TRANSCRIPT

Smart Women, Smart Power
“Nerding Out on NATO”

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FEATURING
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This is Smart Women, Smart Power, a podcast that features conversations with some of the world’s most powerful women.

And I think what helps us to do this is also to recall that NATO is also a political -- it’s a military, but it’s a political-military alliance.

We feature thought leaders at all career levels where we explore, among other things, the many contributions that women make to the fields of international business, national security, foreign policy, and international development. Does having women in positions of power influence the outcomes of decisions in these fields? Why or why not? Join me, Dr. Kathleen McInnis, director of the Smart Women’s Smart Power Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for these incredible conversations.

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Today I am honored to welcome Dr. Benedetta Berti to the Smart Women, Smart Power Podcast. Dr. Berti is the head of policy planning in the Office of the Secretary General at NATO. She has years of experience looking at human security and internal wars, as well as looking at ways to better understand the global shifts in patterns and dynamics of political violence. As a NATO nerd myself, I mean, it’s just fantastic to geek out with the head of policy planning at NATO. So thank you so much Dr. Berti for joining us today from Brussels.

Yeah, thank you. It’s a pleasure. I’m looking forward to nerding out about NATO <laugh>.

So I’d love to start by hearing more about how you found yourself working in the field of international security.

Right. I’ve always been drawn to the international relations field and more specifically to the security studies and really specifically the question that I’ve always had in my mind when I started at this point a couple of decades ago, my career was really what drives patterns of conflict and how does war and our hostilities affect, how do they affect civilians and what can we do in terms of mitigating, reducing the impact of our hostilities and conflict on civilians? So that’s always been, if you wish, the key question that I’ve used to, to orient my research and then also my career choices. I am now in NATO in this position as head of policy planning for, I’ve been in this position for roughly five years. So that is a pretty long time, especially if you consider the monumental
shifts in our security environment and also in the NATO alliance in recent years.

So it's really been a fantastic, a tremendous opportunity to observe from within how the alliance is changing, how the security assessments are changing, our adapting politically, militarily. But I came through this job working before, working here in NATO, in the office of the Secretary General. I really was more involved in shaping policies from the outside, meaning that I was in academia, I was working in think tanks. I was working as a protectional civilian, consultant on the ground. So I was looking at the same policy questions, but from a very different perspective, meaning from outside a more institutional or governmental framework. And I thought as many that have had that academic and think tank experience, that a way to make my policy research recommendations and advice perhaps more relevant in the future will be to try and spend some years from within and really understand how decisionmaking works inside institutions. And that I thought that would eventually lead me to do a better job as a policy advisor working in academia or in think tanks. So that, that’s a little bit my journey to NATO.

Kathleen McInnis: And one of the things that you mentioned was that you were inspired to join NATO to get a better understanding of how policy is made and how hard it is. And I think that is something that it really is hard to fully appreciate unless you've been on the inside, you know, seeing and making the sausage -- things that seem so simple, like, you know, pick an issue, in protection of civilians, climate change, things that are seem so obvious actually, when you try to get them integrated into these institutions and develop policy and execute policy. It's extremely hard. So I just, for our listeners, I commend you for jumping in to understand how all this stuff works, because it’s really hard.

Benedetta Berti: Of course. I think from, I mean, there's a series of things that you just don't see from the outside, of course, because, well, first of all, when you are inside an organization, you appreciate really the magnitude of the simultaneous challenges and issues that you have to deal with. And you have to deal with the fact that all organizations are inherently limited in terms of resources, staffing, time, political capital, political attention. So prioritization becomes really, really important. But I also think one of the key differences is as a researcher, both in academia and in think tanks, are really always focused on producing the best possible idea. And of course, that remains incredibly important whenever we, we think through a new policy issue and we design options and recommendations for the Secretary General, it's really important to have very sound research, very sound data, good options, good ideas.
But I think what you do a little bit less when you are in the outside world is understanding how important it is also to socialize that idea, to get political buy-in, and to understand the different interests and priorities of all the different stakeholders. And that’s really key in a multilateral framework. You ultimately, everybody needs to be on board, which means you have to understand and address the security concerns of perceptions in the case of NATO, of 30 member states. And I think that’s something that of course, you know, on a, on a much more theoretical level, when you are not doing, when it’s not part of your day-to-day job, but it’s very different to be in the room and trying to forge that consensus to understand what is the way to unlock some of the differences and to move forward together, without really going to the lowest common denominator, which is of course not what you want to achieve.

