

# **ALLIANCES AND PARTNERSHIPS IN A COMPLEX AND CHALLENGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT**



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# Alliances and Partnerships in a Complex and Challenging Security Environment

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NATO ALLIED COMMAND TRANSFORMATION

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

“Alliances and Partnerships in a Complex and Challenging Security Environment”

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## Executive Summary

The 2024 iteration of the NATO Academic Conference at Old Dominion University brought together academics, influencers and key civilian and military leaders from NATO, Allied and selected partner nations to reflect on the implications of the constantly changing geopolitical environment through the lens of *“Alliances and Partnerships in a Complex and Challenging Security Environment.”*

The event was a touch point on the “Road to the Washington Summit” that will mark NATO’s 75th anniversary. Through four plenary sessions and subsequent breakout sessions, the conference explored the meaning and relevance of Alliances in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, exchanged views on understanding and anticipation of threats posed by Russia’s and China’s partnership dynamics, discussed global trends and opportunities stemming from Sub-Saharan Africa, and examined the value of NATO partnerships with nations, organizations, and industry in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

NATO remains the preeminent security Alliance that brings strategic advantage to its members and partners as a force multiplier with strategic flexibility and depth that can help shape and contest the strategic environment. NATO is both a vehicle for promoting shared values and hub for achieving standardization, interoperability, organization, and joint planning. Throughout its 75 years, NATO has been a bastion of support for the rules based international order and enlargement has increased regional stability. Furthermore, it remains an attractive, credible and viable proposition noting Finland and Sweden’s recent accession. However, new alliances are emerging and in a multi-polar world, with increasing mini-lateralism (e.g., agile and focused constructs like the Quad and AUKUS)—NATO must adapt. In particular, NATO must carefully consider its approach to the management of new alliances in order to preserve stability. There is also a need to continue to increase investment in NATO to mitigate decades of under-resourcing the Alliance’s defence capabilities. The EU defence and security posture has also been growing over the past decade, accelerated by the war in Ukraine. However, there remains a need for a strategic partnership between the two organizations to leverage their respective strengths, avoid duplication and minimize capability gaps.

NATO is not (and should not be) a global Alliance, but it does need a global perspective due to the interconnected nature of the geostrategic environment. NATO’s strength, relevance, and capabilities need to be observed in relation to the growing threats posed by Russia and China. NATO’s strategic thinking must adapt to this reality and consider how to proactively address the changing global order. The Russia-China partnership is a multidimensional manifestation of the evolving geopolitical landscape spanning economics, national identity, regional architectures, and bilateral agreements. The strategic goals of the two nations do not necessarily align, and the relationship is not balanced—with China being the dominant partner due to the size of its economy. Weaknesses stemming from their asymmetry provide opportunities for the West to exploit, but while the relationship is low trust, it is likely to remain strong.

NATO and the West need a new lens to view the Russia-China relationship, one that looks from their perspective in order to anticipate strategic risks and opportunities. While NATO fully understands the direct threat of Russia to its Area of Responsibility, it must not view China as an out-of-area security issue. China's economic ties to the West—for example, investment in critical infrastructure—have direct implications for Alliance resilience and therefore credible deterrence and defence. Dynamics of the Russia-China partnership should also be observed with the view of its attractiveness to nations that are in dire need of economic support and military capabilities. The authoritarian, corrupt, and xenophobic nature of the two states is not an attractive proposition for potential partners, but pragmatic and transactional arrangements may be attractive in the short term. Such opportunities are particularly prominent in Sub-Saharan Africa, where China's and Russia's foreign and security investments bring significant political influence.

Africa is a continent of 1.2 billion people with huge regional diversity and a GDP similar to Italy. By 2035 the population will have reached over 2 billion with 50% or more being under 21. This presents a huge challenge to the nascent states of the continent that lack the capacity to deal with competing demands, provide employment, and meet the aspirations of a young, globally-connected population. Sub-Saharan Africa is also marked by the nexus of climate change, competition for resources, rapid unplanned urbanization, terrorism, and organized crime. These factors drive internal migration which further stresses these young nations, while external migration typical presents a challenge for Europe. NATO requires a long-term strategic partnership with the continent to accommodate the time it takes for states to develop; a process that is historically often slow, faltering, and rarely peaceful. To build these partnerships substantive leader engagement and commitment is required to understand issues from a partner perspective. NATO needs to offer a sound value proposition and improve internal articulation of the risks and benefits of investing in Africa. NATO must also understand that there is no “one size fits all” solution in Africa. This requires better planning based on suitable assessment mechanisms. It will require greater investment in Defence Capacity Building with an understanding of the receiving nation's absorption capacity.

A lot of these principles for quality partnering in Africa can be applied more broadly across the NATO's partnership agenda. The military approach to partnerships is changing in recognition of this requirement. The change is multifaceted and includes reviewing existing partnership mechanisms, tailored approaches with each partner based on mutual benefit, and adopting an agile approach in order to out-partner adversaries.

NATO's approach to partnership must be holistic, going beyond partner nations to IOs, GOs, NGOs, industry, and academia. Of particular importance will be relationships with the private sector, which continues to lead the development of key and critical capabilities. These new and renewed partnerships need to have a culture of readiness embedded within them, but there is also a need to take risks based on strategic priorities. The rapid arc describing the changing nature of war in the industrial era has become an exponential shift in the information age. To address the simultaneous, boundless, and persistent threats this presents, out-partnering potential adversaries will be essential—enabling NATO to shape and contest the strategic environment and to win in the event fighting is necessary.





# **Introductory Essay**

# NATO at 75 Years

Regina Karp and Richard Maass

As the NATO alliance celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, its members can look back on significant accomplishments including not only deterrence during the Cold War and enlargement thereafter, but also more broadly shaping expectations about the future of security in the transatlantic space. At the same time, the alliance also faces daunting challenges, which will require sustained commitments and some new ways of thinking. NATO's 2024 Academic Conference hosted by Old Dominion University helped shed light on many of these past successes and enduring challenges, paving the way for Allied leaders to consider best paths forward during the July 2024 Washington Summit.

## A Successful Alliance

NATO is a unique construct in the history of international relations: a multilateral peacetime alliance with dozens of members that has helped preserve stability across two continents for three-quarters of a century. It defines itself across space and time, through membership and partnership, through missions completed and failures endured, through a patchwork of relationships with other institutions, and in competition with events and developments it cannot control. It remains both attractive to would-be members and formidable to antagonists, having demonstrated a remarkable ability to tackle internal and external challenges, to adapt and to evolve. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin observed in January 2024, "NATO is the most powerful and successful alliance in history, and we're going to keep it that way."<sup>1</sup> Its core missions of deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security are as salient as ever—their sense of gravity renewed amid Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and now extending to 32 member states after the recent accessions of Finland and Sweden.

NATO's basic objectives are often described as threefold: keeping the Russians out, the Germans down, and the Americans in (the famous characterization of its *raison d'être* attributed to its first Secretary General, Lord Ismay).<sup>2</sup> It has succeeded on all three fronts: no NATO member state has been attacked by a state external to the alliance, potential wars among NATO member states themselves became unthinkable, and the alliance has marshalled sufficient internal cohesion to sustain itself for 75 years and counting. None of these successes has been free from difficulties along the way, yet it is safe to say that the signers of the North Atlantic Treaty would be satisfied with the alliance's record. Moreover, those three objectives did not exist in isolation from one another—the Treaty envisioned NATO's ultimate goal as preserving a stable North Atlantic region

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Clark, "Austin Underscores Enduring Strength of NATO Alliance," *DOD News*, January 29, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3659353/austin-underscores-enduring-strength-of-nato-alliance/#:~:text=%22NATO%20is%20the%20most%20powerful,to%20keep%20it%20that%20way.%22&text=The%20two%20leaders%20spoke%20as,to%20include%20Finland%20last%20year.>

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

capable of sustaining its members' freedom and well-being. On that cumulative score, too, the alliance has been a success. This section briefly examines NATO's record on each of the three criteria outlined above in the context of that broader vision.

First, NATO has maintained an enviable record as a cooperative security organization, deterring any and all potential attacks on its members by states external to the alliance. This was far from a foregone conclusion on April 4, 1949; as delegates gathered in Washington to sign the North Atlantic Treaty, Soviet forces had been blockading the western zones of Berlin for ten months with no relief save the ongoing U.S./British airlift.<sup>3</sup> The UN Charter's prohibition of "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state" was scarcely three years old,<sup>4</sup> and the Axis invasions that had sparked World War II remained fresh in living memory (as did the contemporaneous Soviet invasions). Soviet conventional military supremacy in Eastern Europe, fresh crises over Berlin in 1958-1961, and the specter of nuclear war fostered pessimism among many contemporaneous observers,<sup>5</sup> yet neither the Soviet Union nor its partners ever invaded a NATO member state. Allies have invoked the North Atlantic Treaty's Article V guarantee that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all" only once—after the 9/11 terrorist attack by Al Qaeda against the United States. That devastating outlier amid the history of modern terrorism is the exception that proves the rule: when seen in international historical context, the level of security NATO members have enjoyed during the past 75 years represents a substantial privilege.

Second, NATO members have benefited from not only security against external attack, but also security vis-à-vis each other. This fact is easily taken for granted from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century perspective, but it should not be—indeed, the institutionalized reconciliation of former adversaries has been one of NATO's signature achievements. The other member states welcomed Italy as a founding member of the alliance in 1949 despite its recent history as an Axis aggressor, and West Germany would join only six years later. Former adversaries became friends in similar fashion after the Cold War, when NATO welcomed all non-Soviet former members of the Warsaw Pact as well as three former Soviet republics. Beyond operational coordination, the Allies developed a culture of collective security, and scholars and policymakers increasingly described them as constituting a "transatlantic security community" within which the idea of war among members had become "unthinkable."<sup>6</sup> Given the extent to which prior international relations was conceived in terms of constant insecurity, struggles for power and survival, or imperialism and resistance, the notion of

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel F. Harrington, *Berlin on the Brink: The Blockade, the Airlift, and the Early Cold War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012); John M. Schuessler, Adam R. Seipp, and Thomas D. Sullivan, *The Berlin Airlift and the Making of the Cold War* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> UN Charter, art. 2, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

<sup>5</sup> Lisle A. Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street: America in 1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Pouliot, "The Alive and Well Transatlantic Security Community: A Theoretical Reply to Michael Cox," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 119–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106061332>; Jennifer Mitzen, "Security Communities and the Unthinkabilities of War," *Annual Review of Political Science* 19, no. Volume 19, 2016 (May 11, 2016): 229–48, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-040711-135425>.

societies spanning most of two continents being able to live largely free of war for that long is remarkable.

Third, NATO's persistence for 75 years represents a notable accomplishment in its own right, especially in light of the vicissitudes of domestic politics within dozens of sovereign states as well as geopolitical, economic, technological, and social transformations during that time span.<sup>7</sup> In retrospect, it is easy to discount the genuine strains the alliance experienced, including France withdrawing from the alliance's joint military command structure in 1966, disagreements over how to handle Yugoslavia's breakup during the 1990s, and tensions over the U.S. response to 9/11 and subsequent invasion of Iraq.<sup>8</sup> Beyond such periodic flareups, the alliance has also endured a variety of more persistent tensions. NATO member states have often struggled to reconcile their diverging threat perceptions—from the contrasting implications of nuclear war for European and North American allies during the early 1950s to the differing vulnerabilities to Russian aggression of Eastern and Western European allies today. The alliance has always featured fundamental asymmetries in military capabilities—a recurring source of both tension and cohesion. Burden-sharing disputes have also plagued intra-alliance relations throughout NATO's history, from John F. Kennedy's complaint that "NATO states are not paying their fair share" to Donald Trump's claim that "nobody's paying their bills."<sup>9</sup> Yet policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic have managed to navigate each passing storm—maintaining, reinforcing, and enlarging NATO's regional security architecture in the process.

NATO's maintenance of external security, internal security, and alliance cohesion have produced more than the sum of those parts, promoting the objectives its founders laid out 75 years ago. The preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty set forth lofty ambitions to "safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law," and to "promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area."<sup>10</sup> The alliance has meaningfully contributed to these goals.

