

Slovenia and NATO at the Crossroads of Change

20-year Anniversary of Slovenia's Accession to NATO

29 March 2024 marked a pivotal moment for the Republic of Slovenia as it celebrated two decades of membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This momentous occasion was commemorated with high-level panel discussions organized by the Slovenian Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, and the General Staff of the Slovenian Armed Forces. Held at the prestigious venue of Brdo pri Kranju, the event spanned the afternoon of March 28, drawing together esteemed leaders and experts from various spheres of defence and international security.

The first panel – »NATO Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow« – steered by Dr. Iztok Prezelj, an esteemed academic and President of the Euro-Atlantic Council of Slovenia, welcomed Lieutenant General Robert Glavaš, Chief of the General Staff of the Slovenian Armed Forces, General Christopher G. Cavoli, NATO's SACEUR, Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, Italy's Chief of Defence, and General Rudolf Striedinger, Chief of the Austrian Armed Forces. They discussed NATO's trajectory and strategic nuances.

In the second panel – »Women, Peace, and Security in NATO« – Dr. Andrej Benedejčič, Slovenia's Permanent Representative to NATO, led discussions with Ms. Tanja Fajon, Slovenia's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Ms. Irene Felinn, NATO's Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security, Ms. Ann Linde, Special Advisor on Foreign Affairs of FEPS and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, and Dr. Ljubica Jelušič, former Slovenian Defence Minister, focusing on gender's pivotal role in the international community and security.

The concluding panel titled »Back to the Roots and Collective Defence: 75 Years of NATO« was moderated by Ms. Katja Geršak, Executive Director of Regional Dialogue. It featured Mr. Marjan Šarec, Defence Minister of Slovenia, Mr. Angel Tilvar, Defence Minister of Romania, and Mr. Vojko Volk, Slovenia's State Secretary for International Affairs and National and International Security, who discussed the strategic importance and core mission of NATO's collective defence.

This article captures essential insights from the 20th anniversary of Slovenia's NATO membership. It compiles information from panel discussions and event observations, focusing on security trends, NATO's strategic directions, and Slovenia's challenges and opportunities.

A Journey of Transformation: Slovenia in NATO

Slovenia's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004 marked a turning point after its independence, as it symbolized strategic coordination with the Euro-Atlantic community and commitment to collective security. This journey of transformation was not just a shift in military alliances but also a profound realignment of Slovenia's foreign policy and defence strategy, deeply rooted in its quest for national and international stability and peace.

The path to NATO membership began in the early 1990s, when Slovenia, freshly independent, sought to integrate into European and Atlantic structures. Joining NATO represented a crucial step towards fulfilling these aspirations, providing a framework for Slovenia to contribute and benefit from collective defence. It was a move that aligned with the broader trends of the post-Cold War era, where many Eastern European countries gravitated towards NATO to secure their newfound sovereignty and participate in a collective security system. On March 29, 2004, the Republic of Slovenia became a full-fledged NATO member.

As a NATO member, Slovenia has actively participated in various peacekeeping missions, demonstrating its commitment to the alliance's core objectives of promoting peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area and beyond. It has contributed to operations in the Western Balkans, Afghanistan, and other regions, underscoring its role as a reliable ally committed to global stability.

Moreover, Slovenia's journey in NATO has been characterized by its adaptability and responsiveness to the evolving security landscape. It has worked to modernize its armed forces, enhance interoperability with other NATO allies, and align its defence policies with the alliance's strategic directives. This transformation reflects a broader understanding within Slovenia of the necessity to invest in defence capabilities, not solely to fulfil treaty obligations but also to ensure its own security in an unpredictable global context, as stipulated in Article 3 of the NATO Treaty.

In the two decades of its membership, Slovenia has grown from a new member seeking to find its place in the alliance to a proactive contributor to NATO's collective security efforts. This development underscores the strategic depth of Slovenia's engagement with NATO, where it has moved beyond mere participation to actively shaping the alliance's trajectory. As NATO faces new challenges in the 21st century, Slovenia's journey within the organization highlights its transition from a post-Cold War newcomer to a proactive player in the collective defence and strategic discourse of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Modernizing for a Dynamic Security Environment

Slovenia's NATO membership journey has been intrinsically linked to the broader narrative of modernization and adaptation in response to the dynamic security environment of the second decade of the 21st century. Modernization, in this context, encompasses a comprehensive spectrum of transformations, from upgrading military hardware to reformulating strategic doctrines and enhancing legal and institutional frameworks.

