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Revitalizing Transatlantic Relations: NATO 2030 and Beyond

As the United States and the world begins to adjust to a Biden presidency, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) once again finds itself at a crossroads. Diplomats and transatlantic supporters on both sides of the Atlantic collectively expelled a sigh of relief last November that a second Trump term—which many feared might spell the end of the 72-year-old alliance—had not come to pass. However, the mood is far from celebratory in either Washington or European capitals because all parties understand that, to steer clear of irrelevancy and remain “fit for purpose,” NATO needs renewal—the question is how?¹

If the allies are not careful, domestic contentions and international disputes over trade and technology regulation could consume their political energy, breaking the promise of transatlantic renewal before it has even begun. To stave off this dim prospect, NATO is embarking on a strategy of transatlantic renewal, the centerpiece of which will be a new Strategic Concept—its first in a decade. NATO’s current Strategic Concept dates back to 2010 and reflects NATO’s thinking on how to cope with the divisive nature of the War on Terror, and it is inadequate for a changed world of great power rivalry. A new Strategic Concept has long been on the agenda in the corridors of NATO diplomacy, but no one dared open this Pandora’s Box during the Trump presidency.

Following the November 2020 US presidential elections, NATO’s Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stepped forward to sketch a calendar for strategic change: a mandate for a Strategic Concept review from the NATO heads of

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state and government in mid-2021, leading to their agreement on a new Strategic Concept in mid-2022.² The virtue of this calendar is that it runs with the positive momentum of change inherent in the Biden presidency and concludes after German (October 2021) and French (April–May 2022) elections, with the timing ending before Stoltenberg’s mandate as Secretary General expires in September 2022.

Stoltenberg has in fact been building up this momentum for change through 2020, having gained a mandate from a NATO Leaders Meeting in December 2019 to frame a “forward-looking reflection process” to strengthen NATO’s political dimension and consultation mechanisms.³ The reflection process—run by 10 experts under Stoltenberg’s guidance—was rebranded as the NATO 2030 initiative last March, complete with a slick new promotional campaign to spur public debate and interest in the alliance’s work. The experts’ report was made public in early December 2020: it too called for a review of the Strategic Concept, including a significant upgrade to NATO’s “political dimension.”⁴

NATO is thus confronted with the choice of whether to merely update its old Strategic Concept from 2010 or do a 360 degree top-to-bottom review of it. A simple update would entail a broad focus on a growing range of “core tasks” running on parallel tracks. Stoltenberg has indicated a preference for this option, which is reflective of a complex and unwieldy security environment.⁵

There is a real risk NATO will seek the wrong kind of strategic renewal

But more of the same carries a risk of diluting NATO both politically and militarily: it would fragment NATO’s political focus, leave the deterrence of Russia incomplete, and fail to define collective defense interests in regard to China. In other words, there is a real risk that NATO will seek the wrong kind of renewal: going “broad and shallow” by taking on more tasks and/or elevating existing mis-

sions, like counterterrorism, to sit alongside collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security as “core tasks” of equal importance, as it did when it elevated the latter two mandates in 2010.⁶ NATO should instead go “narrow and deep” on collective defense, recommitting itself to its original purpose of deterring and defending against systemic rivals.

The better option is thus a 360 degree top-to-bottom review of the future of collective defense—addressing rival medium and great powers (Russia and China), partners (e.g., Australia, Japan, and India), domains (e.g., cyber and space), and geography (e.g., the Indian Ocean and the North Atlantic/the Arctic). Each of the constituent parts—partners, domains, and geography—of the new strategy review should be geared toward defending and deterring against systemic rivals. Such a no-holds-barred approach would be taxing on

NATO's political craftsmanship in 2021–22, but in light of current geopolitical trends, it is essential to ensure an alliance that is durably fit for purpose. NATO should therefore zoom in on the twin challenges posed by Russia and China and tailor policies as well as missions to the overriding purpose of managing these rivalries.

Behind the Bluster of Burden-Sharing

Although battered by four years of presidential vitriol and reportedly at least one semi-serious attempt by the former US president to terminate Washington's membership in the defense alliance,⁷ NATO survived the Trump presidency intact. Contrary to expectations, the Trump administration waited until its last year in office to push through the sizeable budget cuts and troop withdrawals that Atlanticists feared back in 2017 would define the Trump presidency.