### Pressing Challenges

Despite its past success, NATO's future is not assured. Six unfolding developments will test its ability to continue maintaining security in the transatlantic space. First, the evolving relationship between Europe and the United States is critical to how the alliance positions itself vis-à-vis Russia

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<sup>7</sup> David P. Auerswald and Stephen M. Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Jeremy Ghez and F. Stephen Larrabee, "France and NATO," *Survival* 51, no. 2 (May 1, 2009): 77–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330902860819>; Joyce P. Kaufman, *NATO and the Former Yugoslavia: Crisis, Conflict, and the Atlantic Alliance* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Ellen Hallams, Luca Ratti, and Benjamin Zyla, eds., *NATO Beyond 9/11: The Transformation of the Atlantic Alliance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> John F. Kennedy, "Remarks of President Kennedy to the National Security Council Meeting," January 22, 1963, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. 13, doc. 168, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v13/d168>; Meridith McGraw, "Trump Reiterates to NATO Allies: If You Don't Pay up, 'I'm Not Going to Protect You,'" *Politico*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/02/14/trump-nato-allies-00141590>.

<sup>10</sup> NATO, "The North Atlantic Treaty," April 4, 1949, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm).

and China. Second, how Allies understand and manage rivalries among their economic, ideational, and strategic interests will determine the extent to which they can fashion a coherent security strategy. Third, the relationship between NATO and the European Union—including how those institutions compete and complement each other—will be critical to their ability to define shared purposes and accomplish common tasks. Fourth, the alliance needs partners across the globe to remain efficient and effective, and its relationships beyond the transatlantic space—especially with actors in the Global South—will significantly shape its future obstacles and opportunities. Fifth, its ability to chart a constructive course through the 21<sup>st</sup> century will meaningfully depend on how it navigates problematic legacies from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and before, including the ongoing aftermaths of decolonization. Sixth, the risks and costs of democratic backsliding within NATO member states are more urgent today than at any point since the late 1940s, elevating a variety of potential domestic political threats to alliance cohesion. These simultaneously unfolding developments (and others) will test NATO’s ability to maintain shared commitments and to once again reinvent itself in the face of new challenges.

### *The Transatlantic Relationship*

Left to the vagaries of international politics, the United States and Europe are not guaranteed a shared perspective. They were arguably closest during the heyday of the Cold War, when the joint need to deter potential attack by the Warsaw Pact offered an overwhelming unifying force. The fall of the Soviet Union marked the end of a particular kind of NATO. After the Cold War, U.S. attention was increasingly drawn to the Pacific, Europe was largely at peace, and transnational terrorist networks emerged as dire threats. Alas, Russia’s war against Ukraine showed that Europe’s business was anything but finished, and the United States found itself reinvolved in continental security affairs to a greater extent. None of this should, however, distract from the larger picture: a long-term relative decline in U.S. power and the rise of China redirecting U.S. focus away from Europe.

Thus far, Europe has been slow to recognize the strategic implications of this redirection and what it means for the future of transatlantic security. Though defense spending across the alliance is increasing in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, questions remain concerning Europe’s commitments to sustain spending 2% of GDP on defense, and its readiness to go beyond that.<sup>11</sup> There are also questions about spending effectiveness that raise familiar issues involving defense industrial economies of scale, national sovereignty, and strategic objectives.<sup>12</sup> These issues are well understood yet not acted upon in a coherent manner, nor are they high on national agendas at a time of competing demands for investments in new technologies and social expenditures for aging populations. These rivalries cannot be resolved without a shared

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<sup>11</sup> Camille Grand, “Defense spending: sustaining the effort in the long-term,” *NATO Review* (July 3, 2023), <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2023/07/03/defence-spending-sustaining-the-effort-in-the-long-term/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Innovation and efficiency: Increasing Europe’s defense capabilities,” *McKinsey & Company* (February 28, 2024), <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/aerospace-and-defense/our-insights/innovation-and-efficiency-increasing-europes-defense-capabilities>.



understanding of how national and European security fit into Europe's perspective on itself and the role it wants to play in international politics.

At the same time, there is a pressing need to address Europe's role within the transatlantic relationship. Time is not on Europe's side, and ways to act coherently will need to be found. European actors need to rediscover what is common to their collective well-being, rather than expecting that what is common only matters when it serves national goals. This is especially significant regarding relations among members of the European Union, whose commitment to the collective appears ever more transactional. If it hopes to be an effective partner with a United States that itself seems increasingly willing to embrace transactional foreign policy perspectives, then Europe must become less transactional internally. This is not a call for a federal Europe, but rather for reexamining and then committing to collective strategic goals.

Europeans should also be more sensitive to what different members need from the alliance. Historically, Europe has always had to strike a balance between Europeanism and Atlanticism. Arguably, this balancing act has become more complex with the alliance's enlargement in Eastern Europe, where new members see NATO and the U.S. commitment to Europe's defense more favorably than any independent European security efforts.<sup>13</sup> Balancing thus becomes a question of alliance cohesion and a critical issue for the future.

Last, partnership with the United States asks European allies to engage with the complexity of international politics where the former, as a global power, clearly takes the lead. Now with 32 members, NATO more than ever must determine how its strategic interests can escape internal division. Here it will be important to recognize differences in power projection capabilities across the Atlantic and to assess the relationship between diplomacy, multilateralism, the use of force, deterrence, and reassurance.

### *Ideational and Strategic Interests*

The alliance may be seen as harboring two essential responsibilities. On one hand is the responsibility to adhere to its own values and to reflect those values in its approach to security (its ideational interests). This is the bedrock of NATO's legitimacy as the largest assembly of democratic states in the world. On the other hand, the alliance also has strategic interests that must be vigorously pursued in order to preserve the security of its members. For democracies, values and security are not easy to reconcile. Too much emphasis on ideational interests can offer weaknesses for adversaries to exploit; too much emphasis on strategic interests may compromise democratic values, which are simultaneously precious and precarious.

These tensions between ideational and strategic interests are especially salient when economic interests turn strategic. For example, overreliance on Russia for cheap energy and on China for

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<sup>13</sup> On the consequences of NATO enlargement, see James Goldgeier and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, ed., *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

commercial markets created dependencies that have been painful to reverse.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, while neither China's nor Russia's domestic and international politics reflect the values of the alliance, both are influential actors in world politics, and many important problems cannot be addressed without their participation—including climate change, transnational terrorism, and the futures of the Arctic and Outer Space.

There is no ready solution for the tensions between ideational and strategic interests. Economic interdependence and globalization suggest that management approaches rather than transformational approaches are set to continue, as are clashes of interest between democracies and authoritarian regimes. Indeed, they are integral parts of international politics. For the alliance, these tensions demand consistent and coherent engagement, both principled and transactional. Successfully navigating them means having a clear vision of what circumstances must be handled without compromising democratic principles and where there is room for negotiation, a path that is often difficult to tread without painful choices.

### *NATO and the European Union*

23 NATO members are also members of the European Union. Given this overlap in membership, questions like how, where, and when these institutions work together are important. Raising them reveals a multitude of problems, however—many of which have been known for decades. While the transatlantic security community is based on trust and collective defense, it also fundamentally rests on capabilities. Yet Europe's defense industrial base remains fractured, organized largely along national boundaries and critical to domestic economic policy. Hence, Europe does not produce enough military equipment multilaterally, and what it does produce often duplicates what already exists.<sup>15</sup> The war in Ukraine revealed decades of underinvestment in defense, and ramping up production is difficult.<sup>16</sup> Industry also heavily depends on external sources of critical materials such as aluminum and natural graphite, imported mainly from China.<sup>17</sup> Defense investment across the continent remains low.

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<sup>14</sup> "The EU's Defence Technological and Industrial Base," *European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations* PE 603.483 (January 2022), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/603483/EXPO\\_IDA\(2020\)603483\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2020/603483/EXPO_IDA(2020)603483_EN.pdf); "EU Parliament backs plan to secure raw materials supply," *EURACTIV* (September 15, 2023), <https://www.euractiv.com/section/circular-economy/news/eu-parliament-backs-plans-to-secure-raw-materials-supply/>.

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Aries, Bastian Giegerich, and Tim Lawrenson, "The Guns of Europe: Defence-industrial Challenges in Time of War," *Survival Online* (June 19, 2023): <https://www.iiss.org/sv/online-analysis/survival-online/2023/06/the-guns-of-europe-defence-industrial-challenges-in-a-time-of-war/>.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Wessner, "Viewpoint: For stronger tech, Europe must spend more on defence and research," *ScienceBusiness* (February 2, 2023), <https://sciencebusiness.net/viewpoint/Sovereignty/stronger-tech-europe-must-spend-more-defence-and-research>; Martin Greenacre, "We need actions not words, defence industry tell EU leaders," *ScienceBusiness* (April 18, 2024), <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/dual-use/we-need-actions-not-words-defence-industry-tells-eu-leaders>.

<sup>17</sup> European Commission, "Critical raw materials," [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials_en).

To many, Europe's defense problems could be effectively resolved through closer cooperation within NATO. Greater coordination would produce capability multiplier effects and synergies, offering compelling opportunities for institutional reform. Aligning the EU and NATO for common purpose would yield unprecedented resources for defense (and not just there), yet the many links that exist between the EU and NATO are largely haphazard rather than strategic.

The primary challenge to greater strategic alignment is a persistent misunderstanding of what the EU is—namely, an organization of sovereign independent states geared toward creating and maintaining prosperity for the citizens of its member states by breaking down barriers to cooperation among those members. In the years after World War II, it was economic cooperation that came to be seen as the bedrock of continental peace. Henceforth, Europeans would no longer go to war with each other but instead focus on building strong and affluent democracies. Small states no longer needed to fear larger ones, and predatory appetites were redirected towards vast social welfare projects that transformed European societies.

NATO, in contrast, has no obvious role in internal European affairs. Though it was instrumental in launching the European project, most Europeans see its primary mission as external security under U.S. leadership; hence, continued U.S. involvement in continental security affairs remains critical to their thinking. The EU, on the other hand, has no designated leader (though some countries clearly carry more weight), making it inherently a less agile political actor and more prone to bureaucratization, governance through extensive rules, and often cumbersome procedures.

These differences in organizational structure and institutional goals have consequences for enhanced cooperation and strategic alignment. They are real differences, so they must be engaged. However, the purpose of this engagement should be to release synergies whenever possible so that the effect is interlocking, not inter-blocking. Institutional differences also provide opportunities to innovate, a requirement in order to ensure that the two organizations' evolution does not further distance them from one another. Finally, while respecting institutional differences, purely national goals should take a backseat, giving way to investment in a common future. Europeans must cooperate more effectively and efficiently both in the EU and in NATO if they wish to remain U.S. partners of choice and present a clear and unified message to challengers.

### *NATO in the World*

The transatlantic space is not a geopolitical island but rather part of a rapidly changing world. In this context, the alliance has a clear choice: it can either shape or be shaped by the systemic transformations around it. Observers on both sides of the Atlantic mark a notable urgency that has shaken alliance members, who are witnessing Russian aggression and a seemingly unstoppable China. Many view this as an opportunity to invest in NATO's long-term future, especially regarding partnerships with other nations around the globe. NATO cannot become a global alliance; its obvious strength lies in safeguarding the transatlantic space, and this is where its legitimacy rests, too. Nonetheless, its success in keeping this space secure requires the

effective deterrence and containment of Russia and China. To accomplish this, the alliance needs global partnerships especially in regions where Russian and Chinese influence is growing: Asia, Africa, and Latin America. To be effective, these partnerships necessitate a broad interpretation of security including supply chain management, securing critical natural resources, and investments in partner nations.

It is here where the alliance (together with the EU) has a particularly notable opportunity to innovate its own relationships. Expanding security conceptions to extend beyond military cooperation would bring to the fore the totality of civilian and military tools available for a common purpose. However, this opportunity is contextualized by discussions within the EU and NATO on the nature of partnerships. Thus far, both institutions have preferred to focus their partnerships on like-minded states—that is, fellow democracies. Offsetting Russian and Chinese influence, however, requires a more pragmatic approach that may conflict with the ideological goals of liberal democracies.

Future partnerships must engage both the alliance's ideational convictions and its strategic interests. Strategic necessities dictate pragmatism while democratic convictions signal caution, an inescapable tension. The alliance's ability to act demands engagement with this inevitable conundrum. NATO cannot base every partnership on trust; it has strategic interests that demand attention irrespective of whether partners reflect its own values. In practical terms, the partnerships of the future demand that NATO go with the grain of international politics, not against it. This means that alliance and EU members develop new narratives about the relationship between who they are and what they need to accomplish in order to keep the transatlantic space safe.