At the heart of Slovenia's defence modernization efforts is the recognition of the evolving nature of warfare and security threats. The post-Cold War era, particularly the recent years marked by the resurgence of state-centric challenges and the rise of hybrid threats, has necessitated a shift in defence paradigms. Slovenia, in alignment with NATO's strategic outlook, has thus prioritized the modernization of its armed forces to ensure their effectiveness and interoperability within the Alliance's collective defence structure. This modernization is not just about acquiring new equipment but also about integrating advanced technologies and innovative tactics to bolster Slovenia's defensive and operational capabilities. The focus extends to enhancing cyber defence, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, acknowledging the growing importance of these domains in contemporary conflict scenarios.

Moreover, NATO's Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) concept underscores the need for a robust and resilient defence posture that can deter and defend against a spectrum of threats, including conventional and hybrid challenges. Slovenia's commitment to this concept is evident in its efforts to align national defence planning with NATO's collective defence strategies, ensuring that its forces are not only well-equipped but also strategically integrated within the broader NATO framework. A critical aspect of modernization is the emphasis on interoperability – the ability of Slovenia's military forces to operate seamlessly with those of other NATO members. This has involved not only the standardization of equipment and procedures but also regular participation in joint exercises and operations, which enhance the tactical and operational cohesion of allied forces.

Modernizing for a dynamic security environment represents Slovenia's strategic investment in a future where security challenges are increasingly complex and interconnected. By aligning its military and defence strategies with NATO's evolving needs, Slovenia is not just securing its own national interests but also contributing to the collective security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic region. This modernization journey, reflective of both adaptation and proactive engagement, is crucial for maintaining the Alliance's readiness and responsiveness in an unpredictable global landscape.

From Crisis Management and Prevention to Collective Defence

After more than two decades, NATO has returned to its fundamental mission – ensuring the collective defence of the Euro-Atlantic area while maintaining the importance of crisis management and crisis prevention and cooperative security. This change of NATO's strategic concept has significantly influenced Slovenia's role within the alliance. This shift underscores the broader security challenges confronting the Euro-Atlantic area and the need for an integrated approach to address them effectively.

Initially, NATO's post-Cold War era was characterized by an emphasis on crisis management and prevention, aiming to mitigate conflicts and foster stability in regions like the Western Balkans. This area, which is in close proximity, has a crucial impact, as any destabilization directly affects the security of allies. Slovenia, having joined NATO in this period, actively contributed to such missions, leveraging its position and experiences to support peace and stability efforts in conflict-prone areas.

However, the changing global security dynamics, marked by the resurgence of conventional state threats and the emergence of hybrid warfare and other unconventional threats, necessitated a recalibration of NATO's strategic priorities. The alliance's focus has shifted back to a strong collective defence, underscoring the principle that an attack against one ally is considered an attack against all, thereby fostering a powerful deterrence effect. This commitment to collective defence remains vital, forming the bedrock of NATO's strategy in ensuring the security of all member countries against a spectrum of threats.

Yet, the contemporary security environment, teeming with state and non-state actors, cyber threats, and hybrid warfare tactics, requires a multifaceted approach. This has led to a broader perspective that encompasses not only robust military defence but also cyber security, counterterrorism, and the protection of critical infrastructure. Slovenia, as part of NATO, has recognized the need to adapt to these complexities. It has embraced the alliance's strategic shift, acknowledging that security today extends beyond territorial defence and involves managing crises and fostering cooperative security frameworks. This nuanced strategy reflects an understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of current security challenges and the necessity of a comprehensive approach to address them effectively.

In embracing collective security, Slovenia has also recognized the importance of solidarity and cooperation within NATO. The alliance's strength lies in its unity and the commitment of its members to provide mutual support – a principle that has guided Slovenia's involvement with

its allies, from participating in collective defence exercises to actively engaging in strategic discussions about the alliance's future.

The shift from a post-Cold War crisis management and prevention back to a strong deterrence and defence as the backbone of collective security signifies a critical adaptation in NATO's and Slovenia's strategic frameworks. This evolution reflects a comprehensive understanding of the complex, interconnected nature of contemporary security threats and the necessity for a united, multifaceted approach to ensure the enduring peace and stability of the Euro-Atlantic region, especially in light of the resurgence of conventional warfare and increased security threats on the European continent.