You want to do the best possible for the Alliance and each member state. So it’s quite different to focus on those issues. And of course, it’s ultimately very rewarding when you manage to unlock some of these issues and you, you get to a political decision because of course, in a NATO context, every decision the alliance takes is taken by consensus. And some say, well, that makes decisionmaking or can make decisionmaking point cumbersome or slow. My experience is that while that may be true, there’s also a really positive advantage, and that is once those decisions are made, they’re fully owned and they really represent the entire alliance, and that allows you to then implement them with a much stronger buy-in. So it’s complicated, but once you get to that decision, it’s quite rewarding — I would say.

Absolutely. It’s powerful too, 30 of the world’s democracies coming together and making a common decision. That’s a powerful thing.

That cuts to the question of what the alliance is for, what the heart of the question of what the alliance is for, which has been in a really intense debate, particularly over the past five years. I mean, 2014 when Russia invaded Crimea is when it started to kick off. But then when, you know, we had the Islamic State and then like this current phase of the war in Ukraine and climate change, cybersecurity, hybrid warfare for all of these things. And there’s this tension within the alliance. On the one hand, there are those who feel that the Alliance has to focus on collective defense, you know, protecting NATO territories and the military dimensions of all of these different issues. So focusing basically on the military, and then there’s others who think actually the security environment is changing and NATO needs to have a role in, or at least thinking about the broader strategic context like energy security, economic security, those sorts of things. Those need to factor into the alliances strategic calculations that go well beyond the defense
portfolio. So it’d be interested in your thoughts, like where is that debate or is, is this attention or is this something that I’m...

Benedetta Berti: No, I definitely understand what you’re saying and I definitely recognize -- I wouldn’t say there’s a tension, but I recognize this is a question that we ask ourselves over and over and the allies are asking themselves. I think if I go back to the last strategic concept that was agreed just a few months ago, I think it’s a quite interesting signal of how NATO is positioning itself in the context of this more complex, competitive security environment. And basically, I think, at least how I read it, my personal opinion is that that strategic concept tells us our purpose, our key mission remains unchanged. It is to ensure the collective defense of allies. It is to ensure security and freedom that remains our mission. And as we are approaching in a year 75th anniversary, that will remain constant, however, the tasks you need to perform in order to fulfill that mission, will those have evolved as the security environment has evolved.

And in that sense, I think you’re completely correct, that 2014 was for NATO, a wake up call about the renewed importance of deterrence and defense. And the focus on really stepping up our military adaptation, really investing in our ability to defend our territories and population. So that obviously remains a driving force behind NATO’s military adaptation because we are in a strategic environment that simply requires us to spend more on defense, to step up our defense and deterrence posture. So that’s definitely happening. And I think rightly so. At the same time, I don’t think anybody believes that it is possible for NATO to go back to a situation in which it focuses only on one threat, one theater, one type of actor. What I mean is we recognize that there’s so many threats and challenges that are not purely military in nature and they don’t just originate from within the Euro-Atlantic area.

And yet those have the potential to affect our security and defense quite significantly. Terrorism, cyber threats, climate change, none of these know geographic boundaries, but of course they have an impact on our defense and on our security. So I think the important part for us is to find that balance. Yes, to refocus and to reset our deterrence and defense posture at the same time. To retain a global approach, to retain a strong investment in working with partners and to retain also a very strong awareness that there’s so much that is not purely military that affects our ability to do deterrence and defense. And you mentioned resilience. To me, that’s the perfect example. We need to have strong, secure, resilient, physical infrastructure, digital infrastructure. We need to mitigate our economic vulnerabilities. All of these issues are critical to our security and defense. And therefore, as NATO, we have a role in discussing them, in working with allies to help them enhance their own
resilience and also our collective ability to withstand all threats and challenges, whether they’re military or non-military in nature.

So it is really, as you say, it is more than attention, I would say. It’s finding the right balance. And I think what helps us to do that is also to recall that NATO is also political. It’s a military, but it’s a political-military alliance. And there are some of these topics where sure, NATO will not be the first responder in terms of implementing. But NATO is the only political platform where you can have those conversations between Europe and North America and forge a trans-Atlantic convergence that ultimately we need to tackle these challenges. So I think between balancing between the traditional and the more emerging threats and between the military and the political is really what we, what ensures these alliance to remain relevant.

Kathleen McInnis: Yes. And the political dimension mean like again, it sometimes feel like the political dimensions and the political role of the alliances is almost overlooked a bit in the public discourse, because we tend to focus on the defense capabilities, but it is a political military alliance.

