

A Guest in Poland

In three weeks the NATO members will get together in Warsaw. The strategy regarding Russia will be the central issue: deterrence, but with a readiness for dialogue.

By Matthias Nass, June 2016

Jens Stoltenberg strides from the VIP-Lounge into the National Stadium in Warsaw. The stadium can seat 60,000 people, but on the Monday afternoon during Stoltenberg's visit in late May, the stadium is empty. The NATO Secretary General is here for an inspection of the venue for the military alliance's next summit. In the middle of the arena over the grass normally reserved for soccer, workers are building a massive conference space. On July 8th and 9th the government heads of the 28 NATO Member States will sit here together – before rows of empty stadium seats, observed only by a thousand journalists from around the world. It's an unusual meeting place, likely chosen for security purposes, but Stoltenberg is satisfied to see that the preparations are progressing.

The NATO Secretary General left Brussels in the early afternoon flying with a Belgian military plane— NATO doesn't own any airplanes itself. Stoltenberg is traveling with a small delegation; less than a dozen staffers, and only one in uniform. Stoltenberg will be in Warsaw for two days. Then he'll travel back to Brussels, the following day to Berlin, then a trip to Paris. Three trips a week is not an unusual stint for Stoltenberg but now, shortly before the Summit, the appointments are crowding in more than usual.

All are in agreement that Warsaw will be an important meeting, as the Summit in Wales was two years ago. Then NATO reacted to Russia's annexation of the Crimea and the aggressive behavior in the East of Ukraine with the development of a faster "reaction force". The strategic planning in Wales emphasized the concept of "collective defense", and shifted away from military interventions in distant places like Afghanistan.

"Deterrence and defense" is the motto this time. It currently sits as the first point on the agenda for Warsaw, and aims above all to assuage the concerns of Poland and the Baltic States.

During a speech at Warsaw University, Stoltenberg notes that the Summit is happening at a

“critical moment”, as the alliance faces challenges from the East and the South. It has been helpful, he says, that Poland has evolved over the past 17 years from a “new ally” to a “leading ally”. A surprisingly well-behaved crowd has gathered in the university’s library to hear him speak. No protest posters, no heckling. One just has to imagine the NATO Secretary General speaking at a German university! It would be a markedly different environment.

Nonetheless, a student sets a critical question forward: How could the Polish government with its anti-European views and nationalistic agenda be deemed a “leading ally”? To that Stoltenberg doesn’t have an adequate response. Nonetheless, it is a good question asked at the right time, since closer cooperation between the EU and NATO is also on the agenda for the Summit. Unlike the European Union, Warsaw’s leaders hold NATO in high esteem. Stoltenberg, in turn, praises Poland for fulfilling their treaty obligations. Poland is one of the few European countries to reach the 2% GDP threshold laid out by NATO for individual country defense budgets.

Fear and hostility towards Russia run deep within the right-wing Polish government, but overly loud anti-Russian tirades are not heard during Stoltenberg’s visit. The NATO Secretary General is repeating it time and again – deterrence and dialogue belong together. The Polish government doesn’t lay too much store by a dialogue with Russia, but they know that a united deterrence policy will only happen if NATO is able to simultaneously signal a readiness for discourse.

For Poland, deterrence means more NATO soldiers in Eastern Europe, and this will happen. Four multi-national joint battalions will be sent to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, although on a rotating basis to prevent any violation of the NATO–Russia Founding Act of 1997, which forbids the permanent stationing of “substantial” combat forces. Additionally a US brigade – similarly not on a permanent basis – will be stationed in Eastern Europe.

In contrast to Poland, countries like Germany and France have a strong interest in continuing the conversation with Vladimir Putin. And to that point, another meeting of the NATO–Russia Council should be held prior to the Warsaw Summit. So far, however, Moscow has not agreed to such a meeting.

Today Warsaw, tomorrow Berlin, the day after that Paris: This is a very normal week for the Secretary General of an alliance where everyone has their own opinions and yet must speak with one voice. Ensuring this is his job, says Stoltenberg.

The atmosphere is relaxed on the flight back to Brussels. Instead of a suit, just a button-down shirt and gray jeans. "Quite a few good meetings, all of them successful," summarizes Stoltenberg, followed by a laugh. He grabs his itinerary and begins studying files for the next trip.

This article is part of a regular series of contributions from Matthias Nass for the Bucerius network. Matthias Nass began his career with ZEIT in 1983, and from 1998 to 2010 served as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. Since 2011, he has served as Chief International Correspondent for the newspaper. His area of expertise is foreign and security policy. This article was originally published in ZEIT Online. The opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the author, and do not reflect the official position of any of the Bucerius Institutions.