Women, Peace, and Security

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda has become a cornerstone of Slovenia's strategic framework within NATO, embodying a comprehensive approach to peace and security that emphasizes the importance of gender inclusivity. This focus aligns with the broader movement towards feminist foreign policy, as exemplified by countries like Sweden, Germany, Spain, Slovenia, and others, which have recognized the need to integrate women fully into peace and security processes.

Slovenia's journey in the WPS agenda and its adoption of feminist foreign policy principles reflect a commitment to elevating the role of women in conflict resolution and security governance. Feminist foreign policy, pioneered by Sweden in 2014, aims to ensure gender equality and the empowerment of women at all levels of international relations. Slovenia, along with other nations, has embraced this policy, integrating gender considerations into diplomatic and security initiatives to create more equitable and effective outcomes.

The critical role of women in peace negotiations underpins these efforts. Despite their pivotal contributions, women are often underrepresented in these processes, with their participation essential for achieving sustainable peace. Discussions at the panels highlighted this discrepancy, emphasizing the need to enhance women's involvement in peace and security frameworks. The speakers have been instrumental in advocating for these changes, bringing gender perspectives to the forefront of international security dialogues. Their perspectives, alongside contributions from NATO's Special Representative for Women, Peace, and Security, underscored the necessity of including diverse perspectives in crafting comprehensive security strategies.

Moreover, the WPS agenda recognizes that effective peace and security efforts must be inclusive, tapping into the unique insights that women bring to the table. This inclusivity not only enriches the peace process but also contributes to more resilient and enduring solutions to conflict and insecurity. Slovenia's active participation in the WPS agenda and its adoption of feminist foreign policy are critical facets of its NATO engagement. These efforts reflect a broader shift towards more inclusive and sustainable security strategies, emphasizing the vital role of women in achieving peace and stability. By championing gender equality and integrating feminist principles into its foreign and security policies, Slovenia is contributing to a transformative global agenda that seeks to ensure peace and security for all.

Strengthening NATO's Cohesion: Interoperability and Alliance Solidarity

Interoperability and alliance solidarity are pivotal to NATO's strategic efficacy, ensuring that member states can operate seamlessly together and support one another in the face of security challenges. Slovenia, as part of its commitment to the Alliance, has placed significant emphasis on these aspects, aligning its military capabilities and strategic doctrines with NATO standards to enhance collective defence and operational collaboration. Interoperability, in the NATO context, involves the harmonization of equipment, procedures, and training among member states to facilitate effective joint operations. Slovenia has been proactive in modernizing its armed forces and investing in NATO-compatible systems. This commitment not only strengthens Slovenia's own defence capabilities but also contributes to the Alliance's overall readiness and capability to respond to threats, reflecting a shared responsibility for security.

Solidarity within the Alliance, underscored by the collective defence principle of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, remains a crucial element. While Slovenia's role in NATO has transitioned from a beneficiary of collective defence to an active contributor to the security of other member states, signalling its growing strategic importance and commitment to mutual security, there is still work to be done to fully realize its role and potential within the Alliance. The discussions during the high-level panels highlighted the importance of regional plans and the necessity to align allies' defence planning with NATO's collective strategy. The emphasis was on how Slovenia is integrating its national capabilities with the broader objectives of the Alliance, ensuring that its forces are not only well-equipped but also strategically poised to participate in NATO operations.

The concept of Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) was particularly significant in the discussions. As the backbone of NATO's collective defence, DDA requires strong interoperable forces that can mobilize rapidly and effectively in response to threats. Slovenia's contributions to this strategic concept, including its efforts to connect its national defence plans with NATO's regional strategies, underscore its role in reinforcing the Alliance's collective security architecture.

Interoperability and alliance solidarity are fundamental to Slovenia's engagement with NATO, reflecting a deep-seated commitment to the shared values and security objectives of the Alliance. Through its efforts to enhance military interoperability and uphold the principles of collective defence, Slovenia is not only ensuring its own security but also contributing to the stability and resilience of the entire Euro-Atlantic region.

Confronting Contemporary Challenges

In the new era of violence, security concerns, and enhanced collective defence, NATO faces an evolving landscape of threats, including conventional threats, cyber, space, and hybrid warfare domains. These threats have not only reignited the essence of collective defence but also highlighted the necessity for NATO to adapt to contemporary challenges that transcend traditional battlefields.