### *The Imperial Legacies of a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Alliance*

As NATO seeks to build new partnerships abroad, one of the most challenging obstacles is its members' imperial legacies. European imperialism was arguably the central ordering principle of the international system between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, imposing hierarchies and inflicting violence that played formative roles within many postcolonial countries.<sup>18</sup> Countries throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia remained colonized by European powers well after NATO's creation (many achieving independence during the 1960s or even later). Even as today's NATO members reject imperialism in favor of self-determination—a commitment on vivid display in their support for Ukraine's independence from Russian imperialism—memories of their imperial pasts weigh heavily throughout much of the world.

Beyond bilateral relations between NATO members states and countries in other regions, moreover, those imperial legacies offer fertile ground for Chinese and Russian propaganda within the context of 21<sup>st</sup>-century geopolitical competition. As China seeks to convert its Belt and Road Initiative into soft power abroad, its government increasingly seeks to shape international

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<sup>18</sup> Richard W. Maass, "Racialization and International Security," *International Security* 48, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 91-126.

narratives surrounding world events.<sup>19</sup> Portraying itself as a fellow victim of European imperialism offers an obvious recipe for building a sense of shared identity with many postcolonial governments and mobilizing their publics against NATO's interests. Russia too seeks to dissociate itself from Western imperialism, though its many neighbors know better. Notably, Moscow was an equal participant in China's "century of humiliation," a lingering potential source of friction within their emerging strategic partnership. Nevertheless, the histories of many societies are ripe with sources of grievance against the former imperial powers, a past which the alliance must overcome if it wishes to cement effective partnerships moving forward.

The best way to do so is not obfuscation or denial but frankness and honest reciprocity. NATO members should invest energy in understanding the perspectives of their potential partners in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere—including where those perspectives are rooted in historical events that reflect poorly on their own national histories. There is no changing the past, but neither is it doomed to repeat. Just as NATO itself has helped reconcile former adversaries into steady allies, postcolonial relationships can be forged into solid partnerships where both sides are willing to meet each other as equals. Transparency and accountability are the foundations of honest partnerships, and they align more naturally with democratic values than authoritarian domination, giving NATO a comparative advantage in seeking to out-partner its rivals. Yet imperial legacies cast long shadows, and NATO personnel should revise outmoded procedures or perspectives that risk coming across as neo-imperial impositions rather than partnerships of sovereign equals.

### *Democratic Backsliding and Alliance Cohesion*

Although few NATO members enjoy contemplating it, the greatest challenge to the alliance may come from within. After 75 years of success preserving its member states against external threats, and in light of enduring U.S. military primacy and the widespread understanding of nuclear deterrence, the prospects of external actors suddenly undermining NATO's collective security appear remote. Yet continued deterrence crucially depends on maintaining the will among all allies to have each other's back. As critics of the alliance often observe, the North Atlantic Treaty pledges its signatories to "consult together" when threatened (Article IV) and to take "such action as it deems necessary" if one is attacked (Article V).<sup>20</sup> Effective deterrence requires substantiating those pledges through regular diplomatic statements, joint training and military exercises, combined force postures amplifying defensive capabilities, and other means—generating surety in the minds of adversaries that war against one NATO member would mean war against all.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Raksha Kumar, "How China Uses the News Media as a Weapon in Its Propaganda War against the West," *Reuters Institute*, November 2, 2021, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/how-china-uses-news-media-weapon-its-propaganda-war-against-west>.

<sup>20</sup> NATO, "The North Atlantic Treaty."

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Brian Blankenship and Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Trivial Tripwires?: Military Capabilities and Alliance Reassurance," *Security Studies* 31, no. 1 (2022): 92-117.



This is particularly true given modern manifestations of gray zone competition and salami tactics, which threaten to erode allies' security without escalating to major war.<sup>22</sup>

An alliance is only as strong as the political will behind it. For this reason, NATO's communications and outreach with publics and policymakers alike remain central to maintaining its cohesion, and democratic backsliding within its member states represents a significant threat to the collective resilience of the alliance.<sup>23</sup> Insofar as NATO represents not only a military alliance but a community of shared democratic values and aspirations, anti-democratic groups within individual member states may sow discord and hollow out the alliance from within. For reasons noted above, this may represent a more likely path to alliance failure than defeat in major war, and it is also a threat over which allied military personnel have less influence. Accordingly, to the extent that NATO can continue to champion the shared democratic values of its member states and help educate their publics about the ideational interests that collective security serves, such efforts constitute a vital portion of its overall mission.

### Conclusion

NATO is rightly called history's most successful alliance, and it has demonstrated a remarkable ability to reinvent itself in the face of international change. Building on the successes of its first 75 years and facing the daunting challenges ahead will require both maintaining its members' commitments to their shared purpose and developing new ways of thinking to overcome pressing obstacles.

While Russia's war against Ukraine has captivated NATO members' attention in the short term, the war also foreshadows the alliance's future. It signals the end of a historic period of peace on the cheap, conflict in distant regions, and the choice of whether and how to be involved. The many challenges outlined above do not offer the luxury of standing by. They are all similarly urgent, and the alliance must implement policies and procedures that visibly and effectively demonstrate its continued vitality.

To face the challenges of systemic change, strategic approaches are required. In the first instance, NATO must cultivate an internal balance between its European and North American members. Europeans must spend more on defense, duplicate less, and consolidate their defense industrial base. National approaches to defense, though treasured symbols of sovereignty, are unfit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rendering Europe a less relevant partner to the United States in its quest to defend Western values and interests.

In turn, U.S. leaders must nurture alliance relations. Too often, Europeans feel left out of U.S. strategic thinking. History has shown that the alliance is at its strongest when communication

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<sup>22</sup> Richard W. Maass, "Salami Tactics: Faits Accomplis and International Expansion in the Shadow of Major War," *Texas National Security Review* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2021/2022): 33-54.

<sup>23</sup> Richard W. Maass, Paul Pepi, and Jared Sykes, "NATO's Enlargement: An Opportunity to Enhance Collective Resilience," *NATO OPEN Publications* 8, no. 6 (2023): [https://issuu.com/spp\\_plp/docs/open\\_publication\\_nato\\_s\\_enlargement\\_an\\_opportunity?fr=xKAE9\\_zU1NQ](https://issuu.com/spp_plp/docs/open_publication_nato_s_enlargement_an_opportunity?fr=xKAE9_zU1NQ).

across the Atlantic is a two-way practice. Recent consultations surrounding military and civilian support for Ukraine are examples to build on; the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is not. Whether it concerns NATO directly or not, unilateral behavior has far-reaching implications for transatlantic relations.

External partnerships also benefit from a shared sense of equality. As NATO is building relations across the globe, it must be mindful of the weight of history and the different lived experiences of others. To abate the rising influence of China and Russia in strategically important regions, the alliance must learn not only to speak the language of equality but to generate real opportunities for shared gains, and it must make those efforts a strategic priority.

Finally, in order to remain effective, NATO will need a whole-of-alliance approach. For this to have the desired results of securing the transatlantic space, deterring and containing Russia and China, the alliance should examine the considerable panoply of tools at its disposal. Its military organization is second to none, but a changing world also needs resources and expertise that others, notably the EU, already have in abundance. Strengthening relations between these partners and the alliance, where appropriate, stands to release synergies that no adversary can match.

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## **Section 1: Rethinking Alliances**

# **Rethinking the Notion of Alliances: A Military Perspective on the Future of NATO**

**David J. Julazadeh and Vlasta Zekulic**

Alliances have long served as essential pillars of security and stability. Since ancient times, the strength derived from coalitions has often been the deciding factor in defeating adversaries or deterring them from attack. This presumption remains valid for coalitions and modern military alliances of today. In our interconnected world, where threats to global security transcend borders and traditional notions of sovereignty, the significance of alliances, especially from a military perspective, is more important than ever before. NATO, “the strongest, most enduring and most successful Alliance in history,”<sup>1</sup> embodies this approach. However, to remain relevant the Alliance needs to continue to adapt to the shifting geopolitical environment.

By dissecting NATO through the lens of past alliances and future threats, this paper seeks to validate the relevance and indispensability of collective defense arrangements in safeguarding peace and security. Through a retrospective lens spanning the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of NATO, we will explain the various dimensions of alliances’ historic and modern value, the importance of cohesion, and the need for adaptability. We will examine the dynamics of political-military relationships within NATO, underscoring the critical interaction between civilian leadership and military command structures. Finally, we will explore the pivotal role of Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in driving strategic change and developing NATO into a military alliance of and for the future.

## **Historic Perspective**

Throughout history, alliances have played a pivotal role in shaping the course of warfare and safeguarding the interests of participating nations. Whether forged out of necessity, shared interests, or mutual defense obligations, military alliances have offered members a strategic advantage.

Looking back as early as the time of ancient Greece, the Delian and Peloponnesian Leagues of 500 BCE merged political ambitions behind military shields. This ambition to unite and fight together continued through the centuries of Roman rule and into medieval Europe until the 30 Years’ War.<sup>2</sup> The same concept of military alliances can also be found in China’s Seven Warring

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<sup>1</sup> NATO, “Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the Occasion of NATO’s 75th Anniversary Celebration,” NATO, April 4, 2024, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_224162.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_224162.htm).

<sup>2</sup> The Thirty Years War began as a religious war, fought between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Germany. It represents the first total war on European soil as it was fought between the Catholic Habsburgs of the Holy Roman Empire (Austria, most of the German princes and occasionally Spain) and Denmark, Sweden, Catholic France and the Protestant princes of Germany. The war ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. C. Staguhr, *Book of War: Why Can’t People Live in Peace?* (Ljubljana: Mozaik Knjiga, 2007), 66-73.

States from 300 BCE,<sup>3</sup> India's Maratha Confederacy of the 17th century,<sup>4</sup> and the Latin American Triple Alliance of 1865,<sup>5</sup> to name a few. Wars, crises, and conflicts have not left a single period of our history, or single geographical area, untouched. The winners and losers negotiated and deliberated; peace was bought, traded, threatened and blackmailed, but always in an attempt to restore it.

However, it wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the imperative for a robust institution capable of compelling nations to abstain from warfare became evident. In 1815, the Concert of European Powers emerged as the first organization tasked with preserving peace, security and stability across Europe to maintain the territorial and political status quo. This marked a pivotal moment in history; a clear recognition that words and decisions hold weight only when backed by a formidable force capable of enforcing them. The strength of this European alliance was acknowledged even by the United States of America which collaborated with them in joint counter-piracy operations off the shores of Greece and North Africa from 1820 to 1843.<sup>6</sup>

From the League of Nations (1920-1946) to the United Nations (1945), the Warsaw Pact (1955-1991), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (1975), and the African Union (2002), nations repeatedly came together with the same aim, to preserve and restore peace and security, if needed even with military force. Each of these organizations was vested with legal authority and powered by political, military, and financial resources. In theory, these institutions possessed the prerequisites to foster and maintain peace. Despite these concerted efforts, the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought some of the most destructive wars in the history of mankind. General Douglas MacArthur reflected on this in saying that *"Men since the beginning of time have sought peace, military alliances, balances of power, leagues of nations, all in turn have failed, leaving the only path to be by way of the crucible of war."*<sup>7</sup> So what makes the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) different?

### **Roles and Missions of NATO**

NATO was established on April 4, 1949, to serve three purposes: "deterring Soviet expansionism, forbidding the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe through a strong North American presence on the continent, and encouraging European political integration."<sup>8</sup> It was always envisioned as a political and military alliance jointly protecting Allied values and interests.

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<sup>3</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, "Warring States," <https://www.britannica.com/event/Warring-States>.

<sup>4</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, "The Marathas of India," <https://www.britannica.com/place/India/The-Marathas>.

<sup>5</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, "War of the Triple Alliance," <https://www.britannica.com/event/War-of-the-Triple-Alliance>.

<sup>6</sup> Nina M. Serafino, "Peacekeeping and Related Stability Operations: Issues of U.S. Military Involvement," *CRS Report for Congress* (July 13, 2006), <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/p/peacekeeping-and-related-stability-operations.html>; Richard F. Grimmett, *Instances of Use of U.S. Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2001* (February 5, 2002), <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL30172.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Elevate Society, "100 Quotes by Douglas MacArthur," <https://elevatesociety.com/quotes-by-douglas-macarthur/>.

<sup>8</sup> NATO, "A Short History of NATO," NATO, accessed June 9, 2024, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified\\_139339.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_139339.htm).

