Correspondence from the Riga Conference

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AntoniaLaura Pup

This past week I had the opportunity to participate in the Future Leaders Forum program at the prestigious Riga Conference, organized annually by the Latvian Transatlantic Organization (LATO). The Future Leaders Forum, organized in partnership with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for the Baltic States, is the conference component dedicated to a distinct cohort of 15 young people from the Euro-Atlantic community, with different backgrounds, aimed at introducing them to the world of security and international relations conferences in order to provide them with a platform to express their ideas and solutions to the current security challenges facing the Euro-Atlantic region in particular, and the world in general, given the current interdependencies.

The panel where I had the opportunity to speak was about how we can get involved in protecting the rules-based international order in the context of the multiple overlapping crises that define the global security architecture. More specifically, I spoke about China's perceived influence at the Black Sea, all the more so in the context of the recent elevation of relations between Georgia and China to the level of strategic partnership, the consistent conversations between Turkey and China on the synergy between the Middle East Corridor and Belt and Road Initiative projects, as well as the complex toolbox of actions China is using to project its influence in the Balkans, including through the notorious Confucius Institutes, about which several allies have sounded alarm bells pointing to the high possibility of these cultural centres being epicentres of technological and scientific espionage. I was pleased to be able to share this panel with strong voices from the Euro-Atlantic community such as Mr David Andelman, CNN commentator, Jazlyn Melnychuk from Enterprise Canada, and Dr Adam Potočňák, Assistant Professor, Centre for Security and Military Strategic Studies, University of Defense, Czech Republic. Donada Rata, a scholarship student at the University of Luxembourg, effectively moderated our panel hosted by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung as a side event of the Riga Conference on 20-21 October this year.

The conference is a major event in the Euro-Atlantic conversation on security and foreign policy and is a flagship event for the Baltic region, bringing together representatives of allied and partner governments, NATO and EU officials, representatives of academia and civil society, journalists, etc. This year's conference was opened by the President of Latvia and the introductory panel featured Thierry Breton, EU Commissioner for the Internal Market, and Latvia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Krišjānis Kariņš. This introductory panel was a dynamic one, coming just after Joe Biden's Oval Office speech on American leadership on the global stage. The EU Commissioner did not miss the opportunity to signal that the European Union will not be dependent on this American leadership, no matter who succeeds to the White House, signalling once again this Commission's determination to exacerbate the EU's geopolitical role, even if the speeches sometimes seem to overstate the Union's real power to export power.

The panels over the two days were interactive sessions to take the pulse, from various angles, of the EU and NATO security agenda today. In addition to the formal program, participants were also invited to sessions organized under the Chatham House Rule on a variety of topics, some sensitive, such as the security situation in Belarus. On the latter topic, I can tell you that the Euro-Atlantic community should not forget the (admittedly fragile, according to some analysts) regime in Minsk and should invest additional resources to devise a strategy for Belarus, like the need to devise a strategy for Ukraine. These two strategies should be independent, working with scenarios, as I personally would not exclude the possibility that the dictator in Minsk is trying to shape some sort of exit strategy from the perspective of the collapse of the Moscow regime. The fact that Ukraine has not yet recognized the opposition cabinet headed by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya should give us pause for thought.

Baltic Sea, NATO Lake. From Madrid through Vilnius, preparing for Washington

Several of the Riga conference's panels focused on assessing the current security context in the Euro-Atlantic region, as well as the current state of the transatlantic alliance itself, in preparation for next year's 75th anniversary NATO summit in Washington. The need to implement the decisions taken in Madrid under the new Strategic Concept (and the first in ten years, this time providing a vision for the alliance's wartime development in Europe), as well as those taken in Vilnius, listing, for example, the new regional plans to strengthen the alliance's defence and deterrence posture on NATO's eastern flank, was stressed by the panellists. As for Ukraine's accession to NATO, this is no longer an unknown, as it was best felt in Riga that there is a strong consensus that Ukraine will soon join the Alliance, but this depends on the outcome of the war.