Benedetta Berti: Yes. And I think just to add to what you were saying, I think so much of that day-to-day work, to build convergence, to build situational awareness, to share intelligence, to understand and look at the security environment through a shared lens, that is incredibly important.

Kathleen McInnis: And incredibly hard. Right? <laugh>

Benedetta Berti: Hard, it’s important. Imagine had we not had a platform like NATO to exchange intelligence to build that common situational awareness picture, how harder would’ve been for us as a transatlantic community to come together, be united in our response to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Of course we would’ve still been united. But the fact that we have been discussing those events, preparing for them, and really having this platform for daily political consultation and exchange, I think you’ve really just helped us being better equipped to respond faster and ultimately to respond in a united coherent and cohesive way.

Kathleen McInnis: Right. Because alliances are ultimately made of people, right. And interconnections, interpersonal relationships matter. So we talked a bit about the broadening of the security agenda, and one of the ways that NATO has been contemplating and executing on that broadening of the security a agenda is in climate change, the area of climate change.

One of the many things that you’ve accomplished in your role as far as is helping NATO adopt its very first climate change and security agenda.
Curious - given all of these dynamics that you just discussed, what went into that? How hard was it to get that through the system?

Benedetta Berti: Right. So I think that's actually the perfect example, right? Because there's so much we know about climate change and how it affects our security. We know that it's a defining challenge of our time. We know that it's happening and that it's going to have a direct impact on virtually everything we do. So of course it will also have an impact on our security, on our defense, and on our militaries, and how they operate. So I think putting that issue on the agenda was really important for NATO. And we adopted this first climate and security agenda in 2021. And even though it's been less than two years, I can see so much progress. I would say it was more than difficult. It was a process starting with how do we work together internally as allies to build a shared situational awareness. So let's consult experts, let's engage with civil society, let's really understand how climate change is affecting our security.

And on that basis, that incontrovertible evidence can lead us to think through what do we need to do? It was a long process. We took about two years to really do the internal groundwork and consultations, but I think eventually it led to there was a lot of internal support from different allies. There was a lot of political buy-in. So gradually I think we built a critical mass of support within the organization. We also had very, very important part of this effort is to engage with our military colleagues and to engage on their concerns on their needs, to have the highest possible operational effectiveness, which remains a driving factor. And to really talk about what are the win-win scenarios here? How can we increase operational effectiveness, lower dependencies on fossil fuels, thereby also lowering our dependencies on, on strategic competitors. What are the ways in which we can meet all these extremely important objectives? So it, it was really a lot of interaction, a lot of, a lot of bridge building and a lot of trying to create a critical mass behind this proposal.

Kathleen McInnis: Yeah, it's interesting when you think climate change, I think most people wouldn't necessarily link it to, you know, a military issue per se. Those seem to be pretty far apart in like, in terms of the political discourse. But when you think about installations, you know, sea level rise on Navy installations, the impact there, hurricanes taking out air wings, these have real military and readiness impacts that the alliance has to grapple with and the nations within the alliance have to grapple with.

Benedetta Berti: Exactly. And that's, that's has been a very, very fruitful conversation because that's exactly step one. We need to understand what it means.
And of course we know, for example, that climate change can exacerbate existing crisis, can exacerbate existing fragility that can lead to new crisis or to worsening of existing ones. Of course that is something that has a -- that can have a direct impact on our security when these crisis are in our neighborhood and can lead to a need for operational engagement from our military. So of course it affects us, but also when it comes to our own territory, and exactly as you said, we need to look at our base installations. Are they climate proof? Are they designed in a way that can withstand extreme weather events? And it’s not just about installations, it’s also about our militaries. If we’re going to have more frequent and severe extreme weather events, then we might need to rely upon our militaries more to support civilian preparedness and civilian efforts-- that has an impact.

How do we design our forces in a way that they can do that while retaining their ability to fulfill their primary mission? So there’s a number of very concrete questions stemming from recognizing the, the profound impact of climate change. Also in terms of how do we design our equipment? How do we make sure that our militaries can operate in a weather that it’s weather wilder, windier, hotter. It is, I would say all encompassing phenomenon that affects from the strategic to the very operational. And I think those conversations have been very helpful in terms of building support for NATO, taking a role when it comes to adapting and responding to the impact of climate change on security. While of course, recognizing NATO’s not the first responder to tackle the entire challenge of climate change, but every organization needs to do its part.