For all the hectoring of European allies over burden-sharing, the Trump White House actually presided over a period of increased US defense spending in Europe—the Department of Defense's European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) saw its funding levels increase significantly in the first two Trump budgets (FY2018 and FY2019, see [Figure 1](#)). EDI continues to enjoy strong bipartisan support in Congress and is a key line of funding for US European Command (EUCOM) activities, making it unlikely its budget will return to pre-2017 levels anytime soon, despite the widely anticipated “flattening out” of the overall US defense budget in coming years.⁸

Trump's eventual June 2020 directive that the Defense Department reduce the number of US troops stationed in Germany had more to do with wanting to punish Chancellor Angela Merkel, with whom he famously clashed on many issues, than with a “master plan” to end America's military presence in Europe.

Figure 1. European Deterrence Initiative Budget FY2015–FY2021⁹



Of the approximately 10,000 US personnel scheduled for re-deployment out of Germany, only about half would have been recalled stateside, with the remainder relocated elsewhere in Europe under the original plan.¹⁰ However, in early February 2021, the Pentagon announced a global force posture review and froze the troop drawdown from Germany.¹¹ Given the emphasis placed by the Biden team on restoring relations with allies, it is possible that the troop pullout could be reversed entirely. Other proposals in the Pentagon's European force posture review, such as relocating the recently combined US Army Europe and US Army Africa (USAREUR-AF) from Wiesbaden, Germany and Vicenza, Italy to Mons, Brussels where it will be co-located with Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), will take years to accomplish and will also come under intense scrutiny by the new administration.¹²

The Trump administration's late-stage moves to upend permanent US troop deployments in Europe coincided with an increase in the number of US forces deployed as part of heel-to-toe rotations on the more volatile eastern border of the alliance. Lured by the prospect of a "Fort Trump," President Trump authorized US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to sign a bilateral Enhanced Defense

Trumph ironically charted a relatively straight course on transatlantic troop deployments

Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with Poland in August 2020, increasing the number of US personnel in that country from 4,500 to 5,500.¹³ The EDCA also designated Poland as the site of the forward headquarters of the newly reactivated US Army V Corps. Located in Poznan and inaugurated in November 2020, the new headquarters element will coordinate and supervise the activities of US ground forces deployed in Eastern Europe as well as oversee the synchronization of these forces with other NATO

forces serving in the region as part of the alliance's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) mission.¹⁴ Thus, one of the many paradoxes of the Trump years is that, rhetoric aside, under his watch the United States nevertheless continued to chart a relatively straight course on transatlantic relations in parallel with previous US administrations.

Even so, it is hard to overstate the damage done to the transatlantic relationship by Trump's four years in office. Despite considerable continuity in the day-to-day operations and inner workings of the alliance machinery behind the scenes, Trump's frequent public anti-alliance outbursts and behavior at NATO summits shocked allied leaders. Had Trump been an aberration, perhaps European governments could move on and forget, in time. But coming on the heels of a turbulent two decades in American presidential politics that witnessed the unilateralism of the George W. Bush years followed by what many Europeans

perceived as coolness on the part of the Barack Obama administration as part of its pivot to Asia, European fears over Washington's continued commitment to maintain its sizeable security contribution to the continent are the highest they have been since the end of the Cold War.

Although confident in Biden's friendship and his administration's support for a strong transatlantic relationship, European leaders understand that the new president will face a confluence of domestic and international crises unlike anything seen before by a US president, except possibly Franklin Roosevelt. Along with halting the out-of-control spread of the coronavirus in America and rebuilding a domestic economy in freefall, the Biden team will need to devote most of its first year in office to tackling other domestic crises such as the country's long overdue reckoning with racial disparity and the divisive legacy of the Trump years. Pressing issues also await on the international stage, where Europeans fully expect the Biden administration to continue the trend begun by the Obama team (and to a degree, continued by the Trump administration) of rebalancing America away from Europe and toward the Indo-Pacific.

Cognizant of these and a host of other international issues—ranging from the climate crisis to the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs—Europeans are prepared to be patient, up to a point. Rather than simply wait for Biden to tackle the challenges on his home front before welcoming the resumption of transatlantic dialogue, Europe should instead move swiftly to demonstrate its continued strategic value to the United States by getting serious about investing in its own security and defense. If done properly, such a signal could go a long way toward not only restoring the transatlantic relationship, but, perhaps more importantly, preparing it for the next chapter of its storied existence. Keeping America engaged will ultimately therefore rest largely on what Europe, not America, does next.

