

RCAS Commentary

Iran Crisis Exposes Cracks in NATO Solidarity

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About RCAS

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RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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The ever-increasing tension between the United States, Israel and Iran has escalated into a regional crisis with global implications. The repeated assaults of the United States and Israel on Iranian targets since Feb. 28 have led to a series of counter-actions that have led to the situation that exists as of today in at least fourteen countries in the Middle East. Iran's retaliatory measures attacking on Israeli soil and military posts and other strategic positions of the U.S. in the Gulf have brought unimaginable strain, which has pushed the region toward even bigger and uncontrollable war.



▲ Photo: Chian US Focus.

The crux of the crisis is the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic choke point. The move by Tehran to essentially disrupt traffic through this strait has shaken the global energy market. Approximately 20 percent of the oil supply of the world passes through the strait; hence any disruption is of international concern. This has placed a tremendous burden on the economies of Western Europe, while at the same time providing an advantage to energy exporters such as Russia.

But on a larger scale, other than the imminent geopolitical and economic aftermath, the crisis has revealed something larger and more meaningful: apparent faults in the transatlantic alliance, and in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in particular. The perception that the supporters of NATO would rally behind the American strategic interests in the Middle East has not been exactly achieved in Washington. Instead, the

reactions of the Europeans have been defined as withdrawn, timid, and even totally contrary.

Donald Trump, the president of the United States, has shown no hesitation in his frustration. In a recent interview, he pointed out what he deems as the asymmetry of the dedication of alliances, which refers to American aid to Ukraine as an instance of American generosity to NATO. His sharp question about how NATO allies will feel when the U.S. wants vengeance is the product of the underlying tension. Is NATO still a cohesive security community, or is it a selective and self-serving alliance is the question at the heart of the matter.

European leaders have, however, spoken clearly. The United Kingdom, via Prime Minister Keir Starmer has made it clear that the current conflict is not a NATO operation. The mere fact that London has denied its military bases to be used in the initial attacks on Iran and its reluctance to contribute toward the war per se are direct signs that it is actively attempting to distance itself from the course of action implemented by Washington. Similarly, Germany, under the leadership of the Chancellor Friedrich Merz, has ruled out the possibility of joining the fight on grounds that it was not consulted. The strikes were instigated without involving European partners.

It is the same story at the level of the European Union. The EU has not been keen to participate in any minimal maritime security activities, such as direct participation in the Hormuz crisis, as foreign policy head Kaja Kallas has called it. There is a need to improve the naval cooperation in the greater Middle East, and there is no enthusiasm for tying itself down to the activities of the U.S.-led military actions.

The difference in tactics is not the only reason, but the difference proves the incompleteness of relations between the Atlantic regions. Over the decades, NATO has been a cornerstone of Western security based on shared values and collective security. The Iran crisis demonstrates that these shared values are increasingly being subjected to the dispensation of the national interest. Already crippled by the Ukraine war and energy insecurity, many European states appear not to be keen on becoming sucked into another decades-old conflict in the Middle East, one that has limited international credibility.

The legitimacy issues were, in fact, brought into the spotlight in Europe. James Moran, a former EU ambassador, believes that the opinion in Europe is that the American-Israeli attacks against Iran have no sound legal footing. This has further limited the European governments to the extent that there is little chance that military involvement is politically and civilly supported. All that is left is the additional separation of the gap between the European reactions and the expectations of the United States.

Ironically, the crisis has also brought accidental strategic benefit to non-members of the transatlantic alliance. Russia will gain with Western sanctions and isolation since it will have more strength in export earnings and bargaining power because of high energy prices. During this period, destabilization of global supply chains is also pointing in the direction of the insecurity of the liberal economic order, almost the entire system advocated by the United States and its allies.

In this regard, the Iran crisis may be considered both a symptom and a catalyst. It points to the additional weakening of the liberal international order and accelerates the move toward a more fragmented and multipolar world. The inability of NATO to speak with a single voice is posing relevant questions to its future relevance. Essentially, the performance of the alliance as a global security provider can be undermined in the event that the alliance fails to agree on crucial matters pertaining to global security that do not lie within its immediate geographic area of operation.

The lesson is also very clear in the case of the United States. The expectation of automatic allied support may no longer be the case at a time when strategic priorities are enclosed and domestic limits are invoked to determine the course of foreign policy. The case of Europe suggests that what is required is more strategic autonomy as a long-term objective, yet it's an unevenly distributed one. Moreover, the Iran crisis shows the limitations of alliance cohesiveness in a changing world. NATO is disintegrating, yet it is also evolving, perhaps to a more relaxed, more transactional model in which cooperation is conditional rather than obligatory. With no beginning and no end to the war and its aftermath, one thing becomes obvious: the time of unilateral transatlantic solidarity has ended, and the novel and more complex era of international relations has begun.

The Iran crisis now underway shows a structural fracture within NATO. The crisis can no longer be considered merely a conflict. The organization that historically is tied closely to the United States is being subjected to new questions, particularly after the rhetoric of Donald Trump in his second term, which expresses skepticism over funding pledges and load-sharing. These positions have offended the European allies, who have shown that there is resentment of strategic independence for years. At the same time, the fact that several states in Europe do not want to get involved in the unpopular war against Iran indicates a discrepancy in the perception threat. Unless resolved, these frictions will reduce NATO from a unity platform to a contest of priorities.

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