is NATO? Most of the time the quick answer

is: NATO is a military alliance, and that is true. NATO is also a political organization, as we've discussed. An international organization, a community of values, a transatlantic bargain between European and North American countries. And one aspect of these many different dimensions of what is NATO and what is the Transatlantic alliance is that there has always been a little bit of a debate with NATO about the role of non-military cooperation in the Alliance. Article two of the Washington Treaty, the NATO-Treaty, actually specifically commits the allies to collaborating in their international economic affairs and other kinds of foreign policy affairs. Quite famous is the Harmel Report of 1967 on the Alliance. Sometimes that report is known as the "Future Tasks" of the Alliance. That report elevated dialogue and diplomacy to co-equal status with military defense and deterrent as sort of essential features of what NATO does. My view is that these things are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing, that what NATO does to achieve military strength, to defend the allies and its values, is entirely compatible with a reinforcing of diplomacy, dialogue, partnership activities that help reduce the likelihood of conflict in the international system. So in this crisis, like in any international security crisis, the NATO allies are able to draw on a wide range of tools: political, economic, military, of course, all unified by a common purpose articulated in its common values.

Anja Schüler: Now we've heard a number of times that NATO has about 30 members. We know that the Secretary General usually always comes from Europe. Still, the U.S. plays a pretty important role in NATO. So, let's turn to U.S. domestic politics for a moment. During the last administration, the Trump administration, we did hear a lot of talk from the White House that the U.S. should leave NATO, among other reasons because not all member-states in the eyes of the then-president were sharing the burden fairly. Now, in light of the increasing political polarization in the U.S., does NATO still have the domestic support it needs in your country?

Seth Johnston: In NATO circles, this issue is known as the "Burden Sharing" issue. In other words, in this transatlantic bargain, who foots the bill? Who shoulders the burden of our common collective defense? Actually the U.S.-view on burden sharing has been remarkably consistent. Certainly this century, the view of the Trump administration that NATO allies in Europe needed to do more to live up to the agreement that all NATO allies had made to invest in national defense. But that view is actually the exact same view that the Obama administration and before that George W. Bush administration had made as well. Quite famously, the Secretary of Defense during the Bush and then also Obama administrations, Robert Gates, made an often quoted speech at the end of his time as Secretary of Defense to articulate exactly this. He felt, and the United States felt, that the allies had agreed, that European allies had agreed to invest more in defense and needed to do it. My view is that is not and should not be a divisive issue. In fact, it was not when NATO allies agreed in 2014 in the so-called "Defense Investment Pledge," to spend two percent of their gross domestic product on their own national defense. This was something that the allies agreed by consensus, and it was something that the allies saw as important after

Crimea – understanding that security and defense has a cost and that it is worth investing in that collective defense. But there's another important aspect to it as well, which is that in an alliance of democracies, where dialogue and consensus and the free will of nations is respected, and, in my view, the Alliance functions best when it is a genuine partnership. We do not want to have a situation where you have, for example, technological haves and have nots within the Alliance, our allies that that have military capabilities and others that do not. It is in the shared interest of all members of the Alliance that there is a strong Europe that is perhaps a little bit less dependent on the United States for its security and defense.

Anja Schüler: Let's take a closer look at Germany and its role in the Atlantic alliance. During Olaf Scholz' recent visit to Washington, major American media were questioning the country's reliability as an ally. I was actually quite shocked to see that headline in the *New York Times*. How do you see Germany's current role in NATO?

Seth Johnston: I think Germany has always played a fundamentally important role in the Alliance. We talked about the thinking about Germany during the founding era of NATO. Of course, it didn't take very long for the allies to realize that the Germans should have a role in the Alliance, and of course, Germany joined NATO in 1955. Very shortly after the creation of NATO, Germany was the front-line of NATO activity throughout the Cold War, as I don't need to remind your listeners. Germany also, though, played an extremely important role after the Cold War in fulfilling the vision of a Europe whole and free. The German Secretary General of the Alliance in the early 1990s played a very influential role in the decisions that led to NATO going out of area and intervening in the Balkan civil wars of that era. Germany has also, and this surprises a lot of people, consistently been one of the largest troop contributing countries to the NATO mission in Afghanistan, which lasted almost 20 years. Think about change in the Alliance overtime and you think about that from an alliance created in 1949 to preserve the peace in Europe after World War II at the beginning of the Cold War to a 21st century alliance where the Alliance itself is engaged in a military operation in Central Asia, outside of the North Atlantic area, and Germany is consistently one of the biggest troop contributing nations to that effort. I mean that is a remarkable change, but it's one in which Germany has, consistently been a leader politically and militarily. Now, what kind of a role does Germany play? I mean obviously for historical reasons, the military aspect of German participation in NATO is sensitive. This is one reason that the political contributions that Germany has made to the fundamental task of the Alliance and its external strategies and policies, have been so important. But that military aspect of German participation in NATO is also not to be underestimated.

Anja Schüler: As we wind down this podcast, I would like to ask you one more thing. The Munich Security Conference is taking place this weekend and no doubt Russia, Ukraine, and NATO will be major issues there. However, it looks like, and we don't have the final word on this now, participants will be talking about Russia rather than with Russian representatives. There might not be any. So is the Security Conference

on its way to becoming a purely transatlantic affair? Can it even play a role in the current conflict between Russia and the West?

Seth Johnston: What an interesting question to be framed that way. It was just last year or the year before, I can't remember which one, the theme of the Munich Security Conference was: "Westlessness?". Has the West sort of lost meaning or lost cohesion or lost its way? But the premise of your question, and I think it's exactly right, is that Russia, in its aggressive stands towards Ukraine and the West, has probably done more to galvanize and strengthen NATO than certainly a lot of other things along these lines. The former U.S. ambassador to NATO sort of made the quip that, if you want to look at increasing defense spending among European countries over the last five or six years, the president who was most responsible for that was not Barck Obama or Donald Trump, but rather Vladimir Putin – I think that's exactly right. At this Munich Security conference, I think alliance cohesion in the face of this current crisis in Ukraine will be the thing to watch. Do Western countries share a common sense of the nature of this challenge? Do they demonstrate, not only the unified understanding of the challenge, but also a unified sense of purpose? NATO has shown time and again since the early 1950s that, with common understanding, it has the ability to adapt, to succeed, and to preserve the peace and security that it was established to maintain. I think there is every reason to believe that it's capable of doing it again.

Anja Schüler: Thank you so much for these insights. We will be watching what is going on in Munich this weekend. I'm also sure that the current situation in Eastern Europe will capture our attention for some time to come, for better or for worse. You have been listening to the HCA podcast, and I have been talking to Seth Johnson from Georgetown University about changes in NATO strategy and organization. Thank you so much.

Seth Johnston: Great to be with you.

Anja Schüler: I should maybe also mention that Seth will teach a class at the HCA in summer semester, so I'm really looking forward to having him as a colleague down the hall, at least for a little while. This wraps up the current episode of "Quo Vadis USA?" My name is Anja Schüler. Our podcast is produced at Heidelberg University with support from the Jacob Gould Schurman Foundation. As always, I would like to thank Julian Kramer for technical support, and I would like to thank you for listening. The HCA podcast will be back in March, so stay tuned, and please stay healthy.