Sweden's accession to NATO was one of the topics that lifted the spirits of the participants present, even more so since we can say with certainty that the northern eastern flank enjoys increased protection, and the Baltic Sea has officially become a NATO lake. The same cannot be said about the other half of NATO's eastern flank, the southern half, where the security of the Black Sea is a real grey rhino in all this talk about regional security and the need for more consistent measures to deter the greatest threat to the security of allies, according to the Madrid Strategic Concept: The Russian Federation.

European Defence: Time to Walk the Talk

Between the pragmatism with which we should view the true state of NATO's European pillar and the pessimism of the crowded security agenda, coupled with the multiple crises affecting the world now, of which the Middle East crisis is by far the most pronounced, this is how I would define the European security echoes in Riga. I have, however, also heard reasons for optimism: the return of Donald Tusk to the head of the Warsaw government and, implicitly, an end to the disputes between Poland and the European institutions, could be an important element in strengthening European unity in these times of crisis that we are experiencing today.

With the US in the grip of a domestic political crisis, coupled with politicians' demands that the Biden administration focuses on Israel at the expense of Ukraine, the European Union must begin to turn good intentions into firm action to strengthen its own defenses. If a few months ago strengthening the European defence pillar within NATO (which President Macron talked about in his Bratislava speech) seemed like an option, today it is no longer an option. It is an imperative – this imperative was made very clear in the context of the Riga talks.

Is Europe ready for the Transition to a War Economy?

Judging by how difficult it is to reach the 2/20 minimum (2% of GDP for defence, 20% for equipment spending), we would say that Europe will have major difficulties in transitioning to a war economy. Ambitions for the development of European capabilities remain, however, a target, especially when we look at the Baltic States, which are a model in this respect also for Germany and France. When it comes to European defence in the current security landscape, the most eloquent conclusion seems to me to be the one drawn by a Conference participant: Europe needs to wake up – soft power won't stop Russian tanks.

The German politicians present in Riga presented not only the opportunities but also the limitations of the Zeitenwende policy. Germany's commitment to righting its historical wrongs towards this half of Europe seems to be as firm as its transatlantic commitment, it remains to be seen what mechanisms the Berlin government will use to counterbalance the

pacifism firmly demanded by society with the new demands imposed by the security situation in Europe. More than a speech, the Zeitenwende should represent a commitment, but it can only be credible if society is committed and the political class – united around this consensus.

Let's not forget the Asia-Pacific

Speakers from Latvia, Australia, Germany, and Japan debated on stage in Riga how changes in the Indo-Pacific region affect the transatlantic community. The consensus seemed to be shaped in an already familiar style: for the European Union, China remains characterized by the triptych of economic partner, competitor, and systemic rival. As one representative in the audience rightly pointed out, these attributes seem rather contradictory and likely to underline the fact that the European Union does not, de facto, have a clear foreign policy in relation to the security challenges that an increasingly assertive China imposes not only in the Asia-Pacific region but in the world at large. There are, however, happy cases when it comes to addressing these security challenges, and one such case can be found in the context of the Baltic States themselves. Latvia, for example, which hosted these strategically important conversations, had the political maturity to understand the importance of eliminating Chinese operators from 5G infrastructure tenders, as did my country, Romania. Are these rules, or rather exceptions when it comes to the positioning of European states towards China, this contentious, irresponsible geopolitical actor intimately linked to the Russian Federation? The low number of EU Member States implementing the 5G clean networks directive, coupled with the ambiguity of the most recent list of critical technologies to be protected adopted at the European level, shows how lax the EU's de-risking (as opposed to decoupling) policy towards China is. It remains to be seen, however, how this rhetoric will evolve, particularly in the context of the European elections next year, but also in terms of how China might project certain foreign policy objectives by speculating on the crowding of the European security agenda at present. With growing conflicts in the Middle East, a critical security situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and a powder keg in the Western Balkans in the run-up to important election rounds, it seems no one would have the energy to look to China's backyard to protect Taiwan.