

# ‘Its centre of gravity will always be in the transatlantic space’

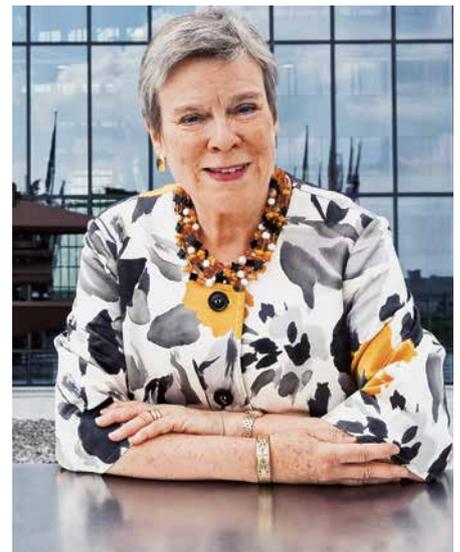
How NATO can adapt to future challenges

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG:** With a globally changing debate on China, NATO also devotes more attention to the country. Could you describe which events influenced how NATO is thinking about China?

**GOTTEMOELLER:** When I arrived at the NATO Headquarters in 2016, China was very far away and did not figure very highly in NATO’s considerations. In addition, the main missions of NATO are in Europe and the fight against terrorism was very much front and centre at that time. When North Korea tested their long-range missiles and did another nuclear test in 2017, the alliance really woke up to the fact that these missiles could land in Berlin, Paris or Los Angeles. Asia suddenly seemed less far away from Europe. At this point, we began to talk to the Chinese about developing a political military dialogue.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG:** How do you evaluate Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg’s approach to call for NATO to respond to China’s growing global presence, and simultaneously emphasize that there is no need to place NATO troops in the Indo-Pacific region?

**GOTTEMOELLER:** NATO depends on bringing troops and equipment from the United States and Canada to exercise and – in the case of crisis or conflict – to reinforce troops in Europe. It became a concern that – with its Belt and Road Initiative – China



**ROSE GOTTEMOELLER**  
fmr. Deputy Secretary General, NATO;  
Lecturer, Stanford University, Stanford

© Erik Luntang

started to control some of these facilities in Europe. It was an important decision to focus not only on the opportunities but also on the challenges China presents. Secretary General Stoltenberg was right to be very alert to China’s presence in Europe instead of deploying troops to the Indo-Pacific. NATO is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Its centre of gravity will always be in the transatlantic space, rather than in Asia.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG:** Do you not see a risk of neglecting NATO’s core tasks, such as to ensure European security, especially vis-à-vis Russia?

**GOTTEMOELLER:** I do think NATO must remain focused on its core tasks. At the same time, it must remain alert to the kinds of threats that China may pose going forward, including threats directly in Europe. We will have to work through how NATO should respond to that. Yet, I want to point out that cooperation with China and the Chinese military exists, such as the operation to shut down the piracy in the coastal areas of Somalia in 2015.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG:** What does the current sense of transatlantic estrangement mean for NATO’s ability to develop a coherent approach towards China?

**GOTTEMOELLER:** President Trump has been very tough on all NATO allies with regard to their defence-spending. Especially on Germany. The next American president will remain tough on Europe for defence-spending purposes. There currently also is a very uncompromising attitude in Washington on China. The actions taken on big Chinese companies, such as TikTok and its owner ByteDance, are examples for the strong point the Trump administration is making. However, I am wondering whether trade necessities will not temper the American view in the long run.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG:** How should we best think about the intensifying rivalry between Washington and Beijing?

**GOTTEMOELLER:** It is very serious that the two sides cannot talk anymore. This was a feature of the Cold War and came to its most horrible fruition

with the Cuban Missile Crisis. The greatest danger I see nowadays is that the two sides are no longer trying to work through difficulties. Despite Beijing’s relative weakness in the defence arena, there is still potential for crisis, and especially military crisis.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG:** One way to reduce the risk of military escalation would be to include China in the arms-control architecture. What could the United States do to convince China to join such talks?

**GOTTEMOELLER:** It was a bit strange that the administration demanded that China should be included in the extension of the New START Treaty. The United States and Russia have several thousand warheads that are not deployed on strategic missile systems. In comparison, China has fewer than 500 warheads. It is good that President Trump now suggested inviting China for negotiations later on, after the United States and Russia have agreed upon a deal. Frankly, I think that is the way to engage China.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG:** In terms of defence policy, what kind of advice would you give to the German chancellor regarding the future of the transatlantic relations?

**GOTTEMOELLER:** I think it is important for the German government to recognize the strong support for NATO across the US body politic. Particularly in the Congress, which controls the budget. There are some limitations on what can be done in the White House. In our Department of Defense and elsewhere in the executive branch, there continues to be strong support for Europe and for the relationship with Germany overall. ✖



September 2020: don't know 6%, no answer 2% | April 2020: don't know 10%, no answer 4%  
 2019: don't know 6%, no answer 2%