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Summit of the unwilling

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You must have heard the phrase “back to the future.” Nothing else could better describe my feelings while following the NATO summit in Brussels on May 25, which President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also attended.

Just as in the wake of the Sept. 11 terror attacks, NATO took the decision to contribute more centrally to the fight against terrorism (i.e. ISIL) at this summit. Another coincidence is that ISIL made a bomb attack in the United Kingdom, Manchester, prior to the summit, just as al-Qaeda had attacked London in the aftermath of Sept. 11.

But don’t fall for the similarities. Neither NATO is the same nor is the world as it was in 2001. Moreover, NATO’s contribution to counter-terrorism will not be same either.

The very next day after al-Qaeda attacked the U.S. on Sept. 11, NATO invoked its Article stating that an armed attack against one of its member states should be considered an attack against all members. Based on this ground, the coalition pioneered by the U.S. intervened in Afghanistan, which was considered to be the main base of al-Qaeda.

After that came Iraq. U.S. President George W. Bush decided to invade Iraq based on the excuse that Iraq's President Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Yet this time NATO didn't stand by Washington. In particular, France and Germany opposed the intervention upon which U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made the distinction between "old and new Europe." According to this distinction, the European countries supporting the U.S.'s Iraq policy were the "new Europe."

Afterwards Bush established a "coalition of the willing" composed of 49 countries, which invaded Iraq in March 2003. In other words, this intervention was conducted by individual states without the involvement of either NATO or the United Nations, which had both backed the intervention in Afghanistan.

The need for NATO and the U.N. seems to have steadily faded in time. Coalitions have become more and more flexible. For example, since ISIL emerged there has not even been an attempt to form a "coalition of the willing." This is mainly due to the fact that today there is nobody willing! Even the U.S. does not fight on the ground in Iraq or Syria these days. The West has burned its fingers so much in Afghanistan and Iraq that they now outsource "subcontracted fighters" such as the YPG in Syria. The "willing" of the day have become those groups.

Moreover, today there are only temporary alliances formed around some specific objectives. This is because NATO was founded in 1949 during the Cold War against the Soviet bloc. Yet today we are in a totally different security environment. The threat is not a single country or a geographic region anymore. Today the threats are global such as terror, the refugee crisis, cyber security and weapons of mass destruction. Some of these relate to a few countries, while some other ones concern the whole world. Thus a group of countries concerned about a specific threat cluster around it. This is exactly why the U.S. and Russia coordinate in Syria nowadays.

Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who lost his life last January, described these groups as "liquid alliances." Bauman argued that we are living in "liquid times" and that short-term and pragmatic coalitions have replaced long-term alliances such as NATO. Therefore, he wrote, alliances dissolve as soon as the target is achieved, such as the defeat of ISIL.

After all, NATO is well aware of the fact that its *raison d'être* doesn't exist anymore. Therefore the Alliance is trying to come up with new missions for itself. General James Jones, Bush's National Security Advisor who had convinced NATO to back the Afghanistan intervention, admitted the same in a 2005 interview. Jones said NATO was in limbo, struggling to avoid becoming irrelevant after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the 9/11 attacks offered a new opportunity to demonstrate its relevance.

The Brussels summit two days ago is the best evidence proving this. It is true that NATO announced its decision to contribute to the counter-ISIL fight, but it will not send over a single troop. In addition, Trump again made the emphasis that member states need to meet the NATO spending requirement, which is 2 percent of their budget. Leaving counter-terrorism aside, it seems NATO cannot even fight its way out of a paper bag today.

So a military contribution should not be expected from NATO anymore. If the Transatlantic Alliance wants to continue its existence, it needs to define a new mission for itself that would not require any military commitment such as cybersecurity. Sinan Ülgen, the chairman of the Ankara-based Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM), argues in his book named “Governing Cyber-Space” that NATO should pioneer the fight against this new global threat, which has become the most threatening national security risk.

Yet it will certainly take a lot time until everything falls into place.