Keeping Transatlantic Relations in Balance

Europe, of course, is not immune to many of these same challenges and has other troubles of its own. A new Strategic Concept must capture both the need for military investment in Europe and the requirement of political balance with the European Union. Too often, Europe's (lackluster) contribution to the Alliance is reduced to the former and is thus a question of defense expenditure. What then goes missing are the abilities of European allies to rationalize their defense industries, which must take place in the EU, and to align their multiple and diverse national

A balanced relationship between NATO and the EU is essential

interests, some of which are Atlanticist and some of which are Europeanist in character. A balanced relationship between NATO and the EU is thus essential. NATO should put this political relationship at the heart of a new Strategic Concept, shaping a reimagined NATO-EU partnership according to a common vision and a clear division of duties.

Balancing NATO and the EU

The Biden presidency is an opportunity to reset Washington's partnerships with both NATO and the EU. It is noteworthy that the NATO-EU partnership is fundamental to Europe's continental security order. Enlargement, where NATO was a first-mover paving the way for the EU's in-depth work on liberal-democratic societal and political transformation, is a case in point.

However, the partnership, and thus the continental order, is vulnerable to political weather change. Poland and Hungary currently resist liberal-democratic transformation, but more consequential has been the Trump approach of denying any constructive role for the EU in transatlantic affairs, even comparing it to China as a vehicle—"except smaller"—that took advantage of the United States in trade terms.¹⁵ This denial has spurred a greater European search for "strategic autonomy" or, in a latest fashion, "sovereignty" that promises hope in the face of seeming US disengagement, but which also, in light of Europe's political divisions and sensibilities, invites more talk than action.¹⁶ By inviting a partnership based on both a strong NATO and a strong EU, the Biden presidency can, to the benefit of all allies, help move Europe from talk to action: from lofty visions of sovereignty fed by underlying fears of US disengagement to aligned transatlantic strategies for enhanced national and collective security capabilities.

Regrettably, the EU scored an own goal late last year when it concluded the Comprehensive Agreement on Investments (CAI) with China. That national leaders like Angela Merkel rushed to conclude the deal despite a strong signal from the incoming Biden administration that it "would welcome early consultations with our European partners on our common concerns about China's economic practices," as incoming national security adviser Jake Sullivan tweeted, does not bode well for the future of transatlantic relations.¹⁷ It suggests that there is lasting damage from President Trump's unilateral approach to China—single-handedly striking a "phase one" trade deal with Beijing while treating allies and partners as pawns that must fall into line. The centrality of the China question in transatlantic relations, as the Biden team has already made clear, will only continue to grow in the coming years, making it essential that allies share responsibility in aligning conceptions of economic sovereignty in order to stave off "divide and conquer" opportunities for China. Because China has already

embraced economic coercion as a foreign policy tool, and because economic power is the mainstay of potential military power, strengthening the NATO-EU relationship will be pivotal in the years ahead in order to prevent China from dominating in Europe.

Balancing Transatlantic Defense Investments

Bolstering ties between the EU and NATO means not only greater coordination between the two Brussels headquarters but also investing more in Europe's security. Encouragingly, European allies agree that Europe must dedicate more expenditure to defense and that Europe should maintain its own vibrant defense industrial basis. In terms of spending, the allies signed off on NATO's Defense Investment Pledge (DIP) in September 2014, which set in stone two key spending objectives for 2024: defense expenditure at the level of 2 percent of GDP; with 20 percent thereof to be spent on major equipment. The DIP has built-in diplomatic emergency exits (it speaks of "moving toward" the 2 percent spending target), but allies have made considerable progress, increasing spending by 20 percent in five years (2014–19) to a level not reached since 1991.¹⁸ And the effort continues beyond 2024: Germany has committed to attaining the 2 percent target in 2031, and once Germany moves, many smaller allies will feel exposed and compelled to move as well.¹⁹

The European defense industry has come to be perhaps the most important driver of EU security and defense discussions. The collective concern emerges from the long-acknowledged fact that Europeans are getting far too little bang for their Euro "buck" and from a more recent fear that technological innovation could turn national defense industries into Bonsai trees: small, well-tended, and essentially irrelevant. In a first, the EU's multiannual financial framework for 2021–27 will dedicate €7 billion (US\$8.5 billion) to a European Defense Fund (EDF) for the purpose of strengthening Europe's defense technological and industrial base. Revealingly, the EDF is legally anchored in the EU treaty's provisions for industrial, research, technological, and space policies, as opposed to its foreign and security policy provisions. In short, the EDF is a plan for building Europe's military muscle by way of market rationalization and industrial restructuring.