From a political standpoint, NATO established a clear linkage to the UN, drawing upon Article 51 of the UN Charter which clearly states that *“Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations.”*<sup>9</sup> This simple link provides NATO with the freedom of action to deter and defend, as well as the latitude to maintain an ‘open door’ policy. Also, the brevity of the North Atlantic Treaty was purposeful as it allows for strategic ambiguity and adaptability of the Alliance. In addition, at the core of NATO’s credibility and effectiveness lies its military power—a potent force that guarantees the ability to deliver on the Alliance’s political ambitions.

Moreover, NATO was and remains a learning organization. In the past, it learned from the successes and failures of other organizations, such as the strength and credibility of the multinational military units of the League of Nations,<sup>10</sup> and from operational challenges, such as the over-stretched forces fielded by the United Nations during missions in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Today, NATO continues to evolve, adapt, and transform to address new challenges and geopolitical realities. When General Mattis took over his dual-hatted position as the commander of U.S. Joint Force Command (JFC) and commander of NATO’s Strategic Military Command responsible for envisioning and leading the transformation of Alliance—Allied Command Transformation (ACT)—he said that his sense of purpose guided him to make NATO, not U.S. JFC, his main effort. Why? He said, *“History is compelling—nations with allies thrive, those without them die.”*<sup>12</sup>

Over the last 75 years, NATO has proven to be a true learning organization capable of adapting to the current strategic environment. Over and over it showed that its foundation and center of gravity—unity and cohesion—are unyielding, while its tools and mechanisms to achieve its goals across all levels (tactical, operational, and strategic) are agile, flexible and adjustable to the ever-changing security environment.

### **NATO’s Value at the Tactical, Operational, and Strategic Levels**

The multifaceted role and value of NATO becomes evident as it intersects with the career paths of Allied military professionals across various operational contexts. Each encounter with NATO unveils a distinct facet of its significance. From the crucible of tactical engagements in operational theaters to the strategic imperatives guiding the transformation of military capabilities for the future, Alliance members learn the intricacies of how NATO safeguards security and advances collective defense.

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations, “Charter of the United Nations,” art. 51, <https://legal.un.org/repertory/art51.shtml>.

<sup>10</sup> In 1920, the League of Nations sent the combined British, French and Italian unit to East Prussia to stabilize the crisis and prevent ethnic conflict. In 1921, 16 multinational battalions were set to Upper Silesia to secure the elections. The League’s most powerful mission was 1935 “Knox’s Army” combined from UK, Italian, Swedish, Dutch and Czechoslovakian troops to conduct elections in Saar region. See The United Nations Office at Geneva, “The League at Work,” <https://www.unog.ch/en/about/league-of-nations/at-work>.

<sup>11</sup> Townsend Hoopes and Douglas G. Brinkley, *FDR and the Creation of the UN* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 213.

<sup>12</sup> James N. Mattis and Francis J. West, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead* (New York: Random House, 2019), 170.

## Tactical Interoperability

From the early 1990s, when NATO dwelled over the reason for its existence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, young NATO pilots flew sorties over the Adriatic, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo while naval forces upheld sea blockades and weapons embargo's on the open seas. The conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia presented novel challenges distinct from conventional warfare paradigms of the past. These were not wars of the Napoleonic or Clausewitzian era that young officers learned about in school—*“battles of annihilation, surrounding an enemy force through a series of maneuvers ambiguous to him, forcing him to fight on your chosen ground, bringing to bear the superior firepower of well-trained artillery, and then closing the fight with infantry and bayonet...”*<sup>13</sup> Rather, these new wars, and NATO's response to them, necessitated a reevaluation of military strategies and operational approaches.

Despite the tumultuous strategic environment, multinational forces at the tactical level exhibited remarkable interoperability, adherence to common standards, and procedural coherence. These early peacekeeping missions underscored the applicability and value of decades of dedicated collective defence tactical training. They clearly showcased the pivotal role of alliances in fostering tactical cohesion, enhancing operational effectiveness, and amplifying the collective impact of allied forces.

This trend persisted through subsequent decades, as NATO engaged in joint operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. With over 130,000 troops from 51 allied and partner nations, the strength of camaraderie and the speed of units' integration—due to inherent interoperability—underscored the tactical value of NATO's crisis management system.

## Operational Synchronization

Quality of execution is also dependent on the quality of plans that are being executed. Derived from strategic goals, ways and means, planning at the operational level provides two key functions. First, it translates strategies into executable plans with assigned forces that enable initiation of operations. Second, it provides a framework for coherent management of the endless series of additional decisions required when troops face reality of the battlefield. Planning and synchronization processes enable commanders to adjust means and ends to deliver the desired goals despite the changing conditions in the theater of operations.

At NATO, the Joint Force Commands provide this robust and comprehensive operational planning capabilities that enhance synchronization, ensure strategic alignment, and build collective resolve. An example of the vital role of this level of command was seen during NATO's planning and execution of the missions over Libya in 2011. Lieutenant General (R) Rob Weighill and Florence Gaub note, *“As the political process ceded prominence to military operations, and NATO transitioned from peace to war, Joint Force Command Naples took over to deal with a myriad of*

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<sup>13</sup> Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 36.



*operational challenges as it took command of all national forces in a very short space of time.”<sup>14</sup>* As NATO military personnel progress to this operational level of command, they learn the importance of the operational planning process as crucial for addressing shared security challenges and ensuring operational success in complex environments.

### **Orchestration of the Military Instrument of Power with Other Instruments of National Power**

Transitioning to the strategic realm, NATO’s Military Instrument of Power assumes a more advisory role. Its highest military body, the Military Committee, *“is responsible for translating political decisions and guidance into military direction, and for recommending measures considered necessary for the defence of the NATO area and the implementation of decisions regarding military operations.”<sup>15</sup>* At this level, the Alliance assumes a distinct political and calculative demeanor.

The true essence of formidable defence power comes from democracies acting in concert and being demonstrably willing and able to consider and act in the direst of situations. Within NATO, this solidarity entails not only a collective commitment to consider and address the crisis but also a tangible willingness to leverage military force when necessary to safeguard shared interests and values. Winston Churchill remarked that *“When strategy and power are properly aligned, all that then matters is the proper application of overwhelming force.”<sup>16</sup>*

While navigating complex political dynamics to maintain relevance and drive transformative initiatives, NATO encounters challenges inherent to consensus-building among its 32 sovereign member nations. What we often see is a resistance to change and adapt, minimal risk-taking, muted energy and initiative, and a penchant to focus on process versus output. Despite the inherent complexities of strategic decision-making, the imperative of collective defense and strategic alignment remains unwavering, necessitating ongoing efforts to balance political-military relationships and develop military capabilities.

### **The Complexity of Political-Military Relationships in NATO**

While NATO functions as a political-military alliance and the political elites own decision-making power, its credibility ultimately hinges on the capabilities and effectiveness of its military. The military functions as a purposive instrument characterized by organization, coherence, centralization, authority of rank, and loyalty to the nation and mission.<sup>17</sup> Militaries are meticulously designed to fulfill their principal objective: to fight and win wars. However, in the context of this complex geopolitical environment, it is difficult to define victory and identify the

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<sup>14</sup> Rob Weighill and Florence Gaub, *The Cauldron: NATO’s Campaign in Libya* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> NATO, “Military Committee (MC),” NATO, May 29, 2024, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49633.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49633.htm).

<sup>16</sup> R. Allen, F. B. Hodges, and J. Lindley-French, *Future War and Defence of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 73.

<sup>17</sup> S.R. Finner, *Men on the Horseback. The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1962).

problems that can be effectively addressed by the military. In short, what is the military problem we must solve?

In the book *“Unrestricted Warfare”* released in 1999, Chinese military officials note, *“For a long time both military and politicians have become accustomed to employing a certain model of thinking—that the major factor posing a threat to national security is the military power of an enemy state or potential enemy state. However, the wars and major incidents which have occurred during the last ten years have provided us with a proof that the opposite is true: military threats are already often no longer the major factors affecting national security.”*<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, General Valery Gerasimov, noted in one of his most cited articles, titled ‘The Value of Science is in the Foresight’ and published in 2013, that *“The very rules of war have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”*<sup>19</sup>

To address this challenge posed by strategic adversaries, the alignment between political imperatives and military capability is of paramount importance. It necessitates close collaboration between political and military leadership to ensure strategic objectives are effectively translated into actionable military endeavors, fostering synergy and coherence. But this dynamic interplay is characterized by a delicate balance of trust, cooperation, and mutual respect.

### **Building Relationships and Trust**

When challenges between political and military levels of power arise, as they inevitably do, whether at the tactical, operational, or strategic level, trust, cooperation, and mutual respect are put to the test. In his book *‘Why We Lost,’* General D.P. Bolger, reflecting on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, points the finger and says, *“Our primary failing in the war involved generalship. If you prefer the war-college lexicon, we—guys like me—demonstrated poor strategic and operational leadership... Some might blame the elected and appointed civilian leaders. There’s enough fault to go around, and in this telling, the suits will get their share. But I know better, and so do the rest of the generals. We have been trained and educated our whole lives on how to fight and win. This was our war to lose, and we did.”*<sup>20</sup> At the core of this dilemma is not the success, relevance, and credibility of the military, but the relationship and trust between political and military leaders.

On one hand, military leaders have to trust political masters regarding *what* needs to be achieved, while the political leadership has to trust the military judgment on *how* to execute their

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<sup>18</sup> Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Brattleboro: Echo Point Books, 1999), 95.

<sup>19</sup> Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science is in the Foresight,” *Military Review* (January-February 2016): 23-29, [https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview\\_20160228\\_art008.pdf](https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General’s inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), xv.

assigned missions and achieve desired objectives. This also includes giving military leaders freedom to change and transform at speed and scale as necessary. When this relationship breaks, the core of political-military power fractures. We saw this in the case of General Stanley McChrystal and President Obama,<sup>21</sup> underscoring the fragility of political-military cohesion and its implications for strategic decision-making.

### **Reenergizing Political-Military Synergy**

In 1994, NATO had 16 member states. At that time, all 16 Permanent Military Representatives (PERMREPs) sitting in the North Atlantic Council (NAC) were former Generals in their national militaries, a number of them were Chiefs of Defence. Because they understood the power of NATO's Military Instrument of Power, they were more willing to use it—first in support of the UN missions and operations in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then to launch a full-scale air campaign over Serbia. The PERMREPs understood the influence, power, and role the military has in advancing political and diplomatic dialogue and thus, in this case, forcing two warring sides to comply. Translating military to political language, and vice versa, was easier in this era, although there were still gateways between the two worlds. General Wesley Clark, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, noted that *“Above me, everything was political or political-military. Below me was just the military. I was at the waist of the hourglass, and the grains of sand were pouring past in both directions.”*<sup>22</sup>

In 2018, NATO had 28 member states. None of the PERMREPs had any military background. All Ambassadors were professional diplomats or career politicians who had come to NATO from their postings worldwide and moved to another posting (not necessarily security-related) after they spent their 3-4 years at the NAC table. Unsurprisingly, they don't teach military history or the Art of War in diplomatic schools, and yet these Ambassadors were asked to make recommendations on very military-heavy topics. One relevant example was the refusal of NATO political authorities to approve the 2018 NATO Military Strategy. They were not yet willing to reopen negotiations on the 2010 Strategic Concept despite the fact that most of its content was outdated by the ongoing turmoil. For example, having occupied Crimea, Russia was no longer a NATO partner; China's aggressive posture was increasing yet it wasn't even mentioned in the Strategic Concept; the Near East was still reeling from the aftermath of the unpredicted 2011 Arab Spring; and the terrorist group ISIL was controlling territory the size of the United Kingdom in the Middle East. But with so many things in flux, the PERMREPs struggled with this dilemma which paralyzed their decision making. General Mattis recalled, *“I was having to come to grips with a lack of strategic thinking in active diplomatic, military, and political circles and the need for a renaissance in this domain.”*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Hastings, “The Runaway General: The Profile That Brought down McChrystal,” Rolling Stone, July 1, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-runaway-general-the-profile-that-brought-down-mcchrystal-192609/>.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), pp. xxxvi.

<sup>23</sup> Mattis and West, *Call Sign Chaos*, 171

There are a number of signs of this renaissance appearing. Due to Russia's illegal occupation of Ukraine and the proximity of the full-scale war at the doorstep of Europe, NATO's political and military elites have never been more aligned on, and committed to, developing plans and procuring capabilities to protect the Euro-Atlantic area from the threat of Russia and international terrorism. The 2022 Strategic Concept openly states that the Euro-Atlantic Area is not at peace. But is this enough? What does NATO need to protect against the threats of tomorrow?

