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Reviews of 'Defence Matters' research for NATO

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In a speech at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Dubrovnik in Croatia on 11 October, [Secretary General Rasmussen](#) told his audience that NATO had been working for six months with prominent research institutes from eight Alliance member countries to look into the question of the need for defence spending, even in times of financial crisis. He said:

The goal was to get a broad picture of how our publics look at defence, and the value they place upon it. The big question was: how much does our defence really matter? The results are now in. And the answer is clear. In a nutshell, defence does still matter. But we all need to do a much better job at explaining why.

The Secretary General indicated that four findings stand out from the research:

1. There is a wide-spread respect for our military forces and broad support for defence investment.
2. Our publics do understand that a country's freedom and prosperity depend on its security.
3. Defence industries are generally viewed as positive contributors to our economies.
4. There is a growing divide between North American and European perceptions of NATO.

The eight reports were posted on the Carnegie Europe website on 21 November. The main findings of each of the reports are reviewed in this briefing.

[The Netherlands - the Hague Center for Strategic Studies](#)

HCSS found that the discourse on defence in the Netherlands is not very vibrant, not very well-informed, and not very strategically oriented, despite parliament-wide support for maintaining and using national armed forces, and for membership of NATO. Furthermore, a culture of publicly debating strategic defence issues is lacking in the Netherlands. HCSS has organised a number of meetings with key stakeholders to 'debate the defence debate'. They have ascertained from previous work that a high-quality public defence debate in the Netherlands is both of little use and quite unlikely without a well-informed political debate.

They conclude that the Dutch are generally concerned about international stability, value NATO-membership, hold their military in regard, are in favour of missions with a clear direct value and have an eye for the economic benefits of defence. The value of defence is often difficult to gauge in the wider scheme of things, for both the Dutch public and the body politic, and suggest that "building and expanding the 'value proposition' of defence, highlighting results and making the return on investment explicit, is crucial".

[France - Institut français des relations internationales](#)

IFRI contend that French people hold their armed forces in high regard and understand the importance of maintaining a military able to

defend the national territory, as well as to deploy abroad, and a competitive defence industry that serves the interest of the armed forces and of the French economy more generally.

However, debates on defence issues remain confined to a group of experts. So, while the French have positive views on their military, they do not discuss or consider it as a priority issue for the country. Parliament is often devoid of strategic debates over the role of the armed forces or over French strategic ambitions, which breeds the public and media disinterest for those issues. "It is important to ensure that debates take place on a regular basis to discuss foreign and security issues within plenaries at the Parliament. It might consequently increase the general interest in those issues."

IFRI makes several recommendations to address this deficit and calls on NATO to help advance the strategic debate in France as the Alliance carries the responsibility to participate in, and foster national strategic debates.

Germany - Jörg Wolf, Atlantic Initiative

German decision-makers and opinion leaders perceive security threats and risks as problems that require a political solution or intelligence and police work. Many Germans believe that there are no military solutions to current security problems. Long-term strategic thinking and planning are largely missing in politics, the media and academia. Germany is not interested in power projection and does not have global ambitions.

NATO's historical contributions to West Germany's security are appreciated but people do not see what NATO's current operations do for their security. NATO is valued as insurance with the main purpose being collective defence. Nuclear weapons are seen as not that useful for today's defence. There is not much awareness that defence spending is insufficient. Wasteful military duplications, uncoordinated drawdown of capabilities, and delays and cost explosions in procurement projects are seen as bigger problems.

Jörg Wolf recommends that NATO's top management should put more emphasis on specifying the security risks and threats to the

Alliance and should share more specific information about its threat analyses so that the press and think tanks can make the case for more defence spending. He derides the current US tide of criticism about Germany not making a sufficient contribution to NATO as counterproductive, especially as 'out-of-area' military missions are unpopular in Germany. He concludes that the North Atlantic Council should debate more international crises and important developments, and do so more openly.

Canada - Paul H. Chapin and col. (ret) Brian S. MacDonald, Atlantic Council of Canada

Defence is not uppermost in the minds of Canadians but they realize the world can be a dangerous place. They support their troops and have been more willing to spend on defence than conventional wisdom believed but they don't have a strong grasp of their national interests. Canada retains strong residual ties to Europe but are unsure how an increasingly Eurocentric NATO fits into their future security and defence plans which are becoming more global.

"Neither government nor the military has done much to enlighten the public on security issues, and Canadians have been poorly served by Parliament, the media, universities and think tanks." A national dialogue is needed in order to develop a National Security Strategy. This should include a civil-military relations program with support from private interests to establish research and education on defence issues.

A division is growing between those who believe NATO's focus should be the defence of the Euro-Atlantic area and those who see NATO with a broader mandate. The authors recommend that Alliance members "should declare a ceasefire in their debate over burden-sharing and put a temporary halt to discussions on the apportionment of capability targets" while the organization refocuses on its fundamental purpose.