Kathleen McInnis: So to turn to the decision that we wanted -- you wanted to talk about today, which was your role in prioritizing human security and protection of civilians and gender into NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept. So you oversaw this process with the strategic concept and its development. Can you set the scene? What was, what was happening at the time and how did you bring this construct of civilian protection into the strategic concept?

Benedetta Berti: So just for those who like us, are not NATO nerds, I’ll just say, if there, I recognize there are some non-NATO nerds out there. And for, I don’t-

Kathleen McInnis: I don’t know why people are, won’t nerd out about NATO all the time.

Benedetta Berti: I know. It’s, it’s a <laugh> it’s a fact of life that we have to deal with. So just to introduce it, this document is quite important for the alliance, I would say after the North Atlantic Treaty, which really sets NATO up as an organization. The second most important document is the strategic concept. It’s a one stop shop to look at how the alliance sees the
security environment, what the key priorities are, what the key tasks are, what the key values. And it's a document that is updated or rewritten regularly. The latest strategic concept was adopted as I mentioned before, in the summer of 2022. And that was the eighth time in 74 years of history that NATO went through this process. So just to say that it's a political, it's a strategic document. There's a high level of a political interest from all allies in making sure that the text that is negotiated and approved is really reflective of where all allies are in terms of their threat perception, assessment of the security environment, et cetera, et cetera.

Kathleen McInnis:

It's easy for an outside observer to just sort of dismiss it as, "Oh, it's yet another piece of paper," right? "It's just yet another statement." No, getting back to your earlier point, when you get 30 nations to agree on something that is profoundly important, and that means that all 30 nations are going in the same direction on these key issues and thinking about how to implement these decisions to collectively, that is in itself a powerful thing.

Benedetta Berti:

Yeah. And I would say, especially when you are dealing with a security environment that is so complex and where the issues that we hadn't dealt with or thought about for a while are back on the table, such as strategic competition. The process of agreeing on a strategic concept is almost as important as the outcome. It's about bringing all those allies around the table to have those strategic discussions and to forge a transatlantic convergence. And then exactly as you say, after it's approved, it then trickles down into planning documents at the military and civilian level. So it is then translated and operationalized. So it is quite important. Of course, the most important part is the implementation, but that's true of every strategy. You always need to, after you have agreed on texts, you need to translate what, your political ambition into resources, into political capital, into action.

That's absolutely true. But now to go on the issue that I mentioned that I was quite happy with my role, and that was the fact that this strategic concept of 2022 strategic concept is really the first one that addresses the importance of human security. Puts human security as one of the key cross-cutting, I would say strategic enablers for everything the alliance does. So it talks about how we need to really integrate human security, climate, and gender perspectives into everything the Alliance does from how we engage with partners to how we think about crisis management and response to how we think about more traditional deterrence and defense. So really it gives that political impetus to think about how do you operationalize that commitment. In that sense, I think it elevates the importance of human security for the Alliance. It also sheds particular spotlight on the importance of protection of
civilians as a key driving principle in how the Alliance addresses and approaches, crisis prevention and management with a specific focus on civilian harm mitigation has been really central to the approach of the Alliance.

And it also, I would say elevates the importance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and recognizes that really advancing gender equality is key to increase the Alliance’s operational effectiveness. And it’s also a reflection of our values. Now, these are the words that allies agreed in the strategic concept more or less. And I think that reflects, I cannot really take too much credit for it because I have to say NATO has been working on these issues for at least for a decade, if not more. And therefore, I think the time was ripe to take all the work that my colleagues had been doing. So to give the credit where credit is due. Those who were working on our protection of civilian policy were working on a Women, Peace and Security agenda and really give it a political endorsement at the highest level. The political part I play would be that I simply made sure, at least tried my best to make sure that those issues were systematically considered in the drafting of the document.

In other -- I think it’s very important that we don’t treat issues like human security or the gender perspectives as a nice add on that you pretty much, you know, add to the policy after the policy is already developed. To me, that's the missed opportunity. So from the beginning of the process, we tried to engage with dialogues, with civil society, engage with dialogues with other organizations. There are more working in the Women, Peace and Security on the one hand and the human security area on the other. And to understand how do they see NATO, how do you -- how do they think the Alliance should position itself? Then of course, the bulk of the work is discussing engaging with allies. But I think that was useful in the sense that it was built into the political discussion early on. It wasn't a nice sentence added at the end. It was from the very get-go, how do we make sure that we think about these issues in an integrated way, mainstreaming them and really giving them the importance that they deserve. So I cannot take too much credit. Of course there is, this is a teamwork building on the work of many colleagues, but I thought in the way we structure the discussions, we made sure that those issues would be time and time again discussed, addressed, and that the relevance would be brought forward as much as possible.