### **What NATO for What Future?**

Throughout its history, NATO's relevance has been periodically questioned; but doubts typically rose during periods when the most visible and immediate security threats diminished. Such instances were the end of the Cold War, the conclusions of the missions in former Yugoslavia, and after the withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> Whenever questioned, NATO needed to consider how to change and what to do to remain relevant.

As history attests, the character of warfare is perpetually evolving, necessitating continuous adaptation and innovation within military institutions. Clausewitz noted that *"The trinity of chance, uncertainty and friction will continue to characterize the war, and will make anticipation of even the first order consequences of military actions highly conjectural."*<sup>25</sup> Over the last 300 years, this has not changed. But the dawn of the information age, technological advancements, and strategic imperatives are shaping conflict into something we haven't seen before. These trends require militaries to remain agile and responsive to emergent threats.

Amid the ever-evolving landscape of global security challenges, the imperative of adaptation and foresight assumes paramount importance within NATO. Wars don't wait until you're ready. In a period defined by uncertainty and volatility, the imperative of adaptation must be met with a sense of urgency commensurate with the pace of change. General Mattis reflected that *"At inflection points, as history has made clear, change must come at the speed of relevance. This meant that now, right now, we had to pick up the tempo... It can't be business as usual. Commanders must encourage intellectual risk taking to preclude a lethargic environment. If you're uncomfortable dealing with intellectual ambushes from your own ranks, it'll be a heck lot worse when the enemy does it to you."*<sup>26</sup>

At the forefront of pushing this endeavor and transforming at the speed and scale of relevance is NATO's Allied Command Transformation. Established in 2003, ACT is improving the NATO of today and shaping the NATO of tomorrow. It transforms the alliance through delivering strategic policies and strategies, strategic foresight analysis, developing common-funded capabilities, and leading the alignment and planning of nationally owed capabilities, as well as by creating

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<sup>24</sup> Other examples of friction include the 1953 Lisbon summit on deployment of 25 + 48 divisions to the east; France pulling out of the military structure in 1966; and the division of Allied views during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

<sup>25</sup> Bolger, *Why We Lost*, 182.

<sup>26</sup> Mattis and West, *Call Sign Chaos*, 184

solutions for individual training, education, wargaming, experimentation, modeling, and simulations. Trying to persuade 32 sovereign nations to align the transformation of their militaries is a massive challenge. But the needle has been moving, and Russia's war of aggression, as well as its speed of reconstitution, has opened Allies eyes on the need to accelerate and scale NATO's transformation.

As of 2020, central to ACT's mandate is the Warfare Development Agenda,<sup>27</sup> aimed at enhancing NATO's operational effectiveness and strategic resilience to create a Multi-Domain enabled Alliance. Developed under the chapeau of the 2018 NATO Military Strategy, the Warfare Development framework, ACT coordinates efforts across NATO commands and member states to drive innovation, interoperability, and capability development. The five Warfare Development Imperatives<sup>28</sup> serve as focal points for enhancing NATO's strategic posture and operational effectiveness in an increasingly complex security environment. Those are:

- *Cognitive Superiority* ensures superior military thinking and understanding of the complex strategic environment. It aims to build our ability to *out-think* any adversary.
- *Layered Resilience* develops a resilient military that connects and integrates with a resilient civilian structure and capabilities. This imperative enables NATO to *out-last*.
- *Influence and Power Projection* enables NATO to project influence beyond its borders while countering adversary influence efforts and developing options that can create dilemmas for our adversaries. This imperative is linked to *out-excelling* and *out-partnering* functions.
- *Cross-Domain Command* enhances our ability to command, lead, and connect. It helps develop skills to lead the fight, the technology to connect across domains, and the tools to manage information in the complex, multi-domain environment. This imperative will make us *out-pace* adversaries of the future.
- *Integrated Multi-Domain Defense* creates a multi-domain architecture that enables integration of sensors, shooters, and command and control systems. It also creates interoperable capabilities and builds a multi-domain defense framework. With all of these capabilities in place we will be able to *out-fight* anyone, anywhere, anytime.

As we navigate the complexities of contemporary warfare and emergent security challenges, it is critical that NATO remains agile, adaptable, and forward-looking in its approach. Through transformative efforts spearheaded by ACT, NATO stands poised to confront the challenges of tomorrow with confidence and resilience. By fostering a culture of innovation, collaboration, and strategic foresight, ACT ensures that NATO remains at the forefront of global security, safeguarding the interests and values of its member states in an uncertain world.

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<sup>27</sup> NATO ACT, "The Warfare Development Agenda," <https://www.act.nato.int/the-warfare-development-agenda/>.

<sup>28</sup> NATO ACT, "NATO's Warfighting Capstone Concept," <https://www.act.nato.int/nwcc>.

## Conclusion

Throughout its history, NATO has confronted moments of existential introspection, where the relevance of the alliance and its military instrument came under scrutiny. From the aftermath of the Cold War to the complexities of post-conflict stabilization efforts, NATO has grappled with shifting security paradigms and emergent threats. However, each juncture of introspection has served as a catalyst for adaptation and renewal, reaffirming NATO's enduring relevance and adaptability in the face of evolving security challenges.

Central to NATO's resilience and efficacy is the enduring transatlantic bond, which serves as the bedrock of collective defense and strategic deterrence. As Europe's moral voice finds resonance in America's military might, the synergy between like-minded nations underscores the importance of transatlantic solidarity and military capability in confronting shared security challenges. Through mutual trust, cooperation, and strategic alignment, NATO ensures that the values and interests of its member states are upheld in times of peace and crisis alike.

In the pursuit of collective defense and shared security objectives, it is imperative to acknowledge the sacrifices made by allied forces, particularly in times of crisis and conflict. From the battlefields of Europe to the theaters of counterterrorism operations, NATO allies have stood shoulder to shoulder in defense of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. Their courage, resilience, and unwavering commitment to shared values serve as a testament to the enduring strength of the Alliance and the bonds of camaraderie forged in adversity.

As we reflect on the multifaceted importance of alliances from a military perspective, particularly within the context of NATO, several key themes emerge that have sustained the Alliance for the last 75 years, reinforcing its relevance in an ever-changing security landscape:

- From the tactical crucible of operational missions to the strategic imperatives of transformative leadership, the significance of alliances in safeguarding security and advancing collective defense objectives cannot be overstated.
- In today's interconnected world, where threats to global security transcend borders and traditional notions of sovereignty, the necessity of NATO in upholding the principles of collective defense and international cooperation remains undiminished.
- Against a backdrop of rising authoritarianism, regional instability, and asymmetric threats, NATO stands as a bulwark of stability, solidarity, and shared values, safeguarding the interests and security of its member states in an uncertain world.

In conclusion, alliances are not merely strategic arrangements but living embodiments of shared values, mutual trust, and collective resolve. Alliances are never easy, and they constantly need to adapt, but in the words of Churchill, *"There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them."*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sven Biscop, *Grand Strategy in 10 Words: A Guide to Great Power Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), ch. 4.

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# **“The End is NOT Nigh”: Rethinking the Notion of Alliances**

**Michael Rühle**

When NATO celebrated its 75th anniversary on April 4, 2024, it adhered to its customary rhetoric of grandeur, echoing phrases such as “the world’s strongest alliance” and “shield for the innocent.” Yet, for those who have tracked the Alliance over the years, this almost reflexive optimism starkly contrasts with NATO’s growing apprehension towards the evolving security landscape. Long before the spotlight shifted to Ukraine’s struggle against Russia’s relentless aggression, NATO harbored concerns about a multitude of challenges: the ascent of China, the specter of terrorism and piracy, the fear of falling behind in the defense innovation race, vulnerabilities stemming from energy dependencies, the looming threat of climate change, and the specter of “hybrid” attacks that skirt the threshold of a kinetic response. While NATO’s public diplomacy machinery strives to project an image of unity and strength, NATO’s underlying “body language” betrays a palpable sense of anxiety—a fear that the West is increasingly overwhelmed by forces beyond its control.

The West’s erstwhile global influence is undeniably waning. Its economic ascendancy that began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century has reached its zenith, giving way to a steady rise of non-Western states in the world economy. By 2030, China is projected to surpass the United States economically, with Asia poised to eclipse North America and Europe combined.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, according to the prevailing Western narrative, a corresponding political decline seems inevitable. Many fear that this decline will coincide with a shift away from the values of democracy, openness, and tolerance that the West has long championed.

The current geopolitical landscape only amplifies these concerns. Russia finds political and military support for its aggression against Ukraine from China, North Korea, and Iran. Meanwhile, Iran and its proxies directly attack Israel, and China openly challenges the sovereignty of Taiwan alongside numerous other territorial claims. These mounting pressures have placed the West under unprecedented strain. Compounding the issue is the disillusionment of Western hopes for alignment with other major players like India or Latin America. These countries prioritize tangible political and economic gains over confrontation with Russia, China, and other lucrative business partners in the name of Western values. China continues to expand its influence across Africa and beyond through its Belt and Road Initiative, despite the debt traps it ensnares many countries in. Moreover, adversaries of the West are increasingly coalescing, leveraging their differences to forge alliances aimed at circumventing Western sanctions, bolstering military capabilities as a counterweight, and offering alternative, “no-strings-attached” trading partnerships to third countries.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Ralph Jennings, “China’s Economy Could Overtake U.S. Economy by 2030,” *VOA News*, January 4, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/chinas-economy-could-overtake-us-economy-by-2030/6380892.html>.

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough explanation of China’s approach, see Simon Curtis and Ian Klaus, *The Belt and Road City: Geopolitics, Urbanization, and China’s Search for a New International Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024).

### **Circling the Wagons: Western Coalition-Building**

To be sure, the West does not stand idly by. In its attempt to circle the wagons, it has engaged in a flurry of partnership-building initiatives: The “enhanced trilateral security partnership” between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, known as AUKUS, seeks to bring together three likeminded nations on maritime security issues, including by supplying nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. The United States is strengthening its informal ties with Israel and Taiwan, as well as its formal ties with Japan, South Korea and others. The European Union is expanding its political and economic links beyond the continent, notably to Africa, and time and again the West has demonstrated its ability to bring together coalitions of the willing, be it in Iraq, Afghanistan, or on counter piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.

NATO, which is often regarded the epitome of the West, has also attempted to play its part in consolidating and expanding the West. While the EU has unified Europe in the economic sphere, NATO enlargement policy has brought most of Europe into a transatlantic common security space. NATO entertains partnerships with a host of other countries, ranging from the few remaining European neutrals to Central Asia, and from Northern Africa and the Gulf all the way to the Asia-Pacific region. And by collectively strengthening its military capabilities as well as through the individual allies’ financial and military support for Ukraine, NATO is also sending a clear signal that it is willing to protect the Euro-Atlantic security order against revisionist powers.

However, despite these measures, the prevailing mood within the Western strategic community remains pessimistic. “Westlessness,” the apt motto of the 2020 annual Munich Security Conference, appears like an increasingly inevitable fate. This sense of malaise, however, is partially self-inflicted. While the West is undoubtedly experiencing a dwindling of its norm-setting power, it is also viewing the global landscape through a distorted analytical lens. This perspective tends to overemphasize the strength of its adversaries while underestimating the West’s own capacity to confront them effectively. If the West does not jettison these fallacies, its decline will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### **Fallacies of the “Declinist” Narrative**

First, the West tends to define itself in relation to its challengers not as it really is, but as what it believes it once was. The Western interpretation of events is often too alarmist, parochial and ahistorical to inspire the development of enlightened policies. The unified West that is now seen to be in crisis is an imaginary West that never really existed. When some observers today consider “Brexit” to be the greatest crisis in the history of European integration, or interpret the criticism launched against NATO by Presidents Trump, Erdogan, or Macron as the beginning of the end of the Alliance, they forget that the Suez crisis of 1956 and France’s withdrawal from NATO’s military structure in 1966 plunged the West into much deeper crises. Within the West, controversy over political, economic, and military issues was not the exception but the rule. In short, there was never a “golden age” of the West. However, when such imagery is employed as a benchmark for one’s performance against the new global competitors, it is hardly surprising that the West looks like it is losing.

This leads to another intellectual shortcoming in the current discourse: the assumption that the West faces highly sophisticated and unbeatable adversaries. This tendency to overestimate the capabilities of the West's challengers, particularly in the military realm, has led to needless debates that portray the West as weaker than it truly is. For instance, many force comparisons between the United States and China are still mostly quantitative and ignore qualitative factors. The result is predictably alarmist, but it does not come close to reflecting the real military capabilities of the opponents.