European disagreement begins at the point of deriving political benefits from these financial and industrial advances. Historically, France has led the drive for greater European "autonomy," Great Britain and a number of smaller European allies have inversely insisted on NATO's primacy, and Germany has sought to have it both ways. In terms of transatlantic balance, the entry of pro-American Eastern European countries into both NATO and the EU to an extent compensates for Britain's 2020 exit from the EU, but intra-European debates on "sovereignty" and "integration" have become more difficult, complicating the challenge

of transatlantic leadership. President Trump's anti-EU and NATO-bashing principally served to push the transatlantic relationship to the point of paralysis—or, to the point of all talk and no action. It formed the backdrop of French President Macron's October 2019 characterization of NATO as "brain dead," and it drove Germany to search for a means with which the allies could bide time and tee themselves up for more action, less talk.²⁰ The outcome was the Reflection Group of December 2019 that now, one year on, has spoken. The moment for action has thus arrived.

Opportunities for Balanced Transatlantic Revival

To better prepare the alliance for meeting the challenges of tomorrow, the Biden presidency could exploit this moment in three distinct ways, with each requiring a reciprocal gesture of cooperation on the part of European allies. First, it could invite Europe to take on greater responsibilities in securing its own neighborhood, with the understanding that for as long as Europe does this in partnership with the United States, the latter will not arrest initiatives on the grounds of "duplication" or "decoupling." Concretely, the EU could move to assume full responsibility for the NATO-run KFOR peace support mission in Kosovo (currently comprising 3,342 troops from 27 nations).²¹ Doing so would help clear the deck and allow NATO HQ to focus on collective defense efforts, as originally intended.

The United States should likewise support the EU Peace Facility, agreed to in 2020 to support European defense capacity building and training with partner countries. Such defense initiatives have traditionally been outside the remit of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and so the Peace Facility is being stood up as an off-budget measure to bolster the implicit military/defense dimension of EU policy. Considering NATO's absence in the Sahel region, the small and struggling EU training footprint in Mali, and the recurrent calls for greater collective effort on the part of the lead countries conducting counter-terrorist and stabilization missions in the region by France and the United States, there is a clear need for coordinated transatlantic investment, including a NATO-EU division of labor, in local security training and capacity building mechanisms.

Moreover, there is an opportunity to broaden and deepen the EU's support for Ukraine. The EU is already offering large funds for Ukraine, double those of the United States,²² but it is shying away from security and military investment. By working closer with NATO's Comprehensive Assistance Package to Ukraine, supported by the United States and as a test of redistributed security responsibilities, the EU could assume a greater role in countering Russia's attempt to use Ukraine as a hybrid war test bed. The more European allies can do in Europe on their own or through the EU, the stronger and healthier the transatlantic bond will be and the more NATO can focus on wider defense and deterrence

measures against Russia as well as broader risks and security threats emanating from China.

Second, the Biden presidency should embrace the global agenda Europeans are now developing in order to relaunch Euro-Atlantic cooperation. EU governments and authorities are pursuing an agenda (though still under negotiation and confidential) centered on health cooperation, economic recovery, climate policy, security cooperation, and the upholding of shared values.²³ In effect, it is an invitation to craft a comprehensive Western response to the challenge posed by China's economic rise and increasing political assertiveness.

In December 2019, the Trump presidency made some headway in this respect by gaining NATO's acceptance to develop a China policy, but the transatlantic dialogue remains anchored in a debate over the role of technology and societal resilience.²⁴ The EU—which, in March 2019, labeled China a “systemic rival”—was unsure of the leadership the United States was offering and whether the Trump administration would endorse the move or continue to treat the Brussels organization antagonistically.²⁵ The EU is offering a reset to the United States and a new beginning to the Western response to China. The Biden presidency could exploit this to craft a new foundation for common policy initiatives especially on investment screening and technology policy, two of the areas where, given their implications for societal and military resilience, it is vital that Washington and Brussels come to an agreement.

