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Feb 26, 2019 by [Sven Lilienström](#)

Interview with LTG Ben Hodges: Why Europe needs NATO ^[1]

NATO is the most important security alliance in the world. The alliance, which now has 29 members in Europe and North America, has been providing security for more than 60 years. So far, so good!

U.S. President Donald Trump has, of course, his own view of NATO, which he recently described as “obsolete.” The alliance was set up a long time ago and, according to Trump, far too few members pay what they should be paying. In an interview with the Faces of Democracy initiative, Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, retired Commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, takes issue with this and says: “NATO remains the over-arching security mechanism for Europe!” But there is one point on which the ex-soldier and the U.S. president agree: The members of the alliance must do more to contribute to burden-sharing.

Does this mean that NATO is indeed a relic of the Cold War and thus obsolete? The following

three arguments show that the defense alliance continues to be vital for security and freedom in Europe.

1. NATO's Eastern Flank

Hodges is not the first to emphasize the value of NATO for Europe in an interview with the Faces of Democracy initiative. In April 2018, Estonia's President Kersti Kaljulaid stressed the importance of a strong and unified defense alliance *vis-a-vis* Russia: "Russia is a declining superpower, which means that their window of changing the game is closing."

Kaljulaid adds: "Would you not try to turn the table by using the advantage that you still have in the knowledge that the window for change is closing? In view of this, we must ensure in the next ten to fifteen years that Russia recognizes our unity and that we are willing to take action."

In a global environment marked by disintegrating structures and numerous conflicts, it [NATO] continues to be a vital anchor of stability—especially for Europe.

2. Terrorism, Cyber-Attacks and Hybrid Threats

The security mechanisms in Europe change constantly. NATO is not only at the heart of this ongoing change process—it is also part of this development. The defense alliance will increasingly have to face new challenges in the future, such as terrorism, cyber-attacks or hybrid threats.

Hodges says: "The alliance has done a good job of adapting to the new security environment that was changed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and alliance leadership continues to do this in a way that is faster and more effective than many may realize. We have to continue this effort, especially in terms of coherence of our collective security efforts. I see the wider Black Sea region as the major area of potential friction with Russia in the next decade."

3. CSDP Not Currently an Equivalent Alternative

Although Europe is looking to strengthen the strategic autonomy of the EU and pave the way for a joint European defense union by further developing the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and intensifying dialogue through the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), it is not a NATO substitute and certainly not NATO 2.0.

While Hodges optimistically states that the EU and NATO will continue to improve cooperation and that the EU is serious about developing a more capable European pillar of security, he also concedes, "PESCO seems to have promise though I haven't seen enough tangible action and results yet."

Both Hodges and President Kaljulaid are supporters of the Faces of Democracy initiative. In a Europe that is shifting to the right, where populists promise people seemingly simple solutions to complex social realities and security issues, it is these Faces of Democracy who want to

preserve and improve established structures and values rather than abolish them.

The Faces of Democracy Initiative: Public Diplomacy “Made in Germany”

The Faces of Democracy initiative stands up for the strengthening of democracy, pluralism and freedom of the press and wants to draw people’s attention to the increasing dangers of protectionism and partial nationalism. We understand public diplomacy as a way of helping the citizens of the European Union and non-Europeans to understand the sometimes complex structures and institutions of the EU. We must learn to accept that democracy is not something that can be taken for granted, rather it is an ideal which we as a collective must practice, strengthen and defend each day.

And our success proves us right: Since the establishment of the Faces of Democracy initiative, more than 250,000 people have signed the voluntary commitment to protect and strengthen the fundamental values of a democratic civil society.

More than 39 prominent figures from the world of politics, business and society are now committed to democratic achievements including pluralism, diversity and freedom of expression, such as the President of the EU Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, German Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas, President of the German Federal Constitutional Court, Prof. Andreas Voßkuhle and the retired Commander of the U.S. Army in Europe Ben Hodges.

In Summary: NATO Is an Essential Anchor of Stability in Europe

Hodges firmly believes: “NATO has successfully protected European, American and Canadian allies and strategic interests almost 70 years, despite many challenging times and disagreements between its members, and I expect that it will continue to do so for many years. The bonds and trust are deep and strong and are not dependent on single issues or personalities.”

What is important, he believes, are well-trained defense forces with modern equipment who are ready to act. “We know from hundreds of years of history that this is the surest way to invite more security challenges,” Hodges says.

In summary, NATO must adapt to the new realities, change and modernize. In a global environment marked by disintegrating structures and numerous conflicts, it continues to be a vital anchor of stability—especially for Europe. An anchor of stability to which we Europeans owe our security and freedom since 1949. Let us hope that thanks to the increased efforts in public diplomacy, more people will learn to appreciate this.

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