Russia, for its part, is militarily vastly inferior to NATO, and its abysmal performance in Ukraine has once again demonstrated the Kremlin's limited understanding of the world around it. However, notwithstanding Moscow's miscalculations, a whole cottage industry has emerged that claims that through cynical "fake news" campaigns, cyberattacks and election interference, Russia is dividing Western societies and thus undermines the cohesion of NATO and the EU. Although there is little evidence that Russia's rather clumsy attempts at "hybrid warfare" have their desired effect—and the war against Ukraine has demonstrated that the role of hybrid actions is far more limited than initially expected—the mere fact that Moscow is using various "active measures" against the West tends to be conflated with their success. In this alarmist line of reasoning, common intra-Western disagreements and the well-known structural weaknesses of open societies are the result of a successful Russian strategy. Moscow is thus ascribed an influence on the West that does not correspond to reality.<sup>3</sup>

Third, the Western narrative remains too self-centered to allow for an enlightened analysis of the nature of international competition. By using terms like "the international rule-based order," which has to be protected against its challengers, Western countries imply that everyone who disagrees with them is determined to overturn the existing order. One example of this is the Western portrayal of Russia's actions in Ukraine, framing it not as a regional conflict stemming from post-Soviet tensions but as part of a much broader strategy aimed at destroying the post-Cold War security arrangements in Europe. Paradoxically, however, it is also frequently argued that Russia's aggression was only made possible by the West's military weakness. In these narratives, Russia emerges as a challenger to the European and indeed global order, yet at the same time it comes across as merely an opportunistic predator, striking only whenever Western vigilance and resolve wanes. Such a reading of Russia, which focuses primarily on NATO's military strength as the linchpin for peace in Europe, oversimplifies complex geopolitical dynamics and sidelines deeper considerations of the causes for the deteriorating relationship between the West and Russia. While it may conveniently absolve the West from examining its own role in these tensions (e.g., through NATO's enlargement process), it also fosters unrealistic expectations of NATO's deterrent capabilities and complicates efforts to establish a constructive relationship with Russia in the future.

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<sup>3</sup> See Michael Rühle, "Aufstieg und Fall des hybriden Krieges" ("The Rise and Fall of Hybrid War," in German), *Internationale Politik* 5 (September/October 2023), <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/aufstieg-und-fall-des-hybriden-krieges>.

A fourth element of Western self-deception is the assertion that the West can only be saved by a united Europe. According to this narrative, only a Europe that speaks with one voice, especially in terms of security policy, would still be able to defend its interests in a world of “carnivores” (former German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel). Calls from EU leaders for a “geopolitical” Europe express a desire to put greater emphasis on addressing foreign and security challenges, with the significant support rendered to Ukraine often referred to as an example of the EU moving to a new level of maturity.<sup>4</sup> However, Europe remains far from being a nation-state that could conduct a coherent and self-confident foreign policy. Europe may at some point put its current economic crises and populist temptations behind it, but a consensus on foreign and security policy, which would have to include military operations and even the nuclear dossier, is nowhere in sight. Nor could the EU compensate for the power vacuum that a retreating United States would eventually leave behind. For these reasons, putting unrealistic hopes on Europe’s evolution is counterproductive: by making unattainable goals the condition of success, the West is only generating greater disappointment, while at the same time belittling the EU’s genuine—if piecemeal—progress.

Another prevalent fallacy is the tendency to extrapolate current developments far into the future, despite ample evidence highlighting the flaws in such an approach. For example, the widely anticipated rise of Japan as a new superpower in the 1980s, which abruptly ceased within a decade, contrasting sharply with predictions of a severe decline of the United States that never materialized. Similarly, among the five original “BRICS” states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), Brazil, India, and South Africa have not realized the success often forecasted, although India’s economic growth is now accelerating.<sup>5</sup> Russia’s economy, heavily reliant on commodity exports, has stagnated, hovering around Italy’s level. Moreover, Russia’s current shift towards a wartime economy will only exacerbate its challenges.<sup>6</sup> Notably, China stands out with its significant economic, technological, and military advancements. However, its growth rate is tapering off, and territorial disputes with neighboring countries, coupled with domestic challenges such as an aging population and increasingly restrictive policies, raise doubts about the sustainability of its expansive economic and foreign policy ambitions.<sup>7</sup> While Asia’s economic ascent is undeniable, concerns linger about the region’s stability, with rising nationalism, social tensions, and rapid military build-ups reminiscent of the great power rivalries of late 19th-century Europe. In sum, while a new geo-economic power distribution is inevitable, it will likely unfold with many uncertainties, challenging the stark predictions of pessimists.

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<sup>4</sup> For a critical analysis of this concept, see Nathalie Tocci, “The Rise and Fall of Geopolitical Europe,” *Politico*, (November 16, 2023), <https://www.politico.eu/article/rise-and-fall-geopolitical-europe-ukraine-russia-israel-palestine-commission/>.

<sup>5</sup> Alicia Garcia-Herrero, “China continues to dominate an expanded BRICS,” *East Asia Forum* (April 12, 2024), <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/04/12/china-continues-to-dominate-an-expanded-brics/>.

<sup>6</sup> European Union External Action Service, “No, Time is not on Russia’s Side” (April 4, 2024), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/no-time-not-russia%E2%80%98s-side\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/no-time-not-russia%E2%80%98s-side_en).

<sup>7</sup> “China’s risky reboot,” *The Economist* (April 6, 2024), 7.

## What the West Must Do to Prevail

George Orwell observed that if thought can corrupt language, language can also corrupt thought. Hence, the first change that Western countries must effect is a change in rhetoric. For example, declaring that limited threats, such as Russian fake news campaigns, would actually constitute “war” gives these actions greater weight than they deserve and also raise expectations about significant Western responses that are unlikely to happen. In a similar vein, lumping together Russia, China, Iran and North Korea in official statements may have the desired effect of getting an audience’s attention, yet such a broad-brush approach can backfire, notably with regard to future dealings with China.<sup>8</sup>

Another area where less reckless rhetoric would benefit Western cohesion is the way in which Europe and the United States describe their relationship. In the United States, a narrative has taken hold according to which the European allies are taking advantage of U.S. taxpayers by consistently under-investing in defense and leaving the heavy lifting to the United States. In this narrative, the transatlantic relationship is reduced to a business transaction: U.S. protection will only be forthcoming if the Europeans pay their dues. In Europe, these U.S. signals of alliance fatigue have led to equally reckless rhetoric about the need for “strategic autonomy” or even a European nuclear arsenal—demands that are way beyond reach and only serve to undermine those U.S. Atlanticists that want to preserve strong ties to Europe. Tempering this kind of rhetoric would be a major, low-cost step towards a more sober approach to tackle global challenges. By contrast, if the transatlantic community would from now on have to live under the Damocles Sword of a potential divorce, the West would lose much of its collective power to influence global developments.

In addition to tempering its self-defeating rhetoric, the West needs to develop policies that are tailored to the challenges thrown up by a changing global power distribution and strategic competition. In many areas, such policies are already materializing. While Western societies are often criticized for resisting uncomfortable changes, there is clear evidence that the West is capable of responding to significant shifts. Unlike the “managed democracies” such as Russia, or one-party systems like China, the Western democracies may not have all the levers of power, but they are far from being defenseless.

Examples of Western self-assertion abound. They include measures to restrict Chinese investment in critical Western infrastructure, including telecommunications; steps towards “de-risking” from China-dominated supply chains; the phasing out of Russian gas from Europe’s energy mix and the search for alternatives to China’s current near-monopoly on rare earths; the faster and more resolute reaction to Russian propaganda campaigns; the willingness to collectively attribute certain hostile acts, such as the Russian assassination attempts in the UK using a nerve agent, and the subsequent expulsion of Russian diplomats; the recognition of

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<sup>8</sup> See the joint press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on January 29, 2024: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_222201.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_222201.htm).

cyberspace as a distinct domain and the development of cyber-sanctions; strengthened intelligence cooperation; the massive support rendered to Ukraine in its defense against Russia (which also demonstrates that Western technology remains far superior to Russia's); and the increase in Western military spending to bolster deterrence at NATO's Eastern flank. Individually, many of these measures may be seen as insufficient and will require further refinement. Collectively, however, they demonstrate that the West does indeed have a steep learning curve and is not prepared to relinquish the initiative to its challengers.

Perhaps the most important factor to be emphasized is that the West has been able to build and sustain strategic, long-term alliances—notably NATO and the EU—that foster cooperation not only among its member states but also offer a certain attraction for many non-members. To be sure, some Western alliances, such as SEATO or CENTO, broke apart because of irreconcilable differences over national policies, while others, like AUKUS, have yet to prove their resilience. It is also true that some Western alliances, due to their consensus-based nature, occasionally fall victim to “groupthink,” i.e., they take collective decisions based on an intra-alliance comfort zone rather than a sober analysis of the problem at hand. Despite such structural weaknesses, however, Western alliances are rather stable. By contrast, China's and Russia's endeavors in alliance-building appear more tactical than strategic. Mere unity in opposition to perceived Western hegemony does not guarantee the formation of robust alliances. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the BRICS are groupings that may carry a certain weight, but they lack the institutionalization and consequent political predictability inherent in alliances like NATO and the EU.

Many of the Western policy adjustments mentioned above are being generated within NATO and the EU, testifying to the strategic value of such alliances. To maximize these policies' impact, however, requires that the Western narrative moves away from alarmist rhetoric, avoids exaggerated depictions of competitors' capabilities, and refrains from fostering a siege mentality. Such a shift will enable the West to capitalize on opportunities for shaping the environment in line with its interests and values.

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# Deprived of the Luxury of Non-Cooperation: EU-NATO Partnership in Wartime

Monika Sus

Since the European Union's security and defense dimension emerged in the early 2000s, and its gradual advance into an area previously reserved for NATO, the need for a close partnership between the Alliance and the EU has been consistently called for. This was justified by overlapping membership (which grew as the two organizations expanded, reaching 23 after Finland and Sweden joined NATO), shared agendas and security priorities, and basic principles underlying both organizations, such as multilateralism, the rule of law, and liberal values.

Indeed, successive joint declarations have emphasized the indispensable character of bilateral cooperation. Despite the ongoing conflict between Turkey and Cyprus, which has successfully hampered many instances of collaboration for many years, progress has been achieved since 2016. A certain level of policy coordination and information exchange has been developed, going beyond the de-conflicting of policy activities of the EU and NATO and enabling closer cooperation, such as in countering hybrid warfare through the joined European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats.

Over time, the NATO-EU partnership has become a central component of the broader European security governance architecture.<sup>1</sup> Reasons for that pertain to the nature of both organizations and the threats they have faced, ranging from terrorism, unprecedented challenges to democracy and the rule of law, instability in Europe's Southern and Eastern neighborhoods, weaponization of energy supplies, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the rise of the authoritarian model of global governance promoted by Russia and China to climate change, pandemics, hybrid threats, disinformation, and cyber-attacks. While dealing with these threats, common for NATO and the EU, a form of implicit division of labor has gradually emerged, mirroring the functional distinction of both organizations. As a defense actor, the former has dealt mainly with hard security issues and has primarily undertaken activities on the ground in its member countries (e.g., military exercises and training missions, strengthening deterrence on the Eastern flank). In contrast, the latter, as predominantly a non-security actor, has addressed mainly the non-defense-related aspects of security and has focused its activities instead in its neighborhood (e.g., through military and civilian missions and measures to strengthen the resilience of neighboring countries).

Despite progress, inter-organizational cooperation has yet to develop into a fully-fledged strategic partnership. The conflict between Turkey and Cyprus creates a glass ceiling, and rivalry dynamics exist between both bureaucracies.<sup>2</sup> As some argue, "NATO skepticism over the EU's dabbling in

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<sup>1</sup> Gustav Lindstrom and Thierry Tardy, *The EU and NATO : The Essential Partners* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2815/644113>, 7.