Third, the Biden presidency should embrace and push the development of the EU's defense fund, the EDF. There is no better alternative for a wholesome rationalization of European defense efforts. Moreover, the EDF has a potential to advance the pragmatic or practical, as opposed to normative or ideological, dimension of European defense cooperation—this can best be seen in relation to the triangular relationship of the EU's EDF (industry), its associated Military Mobility fund (to facilitate troop movement across borders), and its so-called Strategic Compass, which is an update of its 2016 strategic outlook and is zooming in on regional powers (i.e., Russia), hybrid threats, and terrorism.²⁶ NATO considers the Military Mobility fund critical to its ability to move troops quickly across the continent, but the fund was weakly funded in the EU's multiannual financial framework 2021–27 (€1.5 billion/US\$1.8 billion). It is a first step in need of further political impetus.

This is where the United States could offer support to priorities developed as part of the EU's Strategic Compass. On its own, Europe will struggle to deliver the “sustained political buy-in” from some capitals that strategic planning

The transatlantic dialogue remains anchored in a China debate over technology and resilience

presupposes,²⁷ and old scores related to “autonomy” and “sovereignty” could all too easily reemerge. It is in the interest of all transatlantic allies to put these issues to rest. The political destiny of the EU has consistently sparked controversy, and the Biden presidency along with its European allies should give priority to pragmatism over the usual fears that Europe is attempting to break away.

Above all, Europeans must avoid getting bogged down in rhetorical divisions over how much strategic autonomy or transatlanticism to pursue in favor of adopting tangible defense policies. As others have noted, the rhetorical divide in the ongoing autonomy/sovereignty debate “creates an excuse not to address the unpleasant truth: no matter what political program may come out of the current debate ... Europe needs to do more.”²⁸ Any backsliding of existing commitments by allies will be interpreted in Washington as further evidence that Europeans are not serious about their own defense. Without a demonstrated European commitment to do more to meet its own security needs, the new NATO Strategic Concept review, which is widely expected to be announced at the spring 2021 summit of Alliance leaders, will flounder before it has even begun.

Keeping Trouble at Bay

A focused (narrow and deep) approach to a renewed Strategic Concept would serve NATO better than a broadened agenda because it highlights what NATO does best—collective defense—and in a complex security environment, it forces decision-makers to think through the defense implications of political choices like enlargement. NATO can and should address any theme and any geography that impacts its collective defense interests and capacity; it should avoid chasing alliance legitimacy and relevance by labeling a range of national security issues

Russia and China are the two strategic actors that have a capacity to break NATO by coercion

as “core tasks.” Continuing to go wide will bring NATO into conflict with the range of domestic reforms as well as the political-economic rationale of a strengthened EU.

Russia and China are the two strategic actors that have a capacity to break NATO by strategies of coercion. NATO allies, by fighting long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and intervening in Libya and Syria, have offered these competitors ample opportunity to adapt to Western military strengths and political weaknesses.²⁹ Were NATO to label

these countries threats and challenges, which it has, and then wander off in many policy directions, which it may, it would embolden these competitors

further and erode NATO's own resolve and reputation. This challenge lies at the heart of a new Strategic Concept for NATO.

As authors, we cannot pretend to offer a full roadmap for such a new Strategic Concept; however, we can sketch some of the key issues to which decision-makers should pay particular attention, as well as pitfalls they should avoid. Below we offer an outline of how NATO can best position itself for a slimmer, collective defense-focused Strategic Concept, organized around the central tenets of the alliance's founding document—the Washington Treaty.

Rationalize Security Interests and Democratic Principles

The current geopolitical climate has brought to the fore the long-established tension within the alliance over whether to prioritize security matters or democratic principles, both of which are enshrined in the Washington Treaty.³⁰ During the alliance's early years, the choice was clear: security took precedence, even if shared values continued to define the political horizon. NATO needed to keep the Soviet Union at bay and prevent Europe from once again becoming a battlefield, so NATO accepted some members whose governments were not yet democratic, like Turkey and Spain. Later, as NATO embraced *Ostpolitik*, it enhanced its focus on values and dialogue with the Harmel doctrine of 1967 and emphasized the twin goals of deterrence and detente with the Dual Track Decision of 1979.³¹

Following the end of the Cold War, NATO looked to its treaty's Article 10, which states that any European state in a position to further the principles of the Treaty and contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area could be invited to join, and to the possibility of promoting such values and dialogue by way of alliance enlargement.³² Today, in the wake of a resurgence of illiberal nationalism and populism, alliance officials have begun to draw more attention to the Treaty preamble and Article 2 as safeguards of “the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law,” and the strengthening of free institutions.³³