Russia's illegal and unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine has underscored that wars are not an extinct phenomenon on our continent. This aggressive act serves as a stark reminder of the unpredictable era we are in and the potential for large-scale conventional conflicts in Europe, necessitating a thorough reassessment of NATO's defence and deterrence posture. Slovenia, in response to this altered security environment, has been integral in adapting NATO's collective defence mechanisms. The conflict has spurred a renewed emphasis on enhancing military readiness and capabilities, not only in conventional forces but also in addressing the sophisticated arenas of cyber and space threats, as well as the murky dynamics of hybrid warfare.

Cybersecurity, given the digital age's proliferation of cyber-attacks and information warfare, has become a paramount concern. Slovenia, recognizing the cyber domain as a critical frontier in contemporary conflict, has invested in strengthening its cyber defence capabilities. This includes not only safeguarding its own national infrastructure but also collaborating with NATO allies to bolster collective cyber resilience and counteract cyber threats from state and non-state actors.

In space, the final frontier has emerged as a vital domain in global security, necessitating a strategic approach to space defence. The militarization of space and the potential for satellite-based conflicts have underscored the critical importance of the space domain, one of the five domains of warfare, alongside land, sea, air, and cyberspace. This has led NATO, with the support of its member states, to prioritize space as an operational domain, ensuring the security of space assets and infrastructure that are critical to national and collective defence efforts.

Hybrid threats, encompassing a blend of conventional and non-conventional tactics like misinformation campaigns, proxy warfare, and economic coercion, have also been at the forefront of NATO's security agenda. The situations in Ukraine and the Middle East have exemplified the multifaceted nature of hybrid warfare, prompting Slovenia and its NATO partners to develop more integrated and sophisticated responses to counteract these evolving threats. The transition to this new security paradigm, driven by the exigencies of the War in Ukraine and the broader geopolitical shifts, underscores the need for a comprehensive and agile defence strategy. Slovenia, in step with NATO's strategic adaptation, is committed to enhancing its capabilities in these critical domains, ensuring that the Alliance remains resilient and responsive to the complex array of threats in today's interconnected world.

The contemporary security environment, shaped by the new realities of the Russian aggression and the consequent strategic recalibrations, has brought to the fore the critical need for NATO and its members to confront the challenges in all the domains of warfare, particularly emphasizing the cyber, space, and hybrid warfare domains that aggressors use for destabilization and support of their conventional warfare efforts. Through concerted efforts in these domains, member states are not only safeguarding their own national interests but also contributing to the strengthened collective defence and security of the Euro-Atlantic area.

Austria's Role in Navigating Neutrality and European Defence Dynamics

The changing security landscape in Europe has put a spotlight on the unique positions of countries like Austria, known for its long-standing policy of neutrality. Austria's approach to defence and security, especially in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, offers insightful perspectives on the broader narrative of European security dynamics and NATO's evolving partnership frameworks.

Austria, while maintaining its constitutional commitment to neutrality, has actively engaged in various forms of cooperation with NATO, particularly through the Partnership for Peace program. This engagement reflects a pragmatic approach to security, acknowledging the need for collaboration in facing common threats while respecting the constraints of neutrality. The Austrian case illustrates the nuanced balance between national defence policies and the collective security efforts within Europe.

In the wake of the heightened security environment, Austria has reconsidered its defence and security posture. The country has increased its defence spendings, signalling a recognition of the changed nature of threats and the importance of having robust defence capabilities. The country's strategy demonstrates a commitment to robust defence capabilities, even as it adheres to its neutral principles. This development in Austria is emblematic of a broader trend in Europe, where countries are reassessing their defence strategies and commitments in the light of new security realities.

Austria's contribution to security aligns with its neutral stance yet demonstrates its active role in international security affairs. The country's support for Ukraine in non-lethal aid and humanitarian assistance underscores its commitment to European stability and its ability to contribute meaningfully within the constraints of its neutrality. Significantly, Austria's strategic location in Europe facilitates its role in providing mobility for NATO allied troops, enhancing the logistical support crucial for the alliance's operational readiness and collective security initiatives. Moreover, the situation has sparked discussions on the strategic importance of European defence integration and the role of neutral countries within this framework. Austria's experiences and policies provide valuable insights into the possibilities and challenges of navigating neutrality in a new era of collective defence needs, offering lessons for the broader European and NATO strategy on integrating diverse national defence paradigms.