<sup>2</sup> See also Tuomas Iso-Markku, "EU-NATO Relations in a New Threat Environment: Significant Complementarity but a Lack of Strategic Cooperation," *FIIA Briefing Paper* (2024).



defense runs deep” due to competition concerns, and a similar spirit prevails among EU officials, who fear that too close cooperation with NATO undermines the sense of EU security policy and leaves it dependent on the United States.<sup>3</sup> As a result, despite the existing institutional mechanisms (discussed in more detail below), cooperation’s effectiveness still depends significantly on personal relationships between the leaders of the two organizations.<sup>4</sup>

In all likelihood, the EU and NATO would have continued their cooperation along this path dependence, avoiding conflicting actions and slowly developing cooperation in some less controversial areas,<sup>5</sup> but without leaning toward a truly strategic partnership. However, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine took both organizations by surprise, shaking the foundations of the European security architecture and triggering a series of fundamental security shifts across Europe. It is still too early to say whether the Russian invasion has proven to be a critical juncture in the inter-organizational partnership—such a diagnosis must wait. Without a doubt, however, the war has significantly changed the dynamics between the EU and NATO. On one hand, the war created a window of opportunity for strategic partnership. It made the threat of military invasion no longer illusory and forced both organizations to increase their efforts to keep their members safe and, most importantly, the European members of NATO to increase their defense spending, long sought by U.S. leaders. In 2024, for the first time, the defense budgets of European NATO allies will amount to 2 percent of their combined GDP.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, due to various political factors on both sides of the Atlantic, Russia’s war in Ukraine and the ambivalent attitude of China (to say the least) has made a strategic partnership more indispensable than ever. In times of war, the absence of such a partnership threatens to undermine the security of the transatlantic alliance.

The EU has begun to make intensive use of financial and legislative instruments to help Ukraine (e.g., financing arms supplies from member states to Kyiv through the European Peace Facility),<sup>7</sup> and to raise the capacity of the European Defense Industrial Base (e.g., through programs supporting joint purchases of arms and ammunition, but also joint production of weapons by member states).<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, parallel action of the EU and NATO began to cover more areas,

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Lau and Jacopo Barigazzi, “Who’s the Boss When It Comes to Defense: NATO or the EU?,” *Politico* (April 12, 2024), <https://www.politico.eu/article/boss-defense-nato-eu-jens-stoltenberg-ursula-von-der-leyen/>.

<sup>4</sup> Lau and Barigazzi, “Who’s the Boss When It Comes to Defense: NATO or the EU?”; Jens Stoltenberg and Ursula von der Leyen, “Joint Press Statements by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg with the President of the European Commission and the Minister-President of Bavaria” (Munich: NATO, 2024), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_222607.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_222607.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Dick Zandee, Sico van der Meer, and Adája Stoetman, “Countering Hybrid Threats. Steps for Improving EU-NATO Cooperation,” *Clingendael Report* (The Hague, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Jens Stoltenberg, “Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the Release of His Annual Report 2023” (Brussels: NATO, 2024), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_223662.htm?selectedLocale=en#:~:text=You cannot have EU and,one and only one institution.](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_223662.htm?selectedLocale=en#:~:text=You cannot have EU and,one and only one institution.)

<sup>7</sup> Federico Fabbrini, “Funding the War in Ukraine: The European Peace Facility, the Macro-Financial Assistance Instrument, and the Slow Rise of an EU Fiscal Capacity,” *Politics and Governance* 11, no. 4 (July 11, 2023): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i4.7174>.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Fiott, “Purchasing Power: Towards Joint Procurement and Planning in European Defence?,” *CSDS Policy Brief* (Brussels, 2023); Nicole Koenig and Leonard Schütte, “How to Come Off De Fense. Five Recommendations,” in

increasing the risk of duplication in the absence of collaborative measures. In addition, the debate about European Strategic Autonomy, understood by some as the need for the Union's independent action in security and defense, has returned to the political agenda.<sup>9</sup> With that, the question of EU-US and, by proxy also, NATO cooperation has become a debated topic. Also, the fact that the EU opened accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and that these countries might not be members of NATO when joining the EU raised the EU's security guarantees (Article 42.7 of the Treaty on the EU) to the forefront of debate.<sup>10</sup> On the U.S. side, the Russian war and the paramount weight of Washington's military aid to Kyiv have exacerbated opposition from parts of the U.S. establishment to provide security to Europe. This manifested itself, among other ways, in Republicans' opposition to continuing aid to Ukraine,<sup>11</sup> and in presidential candidate Donald Trump's announcements about his plans to wind down aid to Ukraine and withdraw the United States from NATO.<sup>12</sup> Also, combined with the shifting dynamics of U.S. grand strategy and a gradual weakening of the Eurocentric perspective in the face of growing systemic competition with China, a reflection on Washington's role in the transatlantic alliance has become urgent. All of this has provided additional impetus for NATO's paradigm shift, which has been underway for over a decade, toward a multifaceted approach to security. It has manifested itself in embracing topics such as resilience and energy security, contributing to an increase in the number of policy areas in which the EU and NATO operate.

In the context of the dynamics outlined above, repeated calls for mutual reinforcement between the EU and NATO are more relevant than ever, and the need to move toward a more strategic partnership has never been more urgent. To address this issue, this contribution briefly summarizes the current state of inter-organizational cooperation, identifies its main obstacles, and then outlines five concrete ideas that can help strengthen the practical dimension of strategic partnerships. The study argues that to confront common threats that have become existential effectively, we need to maximize synergies between the EU and NATO, making joint efforts to help Ukraine defeat Russia, developing institutional cooperation practices between the two organizations, coordinate closer planning and capability development, enhancing military interoperability, and crafting common approaches to crisis prevention.

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*Defense Sitters: Special Edition of the Munich Security Report on European Defense*, ed. Nicole Koenig et al. (Berlin: Munich Security Conference, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.47342/LIHA9331>.

<sup>9</sup> Eva Michaels and Monika Sus, "Not Coming of Age? How the European Union's Rhetoric on Strategic Autonomy in Security and Defence Meets National Political Realities," *European Security*, forthcoming (2024).

<sup>10</sup> On reluctant NATO reaction to France invoking Art 42.7 in 2015, see: Sven Biscop, "EU-NATO Relations: A Long-Term Perspective," *Nação e Defesa* 150 (2018): 85–93.

<sup>11</sup> William A. Galston, "Republicans Are Turning against Aid to Ukraine," *Brookings Institution Commentary*, August 8, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/republicans-are-turning-against-aid-to-ukraine/>.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Cortellessa, "How Far Trump Would Go," *Time* (April 30, 2024), <https://time.com/6972021/donald-trump-2024-election-interview/>.

## EU-NATO in 2024: Getting Closer But Still Missing the Strategic Layer

The current level of partnership between NATO and the EU has reached unprecedented heights following three declarations of bilateral cooperation signed in 2016, 2018, and 2023,<sup>13</sup> triggered by the deterioration of Europe's security environment. The most recent declaration outlines the ambition to expand inter-organizational cooperation in several areas, such as the growing geostrategic competition, the protection of critical infrastructure, disruptive technologies, space, and foreign interference, adding to the areas already defined by the two earlier declarations, with military mobility, cyber security, hybrid threats, and counter-terrorism among others.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of the growing institutionalization of the partnership, it is easy to lose track of the existing and numerous mechanisms of cooperation and coordination between the various levels of the two bureaucracies, with over 70 joint proposals and dozens of deliverables across many policy domains.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the latest document highlights the importance of regular meetings between the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) as fundamental to inter-organizational dialogue. It draws attention to the regular practice of mutual participation of high-level NATO and EU officials in meetings and summits at various political levels.<sup>16</sup> Despite these cooperation dynamics, there still is a considerable gap between political rhetoric and day-to-day practice.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the inherent rivalry arising from the nature of international organizations seeking to maximize their own mandates, three issues seem to harm the more strategic dimension of cooperation between the EU and NATO. The first is the continuing Turkish-Cypriot conflict, which hinders the effective use of formal collaboration channels and continues to block the exchange of classified information. Both organizations have been finding ways to circumvent the blockage via informal channels and ad-hoc formats, yet they cannot replace the formal communication needed for strategic dialogue.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Donald Tusk, Jean-Claude Juncker, and Jens Stoltenberg, "Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation" (Brussels, 2018); Donald Tusk, Jean-Claude Juncker, and Jens Stoltenberg, "Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation" (Warsaw, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2195089>; Charles Michel, Ursula von der Leyen, and Jens Stoltenberg, "Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation" (Brussels, 2023), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_210549.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_210549.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Sean Monaghan, Colin Wall, Otto Svendsen, and Sissy Martinez, "Does the New EU-NATO Joint Declaration Matter?" *Center for Strategic & International Studies* (January 13, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/does-new-eu-nato-joint-declaration-matter>.

<sup>15</sup> EU-NATO, "Seventh Progress Report on the Implementation of the Common Set of Proposals Endorsed by EU and NATO Councils on 6 December 2016 and 5 December 2017" (June 20, 2022), [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220620-progress-report-nr7-EU-NATO-eng.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220620-progress-report-nr7-EU-NATO-eng.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Sebastian Clapp, "The Third Joint EU-NATO Declaration," *At a Glance*, (Brussels, 2023), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739333/EPRS\\_ATA\(2023\)739333\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739333/EPRS_ATA(2023)739333_EN.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> See also Luis Simón, "Thinking about NATO-EU Relations in Wartime" *Real Instituto Elcano* (May 31, 2024), <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/thinking-about-nato-eu-relations-in-wartime/>.

<sup>18</sup> European Parliament, "European Parliament Resolution of 7 July 2021 on EU-NATO Cooperation in the Context of the Transatlantic Relations" (Brussels: European Parliament, 2021), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0192\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0192_EN.html).

The second issue results from the changing role of the EU and the number of initiatives recently put in place that strengthen the security and defense cooperation between the member states.<sup>19</sup> The recent EU strategic document—EU Strategic Compass—as well as the EU-NATO declaration 2023, acknowledge the primacy of the Alliance in collective defense, considering EU contributions as complementary.<sup>20</sup> Still, the inter-organizational relationship continues to be troubled by the perception of some NATO officials that the EU's growing ambition in defense risks strategic decoupling from NATO. Thus, NATO seems to pursue a dual strategy of encouraging cooperative ideas (e.g., investments in the European defense industry) while remaining cautious about those perceived as threatening the effectiveness of European defense (e.g., EU's involvement in standardization).<sup>21</sup> The Biden administration's recent support for a more substantial role of the Union in defense as the only way to strengthen the European pillar of NATO seems to have yielded limited results, and the uncertainty continues.<sup>22</sup> The same is happening in the EU, where most European leaders emphasize the primacy of NATO in territorial defense. However, there are still voices promoting European strategic autonomy as a way to reduce Europe's dependence on the United States and NATO.

Finally, the lack of sufficient mutual knowledge about the functioning of the two bureaucracies is also an obstacle. Due to the constant emergence of new initiatives and projects, the institutional complexity of the EU and NATO has been increasing, and there are not enough officials with sufficient knowledge of both organizations to reliably assess, implement, and evaluate joint operations.

### **Moving from Rhetoric to Practice: A Strategic Partnership Worth Its Name**

Rhetoric matters, and the importance of declarations of bilateral cooperation and strategic partnership cannot be overstated. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's desire to destabilize the European security order have made it urgent to translate the rhetoric into practice.

The European Parliament's 2021 call for a "true strategic partnership" between the EU and NATO based on "the agreed guiding principles of transparency, reciprocity, inclusiveness and the decision-making autonomy of both organizations" seems to have gained the ultimate momentum.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the basic principle of a single set of forces that has defined bilateral cooperation for many years has taken on new meaning in the face of the ongoing war and the

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel Fiott, "Defence Matters: Ten Years of European Defence and What Has Really Been Achieved?" *Policy Brief* (Brussels, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Clapp, "The Third Joint EU-NATO Declaration"; European External Action Service, "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence" (Brussels, March 2022), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en).

<sup>21</sup> Lau and Barigazzi, "Who's the Boss When It Comes to Defense: NATO or the EU?"

<sup>22</sup> See also Alessandro Marrone, "A Europe-Led NATO to Guarantee European Security: The Time Has Come," *Aspenia Online* (May 31, 2024), <https://aspensiaonline.it/a-europe-led-nato-to-guarantee-european-security-the-time-has-come/>.

<sup>23</sup> European Parliament, "European Parliament Resolution of 7 July 2021 on EU-NATO Cooperation in the Context of the Transatlantic Relations."

increasing scarcity of resources. The war has exposed not only the adverse effects of the post-Cold War ‘peace dividend’ in Western European countries and the underfunding of defense but also the low capacity of the European defense industry, its fragmentation, the lack of a sufficient military arsenal of many European NATO allies, and their full dependence on the United States for strategic enablers.

Therefore, only by unleashing the synergies that such a strategic partnership can bring will the EU and NATO be able to effectively carry out their core tasks of providing the security of their members and neighborhoods.

