Report

NATO and the Future of European Security

Be it resolved, the EU not NATO should lead the way in European Security

With Salima Belhaj, Toine Beukering, René Cuperus, Marianne van Leeuwen and Dieuwertje Kuijpers (moderator)

20th of November 2019, Filmcafé Utrecht

On Wednesday, November 20, the Netherlands Atlantic Youth and Study Association Metis organised a debate about NATO and the future of European Security. The panel consisted of Marianne van Leeuwen (UvA) and Salima Belhaj (D66), who were in favour of the EU playing a larger role in ensuring European security, and René Cuperus (Clingendael) and Toine Beukering (FvD), who argued that NATO should remain the main alliance to ensure European security. This debate was moderated by Dieuwertje Kuijpers and attended by around 120 students and young professionals.

During the opening statements it soon became clear that the panellists held widely different beliefs on the role that NATO should play in the future of European security. Marianne van Leeuwen kicked off the debate by stating that NATO’s cohesion depends on the requirement of a common enemy, but that doubts have arisen whether a shared enemy still exists. Moreover, she noted that the shared values of the US and Europe seem no longer as evident. Nevertheless, van Leeuwen does believe alliances are fundamental to Europe’s security: “European countries cannot deter threats on their own.”

Salima Belhaj argued that many are not aware what a European defence force would entail in practice and called for a fair and open debate about what The Netherlands wants for European defense cooperation. In her view, a European defence force is vital to protect Europe’s interests, and to be able to implement the EU’s foreign security policy untethered from American dependency.

René Cuperus criticized Macron’s proposal for the creation of a European army. According to Cuperus, we are currently living in the Asian century, characterized by the rise of China and the loss of western dominance. As such, Cuperus declared the French President has chosen the worst time to divide the western alliance with his remarks that NATO is “braindead.” “Macron has recently given a cold shoulder to the US, but a warm hand shake to Russia”. Now more than ever, Europe and the US need NATO to ensure the hegemonic position of the West. Cuperus even suggested that NATO should expand and become an alliance of liberal democracies against the authoritarian threat in the world with countries like Japan, India, South Korea and Australia.

Toine Beukering also questioned the feasibility of extensive European defence cooperation. He emphasized that people within a nation state feel connected through the shared experience of building a state. People are willing to fight for their own country, but not for a big empire or bureaucracy. Beukering argued a European army would never work because the EU lacks this collective identity. Moreover, he pointed out that the different geopolitical
zones within the EU undermine attempts for effective defence cooperation. Countries such as Italy and Spain are looking southward, wanting protection from the high numbers of migrants coming from the African continent, while the eastern European countries are preoccupied with defending themselves against Russia.

During the panel discussion, the debate focussed on the relationship between Europe and the US, and its consequences for NATO’s role in the future of European security. The proponents of European strategic autonomy argued that Europe should be able to provide a military response to a crisis without reliance on the US. However, Beukering and Cuperus responded that the EU does not have the capabilities or the strategic culture to overcome the reliance on the US. Beukering believes Europe’s dependence on the US for defence is not necessarily a problem. According to him Europe can rely on the US when it comes to NATO: “The US pays the bill.”

Another interesting aspect of the debate was to explore the role of the European member states within the Alliance. For instance, van Leeuwen proposed the idea that NATO’s European members contribute more financially and in return demand a larger say in the issues the military alliance should address.

After the panel discussion, the audience got engaged through a lively Q&A session where certain aspects of NATO were explored. The participants to the debate were asked whether they believe that the 2%-norm is a sensible guideline to measure commitment to the alliance, and whether they think NATO should be able to expel a member state in the case of misbehaviour or when a state does not contribute enough.

According to Marianne van Leeuwen, “the optimism felt in 1989 after the fall of the Berlin Wall seems to be lost.” In spite of different views on the role of NATO in European security, the panellists agreed that we are living in uncertain times. For Beukering and Cuperus this entails the need for a stronger trans-Atlantic alliance. For Belhaj and van Leeuwen it means that Europe needs more strategic autonomy.

By: Veerle van Dijk