NATO should maintain this strong commitment to values but also be clear about what it takes for members to defend them. It should spell out how interests and values converge in distinct geopolitical contexts. Thus, in Europe, allies should work with (and through) the EU to counter regional democratic backsliding. As both an intergovernmental and supranational organization, the EU is the more appropriate forum for tackling these difficult discussions. The good news is that the EU already appears willing to perform this role, having recently passed a European-style Magnitsky Act to address serious human rights violations and abuses worldwide.³⁴ The NATO-EU partnership is also essential to deterring Russia and to the collective policy of denying Russia any return to “business as

usual” for as long as it uses armed force to impose political change. The EU also has an important role to play in holding China accountable for human rights abuses in Xinjiang and the continuing crackdown on Hong Kong.

In a global context, NATO allies should also support Washington’s efforts to address democratic backsliding. In stark contrast to his predecessor, Biden has for years spoken and written about the need for the United States to stand up to the

The EU or a new forum is more appropriate for tackling democratic backsliding

external actors’ subversion of Western democracies. More recently, Biden and members of his team have continued to signal their interest in building an “alliance of democracies” to reverse the democratic backsliding underway both at home and abroad.³⁵ Instead of using NATO as a forum for taking on this latest charge, however, the Biden administration—which will have its hands full rebuilding democratic institutions at home—

would be better off pursuing these discussions via an entirely new forum where America’s allies and partners are on par and can hold frank discussions, free of the burden of having to simultaneously manage the transatlantic alliance’s day-to-day operations and security tasks.

One possibility would be to build on the work of former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who founded the non-profit organization Alliance of Democracies in 2017 to address the erosion of democracy worldwide.³⁶ NATO members can and should continue to speak up in the North Atlantic Council (NAC) for democracy, either against fellow member’s democratic infractions or in support of a global initiative, but the NAC should also preserve its most precious resource of all—time—by allowing the organization to focus on its key contribution to regional and global security, namely its collective defense capacity.

Enhance National and Collective Defense Efforts

NATO officials quite rightly have begun paying more attention to Article 3 of the Alliance’s founding treaty, in which parties pledge to “separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid” maintain and develop their “capacity to resist armed attack.”³⁷ On one hand, the reemergence in 2014 of Russia as a politico-military threat has necessitated in-depth military defense efforts, including NATO’s ability to corral national efforts; on the other hand, the emergence of hybrid (or so-called “grey zone”) threats has necessitated broader non-military defense efforts, which have recently blossomed into a wide-ranging “resilience” agenda.³⁸ NATO needs to work both

dimensions, but it cannot afford to trade military muscle for resilience efforts as a broad Strategic Concept risks. Resiliency should be regarded as a *component* of national and collective defense, not as a separate charge on par with the Alliance's main task of guarding against foreign threats.

As noted, the allies have come far in terms of military defense spending since 2014. But NATO has only just begun to translate this effort into military reality and cannot afford to take its eye off the ball. Preliminary assessments in 2020 of the national capability targets set by members following their pledge at the 2014 Wales Summit to pour resources into heavy, high-end, and ready forces indicate more work is needed.³⁹ It will take considerable political focus and energy to take this process beyond the infancy stage in which it still finds itself.

The broad agenda of hybrid or grey zone warfare and societal resilience complicates matters. NATO once referred to the latter as civil emergency planning or civil preparedness, and while the current resiliency pledge has a similar focus on prepping NATO allies for collective defense, it is broad to the point of slipperiness. NATO needs to define in greater measure the relationship between its core military capacities and its Warsaw Summit 2016 pledge to protect the "continuity of government, continuity of essential services and security of critical civilian infrastructure," wherein most of the effort will lie at the national level and not directly relate to NATO's core collective defense task.⁴⁰

COVID-19 will in particular drive nations to view such "continuity" in public health terms, and there is simply a limit to how far NATO should delve into such matters. NATO and the EU have both recognized that most resilience efforts lie at the national, not the collective, level, and the two organizations have pledged to continue to work together to strengthen the resilience of their respective member states.⁴¹ However, the lines specifying the division of labor between the EU and NATO should be developed further, with NATO only engaging this broad agenda at the points where there are quite clear implications for military capacities.