Kathleen McInnis: Well, and I’d like to just underscore what a change this actually represents, because in the field of strategic studies in international security, we tend to look at countries and states as the key focal point for our analysis, right? And so how do states interact with each other?
How do countries interact with each other? Bringing the human dimension into that is actually quite a profound analytic shift within the international security world, but also within NATO. It’s bringing the human dimension forward. And it seems like an obvious point to an outsider, right? That, you know, the security is, it’s ultimately about humans, but actually getting this stuff into documents, getting into the bloodstream of the strategic studies world and within these organizations is quite profound and important.

Benedetta Berti: I tend to agree with you, and I also think it’s important to do so exactly to the prism you define, which is the prism of our strategic environment is shifting the actors that have an impact on our security and defense. And that can be crucial in context like post-conflict stabilization or crisis prevention. Those actors are not just state actors. So we really have to have that understanding. So the argument is not that we are looking at these issues because they are nice, we are looking at these issues because they have a strategic effect. And if we don’t understand those actors engage or have a plan, we’re going to have our ultimate mission objectives undermined. We’re not going to perform as well. So the way we’re really approaching these issues is through the lens of it’s in a strategic interest, it’s in an operational interest, it’s what we need to do in order to fulfill our missions. And I think that’s really the important shift as well. This is not about doing something because it’s nice. It’s about doing something because it’s smart.

Kathleen McInnis: Yes. Well and that gets to, back in the day when I used to work on Afghanistan issues, the issue of civilian harm kept coming up in part because coalition forces weren’t paying enough attention to mitigation of civilian harm. At least when I was working on the issues. And our Afghan counterparts would tell us, you guys could lose this war because you’re alienating local populations by being indiscriminate in your use of force. There’s all sorts of things that contributed to the situation that we have at Afghanistan today, but that always stuck with me, that civilian harm by not being careful about mitigating it, that might have lost us momentum in the campaign much earlier than we contemplate and may have led to helped lead to or contribute to strategic failure.

Benedetta Berti: Well, I think today there’s so much we do know, I would say there’s so much we do know about the importance of involving protecting, enhancing the security of the communities and the people. We know that that’s crucial and we know civilian harm mitigation is at the very minimum of any solid protection of civilian. Policy, of course, it’s not enough. There's also a need to think proactively, but I think we have really over the years gained a much better understanding of the value importance of these issues. And that’s why in my previous answer I was
emphasizing that I wouldn’t really claim too much credit for my role in the strategic concept because I really want to say this was not a controversial issue our allies wanted from us. Something ambitious wanted from us to codify the good work that had been done. They wanted to see the Alliance reflect those values. And especially it seemed particularly important in this historical phase where we do see growing pressure from assertive authoritarian powers standing on the basis of our values seem to not just the right thing to do, but yet again the strategically relevant and important thing to do. So, I think everything converged in that sense to make sure that those themes would be treated with the right importance in the strategic concept.

Kathleen McInnis: So to begin to wrap up this fascinating conversation, do you think that your gender in being a woman had an influence on the incorporation of prioritizing human security in the strategic concept? If so, why? If not, why not?

Benedetta Berti: So I don’t have a good answer to that because I’ve been thinking about that and I think obviously we bring who we are to everything we do, and I am very much aware of that. So I am a woman who has worked for over a decade on conflict and worked on protection of civilian issues and witnessed firsthand the impact of conflict on civilians in generals, but on vulnerable populations specifically. And of course it is to me intuitively true that conflict has a disproportionate impact on women in girls, but also minority groups. I don’t know if it’s because I’m a woman. I would say it’s my experience, what I brought to the table as an individual. I’ve been working in this field and I’ve spent quite some time thinking through issues related to civilian harm mitigation. I think that definitely influences the way I look at conflict and the way I think through those issues, probably, of course, my personal experience as a woman working in some of these settings, I am, I’m pretty sure that even if I don’t know it consciously or unconsciously shapes the way I look at the work.

Kathleen McInnis: Thank you so much Benedetta Berti for joining us for this conversation today. What an amazing walkthrough, how NATO works and the central role that you’re, you’re playing with within its conceptualization of how the alliance is going to manage its current and future challenges. Thank you so much for your time.

Benedetta Berti: Thank you.

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@kjmcinnis1. Thanks for listening and join us next time. This Smart Women, Smart Power podcast is supported by Lockheed Martin.

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