The United Kingdom - Alexander Nicoll, International Institute for Strategic Studies

The IISS was unable to participate due to pressures of work and a tight time scale. Their contribution was offered in the hope that they can add some thoughts to the process.

Within the parliamentary system, awareness is high. There is a strong level of political participation in defence discussions. There is broad political consensus on the purpose and nature of Britain's armed forces. There is some disagreement about reductions in spending, with military representatives and lobby groups voicing concerns but there is plenty of informed debate about what the reduction in capabilities means for Britain's role in the world.

Alexander Nicoll suggests that if increasing public awareness of defence is needed in the UK, it should be based on Britain's roles and capabilities with discussions framed around pressing security needs. Without a clear focus on actual security issues, the debate about military capabilities is taking place to some extent in a vacuum.

There should also be a focus on the benefits of cooperation, including in equipment acquisition and support. Without it, the ability of individual European countries to shape world affairs will wither away. This is the logic behind NATO's Smart Defence projects and similar initiatives. The argument needs to be stepped up in all countries, so that politicians understand the benefits and are more likely to advance the arguments themselves.

Poland - DemosEurope

Citizens and experts understand security and threats in a very wide context and direct military threats are considered unlikely. NATO is seen as an organisation motivating the development of the Polish army and supervising structural changes, but the image of the national defence system is generally negative due to presumed under-financing and under-equipment of army units.

Involvement of Poland in NATO's international operations is perceived as a fulfilment of ally obligations, and not in Poland's current interest. Thus cooperation and integration is perceived positively as generally improving Poland's military capability, but public opinion is wary of this turning the country into a target for terrorists.

There is a lack of knowledge on actual expenses and financing of the defence system due to a lack of information in the public domain about the Polish Armed Forces Modernization Plan, but

there is a strong belief that military investments have a positive impact on the economic development of a country. For these reasons, DemosEurope recommend the launch of a coherent information campaign directed at a wider public.

United States - Jacob Stokes and Nora Bensahel, Center for a New American Security

NATO faces another deep crisis with shrinking European defence budgets which are putting pressure on continued American support for the Alliance. At a time when US defence budgets are declining – perhaps dramatically, if sequestration is fully implemented – many Americans believe that the United States continues to carry a disproportionate transatlantic burden.

The authors state that: “While these indicators demonstrate general public support for NATO, the reality is that most Americans do not have a strong view about NATO one way or another. The level of knowledge about NATO remains extremely low, fostering a broad ambivalence among the public.”

They suggest that: “While the best way to increase US support for NATO is to improve the military capabilities of the member states, NATO can also do a better job of demonstrating the value of what it already provides to the United States.”

Italy - Alessandro Marrone and Paola Tessari, Istituto Affari Internazionali

The Italian debate on defence matters is influenced by national structural factors that are unlikely to change in the short term - as happens in other European countries. Italian public opinion will likely continue to attach great importance to two aspects of Armed Forces' deployment: the legitimacy in accordance with international law, and the tasks carried out within missions abroad concerning humanitarian assistance, socio-economic reconstruction and training of local security forces.

Sectors of Italian public opinion are more interested in a cost-benefit analysis of Italy's participation in international missions - and of the related defence spending - particularly in

times of austerity. The purposes, results and effects of international missions with regard to Italy's national interests should be discussed more deeply in order to constructively involve in the debate a wider share of Italian public opinion.

There is a scarcity of public information about what the military does in international missions and what is needed in terms of equipment and procurement. Considering the disconnect between the community of experts and practitioners and the mass media, opportunities should be created for a greater connection between the two sides. A growing Italian audience interested in foreign and defence policy will require greater information and a better debate on these matters.

NATO Watch comment

It would have been helpful, and more appropriate, had there not been a six week gap between the Secretary General presenting the findings of the reports on 'Defence Matters' and their publication.

Due to the disparate methodologies adopted in gathering and presenting data, some highly detailed and some lacking in primary research, we have found it difficult to draw comparisons between each report and would have some difficulty in narrowing down and focusing on the "four findings [that the NATO Secretary General said] stand out from the research".

That said, there was some interesting information and occasional common threads that emerged, perhaps not least, as indicated by Mr Rasmussen, "*[the] need to do a much better job at explaining why [defence matters]*". This is a highly complex subject that is often portrayed as having little appeal to the majority of citizens, and in turn, is often cited as a reason for limiting access to detailed information on defence matters. This rather self-fulfilling circular argument needs to be broken by greater transparency and accountability within the Alliance - at both the level of individual Member States and within NATO - in order to ensure effective as well-as democratic defence and security decision-making.