Strengthen Internal Diplomacy and Consultations

As was the case with the NATO 2030 initiative, the new Strategic Concept must acknowledge the existing political divisions within the Alliance while simultaneously searching for new ways to enhance the ability of allies to maintain NATO's defense vigor in a complex and dynamic security environment. NATO's Article 4 opens for consultations whenever any ally feels threatened politically or territorially. However, Article 4 consultations are of major political import because of the proximity of Article 4 to the collective defense clause in Article 5: to invoke them is to move close to the activation of defense measures. Historically, therefore, allies have preferred to strengthen day-to-day

consultations and diplomatic coordination instead of invoking Article 4 during periods of crisis. Because Article 4 stipulates that the party invoking the clause regards itself as “threatened,” it has only been used on a handful of occasions, most recently by Turkey over tensions in Syria last year.⁴²

The Trump years have been particularly meager in this regard, though—militarily, NATO did well, but politically, it withered. The Reflection Group report of November 2020 thus appropriately dedicates significant attention to the need for revitalizing enhanced consultation. Interestingly, it suggests an enhanced pace of Foreign Ministerial meetings (to match that of Defense Ministers) and the occasional inclusion of “other Ministers,” for which we might infer Ministers of Finance and of the Interior, and also a greater use of informal meetings with “freer interaction and discussion.”⁴³ Such an upgrade in political consultation is absolutely essential, because without it, NATO will not be able to manage the balances invoked here—between NATO and the EU, values and interests, and individual and collective defense efforts.

NATO’s Secretary General has leeway to pursue such a consultation upgrade in so far as the North Atlantic Council, NATO’s decision-making body, is inherently flexible: it can meet at any level of political representation and address any issue it deems fit, either to inform or to reach decisions. The critical factor will be political buy-in from nations: will they want to dedicate their perhaps most precious resource—high-level attention—to frequent NATO meetings? The likelihood hereof, arguably, depends on NATO’s ability to develop cumulative and meaningful political-military contributions to the issues that matter the most to the Alliance, namely Russia and China.

Seek Global Partners, not More Members

For all of the above reasons, NATO should consider going slow in terms of Alliance enlargement and instead accelerate its engagement with global partners.

NATO should go slow with enlargement and accelerate engagement with global partners

Future enlargements should reflect credible collective defense interests and commitments. Until NATO’s new transatlantic balance between a United States focused primarily on China and a Europe capable of greater defense responsibilities within NATO’s area, a topic discussed below, has been fleshed out in greater detail, fresh enlargements risk exposing fractures within the Alliance.

NATO has grown from an alliance of 16 to an alliance of 30 by drawing attention to its purpose both as a security institution and as a community of values.⁴⁴ However, the 2008 US push to extend

invitations to Ukraine and Georgia nearly broke the consensus. Any future attempt to grow the alliance without first addressing the medium- and longer-term strategic priorities discussed here would simply prolong the alliance's present strategic deadlock into the future. NATO remains attractive to current and prospective candidates precisely because it confers real security benefits to its members. An alliance that is unable to prioritize among competing threats only risks stoking the fears of newer/future members who worry about potential abandonment, thereby diluting any collective defense pledge which is the primary membership attraction for these states.

Naturally, a less ambitious enlargement timetable offers Russia opportunities for meddling. But a less-rushed calendar would leave the door open for consultations with Moscow on much-needed arms control efforts by potentially helping to spur progress in the critical "risk reduction" diplomacy that is proving so hard to initiate.⁴⁵ In sum, enlargement with Ukraine, Georgia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, with its connections to Serbia, another historical area of Russian interest, might not be in NATO's best interest for the foreseeable future.

Instead, NATO should re-think its global partnership arrangements to prepare for greater investments in new defense spaces. In Eastern Europe, in the aforementioned countries along with Moldova and Belarus, NATO should encourage the EU to take the lead in securing democratic and free market reforms. In regard to the broad region of the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, where NATO is plagued by internal strife (centered on Turkey) and complex external crises, broad NATO-led crisis management operations like in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2014 or air interventions like in Libya in 2011 should not be repeated. NATO should instead enhance its ability to support the lead role of UN organizations or the EU in stabilization missions, such as with logistics and intelligence. NATO can also seek political dialogue, including intelligence cooperation, with key partners, such as Tunisia and Morocco, but it should not seek an operational role except where human plight and refugee flows directly impact the functioning of Western governments.