Austria's stance and actions in the current security climate highlight the evolving nature of neutrality and partnership in Europe's defence landscape. These dynamics, reflected in the discussions and considerations within NATO and among its partners, emphasize the need for flexible, inclusive approaches to collective security that accommodate the diverse political and strategic backgrounds of European countries.

The Future of Collective Defence and NATO

The future of collective defence within NATO, particularly considering the evolving security dynamics influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, marks a pivotal phase in the Alliance's evolution. This event has not only reinvigorated NATO's core mission of collective defence but also prompted a strategic recalibration to address the complexities of modern geopolitical and security challenges.

The War in Ukraine has demonstrated the sheer scale of military resources and readiness required to deter and defend against a determined adversary, highlighting the need for NATO members, including Slovenia, to bolster their defence postures significantly. The invasion has shattered any illusions of a peaceful Europe and has re-emphasized the necessity for robust collective defence mechanisms. Slovenia, as part of NATO, has been at the forefront of supporting Ukraine by actively and robustly sending military equipment, while recognizing the need for significant increases in defence spending and investment in upgrading to NATO-standard equipment. Although there is still much to be done to enhance its defence capabilities, Slovenia is on a positive trajectory, aiming to reach the 2% GDP target for defence spending by 2030.

NATO's evolution in response to these challenges involves not only a quantitative increase in military assets but also a qualitative improvement in how these assets are deployed and managed. The emphasis is on enhancing the interoperability, mobility, and readiness of forces, ensuring that NATO can respond swiftly and effectively to threats. Slovenia's support for these initiatives, including its commitment to meeting NATO's defence spending guidelines and participating in joint training and exercises, underscores its dedication to the collective security of the Alliance. The War in Ukraine has reignited discussions about NATO's strategic direction, including the balance between eastern and southern security concerns. The war has also highlighted the importance of non-military aspects of security, such as economic stability, energy independence, and informational resilience. Slovenia advocates for a comprehensive approach to security within NATO, recognizing that military strength must be complemented by broader societal resilience to withstand the multifaceted nature of contemporary threats.

The future of collective defence and NATO's evolution are intrinsically linked to understanding and adapting to the lessons of the Ukrainian conflict. Slovenia, through its active participation and strategic investments, is contributing to shaping an Alliance that is prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century, ensuring a collective defence mechanism that is robust, responsive, and reflective of the complex security landscape of today's world.

Conclusion – Charting the Path Forward

In the wake of Slovenia's 20th anniversary in NATO, amidst a new era of heightened security challenges and collective defence imperatives, it's evident that both Slovenia and its allies must intensify their commitments. In this new era of violence, conflicts, and unpredictability, with war returning to Europe through the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the transformed security environment demands an escalated response in defence preparedness and strategic alignment. The discussions commemorating this milestone have shed light on the necessity for increased defence expenditures, enhanced procurement strategies, bolstered resilience, and heightened public awareness. Slovenia, reflecting on its journey within NATO, recognizes the imperative to not only continue but also amplify its contributions to the Alliance's collective security framework. This entails a significant ramp-up in investment in defence capabilities, ensuring the armed forces are equipped with the necessary tools and technologies to meet contemporary threats.

The concept of resilience has emerged as a crucial theme, emphasizing the need to fortify both military and civilian infrastructures against a spectrum of threats, including cyber and hybrid warfare. Slovenia's role in NATO is evolving, with a clear focus on enhancing interoperability and ensuring that its strategic efforts are closely aligned with the broader goals of the Alliance, particularly in addressing the comprehensive nature of modern security challenges. Moreover, fostering public awareness and understanding of these security imperatives becomes vital in cultivating a society that supports necessary defence measures and recognizes the importance of a strong collective defence stance. Slovenia's efforts, in tandem with NATO's strategic objectives, must therefore encompass a broad spectrum of initiatives, from upgrading military hardware and enhancing joint operational capabilities to nurturing a public discourse that acknowledges the complexities of the current geopolitical landscape.

In conclusion, Slovenia's journey in NATO, especially in these turbulent times, underscores a collective responsibility to adapt to the new realities of global security. The path forward, marked by the need of enhanced defence expenditures, strategic procurement, resilience building, and public engagement, reflects a comprehensive approach to ensuring peace and stability in a new era of unpredictability and uncertainty.

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