Finally, NATO has a "partners across the globe" framework and close relations to partners such as Australia and Japan. NATO should maintain and strengthen these ties as well as explore closer partnerships with other states already in this program, such as New Zealand and the Republic of Korea, and consider inviting India to join.⁴⁶ Considering the global and full spectrum nature of China's foreign policy, NATO should seek a dialogue with its global partners that addresses the key points at which China may impinge on the resilience of Western and democratic societies: this should include military-to-military ties but also dialogue on foreign (Chinese) direct investments and the challenge of technological innovation in a connected, but strategically competitive, world.

Protect Old and New Defense Spaces

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, NATO modernized its collective defense clause, Article 5, by invoking its provisions for “an armed attack against one or more” allies in the case of commercial aircraft hijacked for terrorist attacks. In subsequently invoking its collective defense clause for the first and only time, NATO explicitly noted that its treaty “was first entered into in circumstances very different from those that exist today, but it remains no less valid and no less essential today.”⁴⁷ The 2010 Strategic Concept affirmed allies’ commitment to deter and defend against “any threat of aggression, and against emerging security challenges where they threaten the fundamental security” of allies.⁴⁸ A new Strategic Concept therefore needs only to reaffirm this modernized understanding of Article 5.

NATO needs to advance its thinking about the spatial implications of collective defense

However, NATO needs to advance its thinking about the spatial implications of its collective defense commitment. NATO’s Article 6 delineates NATO’s commitment to national territory in the North Atlantic area (north of the Tropic of Cancer), but a broadened approach has become necessary. In 2016,

NATO recognized cyberspace as a domain of operations; in 2019, it recognized outer space as such a domain. Cyber and outer space are limitless, and NATO should impose limits for its engagement: a focused approach would entail priority to issues that carry a risk of war. In a Strategic Concept, NATO could delineate this concern and task its staff to operationalize it. Because China occupies a central place in each of these domains, NATO must also do more to counter Beijing’s dominance in AI, cyber, space, quantum computing, and other high-tech military spheres.⁴⁹

The new Strategic Concept must also address the Arctic, which has become an incipient arena of great power competition and was left out of the 2010 version. Since then, China has described itself as a “near-Arctic” state and published its own Arctic strategy. China’s state-owned companies have also entered into several development projects with Russian companies aimed at developing the Northern Sea Route.⁵⁰ To guard against the potential for Chinese or Russian malignant activities in the Arctic, where both powers are increasingly active, and beyond, European militaries must expand their maritime, icebreaker, and rotorcraft capabilities.⁵¹

It is in NATO’s interest to define how China’s growing presence in NATO’s remit relates to its collective defense interests and how surveillance and maritime capacities—NATO-owned or reinforced—can help preempt tensions. While neither Russia nor China as yet represents a threat on par with the Soviet

Union, NATO should prepare for the possibility that the latter—either alone or in combination with Moscow—could become so in the coming decades.

Conclusion

NATO's continued transformation in the coming years seems all but certain; less certain is what it will transform into. The alliance has survived this long by adapting. But unlike during previous rounds of adaptation that involved the alliance taking on more responsibilities and tasks, the coming decades—whose defining feature will be the continued rise of China—will require a much more narrowly focused alliance. For nigh on three decades, NATO had the luxury of pondering what kind of alliance it wanted to be as it searched for a new *raison d'être* in the reduced threat environment following the end of the Cold War. But the contrast between the 1990s and today's deluge of challenges and threats is stark, and NATO no longer has the luxury of time.

**NATO no longer
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To ensure the alliance's future operational utility, the alliance must embrace its original collective defense identity and look for ways to streamline, and where possible reduce, its existing collective security and crisis management activities. In addition to offloading existing responsibilities to the EU and UN, NATO should think twice before taking on new mandates and avoid elevating new tasks like resiliency or counterterrorism missions and assigning them equal importance to Article 5. The alternative to the vision outlined here is an alliance increasingly weighed down by a myriad of tasks, unable to prioritize among them, and lacking both the political will and financial resources to perform its main function. An overburdened NATO risks being unable to fulfill its chief purpose of collective defense, thereby increasing the risk of further fracturing within the alliance. The proposed course of action will by no means be an easy one. But it provides the best chance to guarantee that the transatlantic alliance will have the capabilities and assets needed to meet the challenges posed by China's rise.

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