Much has been written about the need for complementarity and a division of labour, as neither NATO nor the EU can deal with security threats based solely on their own assets and capabilities.<sup>24</sup> Yet “any quest for overarching guiding principles and division of responsibility between the EU and NATO is going to be Sisyphean” for two reasons.<sup>25</sup> First, the two organizations have already expanded their activities into the traditional territory of the others, with the EU advancing its defense capabilities and NATO developing civilian instruments. This also happened due to the blurring of the boundaries between internal and external security and the growing need to address security-related issues via diverse instruments. Consequently, a certain degree of bureaucratic competition is inevitable, but it can be addressed by prioritizing the complementarity and interoperability of the two organizations’ resources and operations. Second, duplication of resources (for example, in times of war) does not have to necessarily always be wrong—it is undoubtedly better than asset gaps.

Thus, a *complementarity-based and synergy-leveraging partnership between the EU and NATO* seems to be the best way to efficiently manage a single set of forces and resources, such as national defense budgets, personnel, etc. The main goal of such a partnership is not to divide work as efficiently as possible but rather to capitalize on and develop the strengths of both organizations. To this end, there are five ideas for advancing the current state of the EU-NATO partnership:

The most vital area of strategic cooperation between the Union and NATO is now coordinating efforts to support Ukraine. In addition to the ideas presented below that would strengthen the partnership and make it more effective, more immediate measures could be considered. In light of plans to be announced at the NATO summit in July to strengthen the Alliance’s role in supporting Ukraine, close coordination is necessary between the Alliance’s new initiatives and

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<sup>24</sup> Jolyon Howorth, “EU–NATO Cooperation: The Key to Europe’s Security Future,” *European Security* 26, no. 3 (2017): 454–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2017.1352584>; Jolyon Howorth, “Strategic Autonomy and EU–NATO Cooperation: A Win-Win Approach,” *L’Europe En Formation* 389, no. 2 (2019): 85–103, <https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.389.0085>; Tania Lațici, “The Wind in the Sails of EU–NATO Cooperation: How Strong and Where To?,” *L’Europe En Formation* 389, no. 2 (2019): 67–84, <https://doi.org/10.3917/eufor.389.0067>; Burak Tangör, “NATO–EU Strategic Partnership: Where Is It Heading?,” *Perceptions* XXVI, no. 1 (2021): 73–99; Niklas Novaky, “A Unique Opportunity to Strengthen EU–NATO Cooperation,” *Euractiv*, December 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Bart Szewczyk, “EU–NATO Coordination in Crisis Management: From Complementary to Synergies,” *The EU and NATO: The Essential Partners* (2018), 24–30.

the two ongoing EU missions—EUAM (EU Advisory Mission in Ukraine) and EUMAM (EU Military Assistance Mission).<sup>26</sup> The separate actions of the EU and NATO in supporting reforms of Ukraine's civilian and security sectors and in training Ukrainian soldiers must be coordinated in terms of goals, principles, and measures.

To increase the synergy effects, a joint EU-NATO training mission, drawing on EUMAM experience, where the EU already applies NATO standards in training Ukrainians, would be worth considering. Also, when planning support and assessing progress, it is necessary to consider the reforms that Ukraine must implement to prepare for both NATO and EU membership. Close coordination of these processes is essential, especially given the limited capabilities and resources, both financial and human, of the Ukrainian administration. Finally, there is a growing need to coordinate financial aid to Ukraine. It is already flowing through bilateral channels and the EU framework and should now be significantly boosted with a \$100 billion fund to be established by NATO at the upcoming summit.<sup>27</sup> The long-term character of the envisaged fund, which should ensure continuity of assistance to Ukraine, is very much needed. Yet, considering the scarcity of financial resources across Europe, spending has to be coordinated by both organizations.

Second, institutional practices of mutual cooperation should be further strengthened, and the mechanism of regular meetings between EU and NATO staff set up in February 2022 will be intensified. While at times tedious and time-consuming, such practices provide a basic structural framework for a partnership that, over time, promotes a reflex of cooperation and the principle of inclusiveness. Also, these institutional mechanisms help improve mutual knowledge of how the two organizations operate, especially in the medium to long term. In addition to existing mechanisms, regular special summits involving all NATO and EU heads of state and government should be considered to retain trust at the highest levels and to define a long-term vision for the strategic partnership.<sup>28</sup> Also, in light of the reshuffle of the EU institutions in the fall of 2024, the separation from the Foreign Affairs Council of a distinct Council defense-dedicated formation, which could closely liaise with meetings of NATO defense ministers, would be advisable.

Similarly, the envisioned commissioner for the defense industry could be a focal point regarding cooperation on capabilities development. At the same time, allies on both sides of the Atlantic and within both organizations should increase pressure on Ankara and Nicosia to find a way to expand the scope of joint operations. If the conflict continues and blocks cooperation, new formats, such as ad hoc coalitions between selected NATO and EU members and increased EU-U.S. cooperation, will most likely be found, risking further fragmentation of the Euro-Atlantic security order.

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<sup>26</sup> Wojciech Lorenz, "NATO to Consider Increasing, Stabilising Support for Ukraine," *Polish Institute of International Affairs* (May 10, 2024), <https://pism.pl/publications/nato-to-consider-increasing-stabilising-support-for-ukraine>.

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Lau, "NATO's Stoltenberg Floats \$100B, Five-Year Fund for Ukraine," *Politico* (April 2, 2024), <https://www.politico.eu/article/natos-stoltenberg-floats-100b-five-year-fund-for-ukraine/>.

<sup>28</sup> See also European Parliament, "European Parliament Resolution of 7 July 2021 on EU-NATO Cooperation in the Context of the Transatlantic Relations."

Third, as the war in Ukraine revealed the shortcomings of the European defense industry, increasing its capacity is crucial for the effective operation of both organizations. Acknowledging that defense-industrial cooperation between the EU and NATO needs to balance the considerations of economic competitiveness (with the United States being the most significant weapons producer) and the push for Europe to produce more on its own, more can be done to unleash the synergies effect and capitalize on the inherent strengths of the EU and NATO. The Union can advance the use of its financial and legislative mechanisms to promote joint procurement of weapons and ammunition.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, NATO should remain responsible for capability targets and standardization, as “you cannot have the EU and NATO present two conflicting lists of capability targets to Germany, Denmark, or Poland. So defense planning... has to be set by one and only one institution.”<sup>30</sup>

As for standardization efforts, their effectiveness is still insufficient. As NATO plays a leading role, the EU, using its legislative mechanisms for jointly funded capabilities, can support these efforts by forcing its members to comply with the rules established by NATO.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, while NATO has a proven set of processes for planning and monitoring capability objectives, such as the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), the EU has also developed several instruments in this domain under the authority of its European Defence Agency (EDA).<sup>32</sup> For political reasons, the processes will most likely remain separate,<sup>33</sup> as ideas to incorporate the collective capability target of the EU countries into the NDPP did not gain support.<sup>34</sup> However, the greater output coherence between both capability development processes should be further enhanced. Recognizing measures already in place, such as via the EU-NATO Capability Group or the fact that the EU capability development process has recently started to take into account the NDPP (in the spirit of complementarity of capabilities and by adopting NATO standards and practices in its capability development), there is a need to intensify these efforts.

Furthermore, the nexus between capability planning and their development should also be improved by both organizations and via inter-organizational cooperation to increase pressure on the members to comply with the planning processes. Also, due to the lack of defense planners in Europe, the same experts carry out defense planning for the national needs of the EU and NATO. Dedicated courses for defense planners on NATO-EU cooperation could be put forward to better coordinate these processes between the two organizations and ensure mutual complementarity.

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<sup>29</sup> Camille Grand, “Opening Shots: What to Make of the European Defence Industrial Strategy,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/opening-shots-what-to-make-of-the-european-defence-industrial-strategy/>.

<sup>30</sup> Stoltenberg, “Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the Release of His Annual Report 2023.”

<sup>31</sup> See also Koenig and Schütte, “How to Come Off De Fense. Five Recommendations.”

<sup>32</sup> For further details see: Fiott, “Purchasing Power: Towards Joint Procurement and Planning in European Defence?”

<sup>33</sup> For details on defense planning process of both EU and NATO, see Maitre Federic Mauro, “EU Defence: The White Book Implementation Process” (Brussels, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Biscop, “EU-NATO Relations: A Long-Term Perspective.”

The fourth issue is the need to work further on the interoperability of forces, especially in light of the EU's efforts to integrate its militaries further through Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). With NATO remaining responsible for collective territorial deterrence, it is vital that the EU efforts in this domain effectively contribute to advancing the European pillar of NATO. The NATO New Force Model aims at having 300,000 European troops in a high state of readiness, which would not be possible without a much greater involvement of European allies, which various EU instruments can support. A certain Europeanisation of NATO is essential considering the necessity of burden-shifting towards a much greater involvement of European countries in ensuring their security, both financially and operationally, and due to the potential shrinking of the U.S. presence in Europe.<sup>35</sup>

As much as the support for NATO by the current U.S. administration remains “ironclad,”<sup>36</sup> Europe cannot take it for granted, particularly in light of Donald Trump's upcoming presidential run. Strengthening NATO's European pillar is the best way of ‘Trump-proofing’ the Alliance and preparing it for a possible U.S. pivot to Asia.<sup>37</sup> Notably, a robust European pillar shall include not only EU countries but all European allies, including the UK, countries associated with the EU, and EU candidate countries, which participate in several EU schemes to improve integration and raise the capacity of Europe's industrial base. A concrete step to boost the European pillar would be to accelerate work on improving military mobility in Europe by creating more military transport corridors similar to the one launched in January 2024 by Poland, Germany, and the Netherlands.<sup>38</sup> By standardizing procedures across the EU and NATO, such corridors would allow troops and equipment to move more easily across their territories to strengthen NATO's eastern flank.

Fifth, crisis prevention and building resilience, especially in the EU neighborhood most vulnerable to hybrid attacks from Russia, are domains where coordination should be further strengthened. Since this is a natural environment for the EU, which has an arsenal of civilian instruments and years of experience in countering hybrid threats, NATO's activities in this non-military domain should primarily support the EU's actions. To this end, mechanisms should be set up for NATO and EU officials to regularly exchange information on crisis response mechanisms planned for a specific crisis. The EU-NATO Task Force on Resilience of Critical Infrastructure launched in 2023 is a good start. Still, its work should be better embedded in the daily operations of both organizations to ensure the implementation of recommended measures.

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<sup>35</sup> Jolyon Howorth, “Strategic Autonomy and EU-NATO Cooperation: Squaring the Circle,” *Security Policy Brief* 85 (May 2017).

<sup>36</sup> The White House, “Vice President Harris Rejects Isolationism, Authoritarianism, and Recent Attacks on NATO While Making Forceful Case for America's Continued Global Leadership During Munich Security Conference” (February 16, 2024), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/02/16/vice-president-harris-rejects-isolationism-authoritarianism-and-recent-attacks-on-nato-while-making-forceful-case-for-americas-continued-global-leadership-during-munich-security-conference/#:~:text=During%20her%20third%20time%20representing,accomplishments%20at%20home%20and%20abroad..>

<sup>37</sup> Lotje Boswinkel, “Trump-Proofing NATO: 2% Won't Cut It,” *RUSI Commentary* (March 7, 2024), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/trump-proofing-nato-2-wont-cut-it>.

<sup>38</sup> Anchal Vohra, “Europe's ‘Military Schengen’ Era of Military Cooperation Is Here,” *Foreign Policy* (March 4, 2024), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/04/europe-military-autonomy-nato-schengen/>.



## Conclusion

Having two organizations with a large group of overlapping members and dealing with broadly similar issues is not ideal. If the Euro-Atlantic security structure could be reinvented, creating a single cohesive organization to deal with all matters concerning foreign security and defense policy, that would make more sense. Since we cannot turn back the clock, however, we must use the current state of affairs to our advantage by increasing the synergies between the two organizations to maximize their impact. A strategic partnership between the EU and NATO is urgently needed when faced with warfare in Europe and the growing threat of authoritarian states with distinctively different ideas on how the global order should look.

As this analysis demonstrates, much has already been achieved in the cooperation between these two organizations, yet a fully-fledged strategic partnership is still in the making. It does not develop in a political vacuum but is the result of political dynamics within each organization (on many levels due to their institutional complexity), as well as the dynamics of relations between European countries and the United States. Yet the geopolitical circumstances for its development appear conducive: the external and direct threat from Russia has brought the positions of the United States and the Union closer together regarding the role of European countries in NATO. As the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy recently underlined: “In the past, when we talked about the European pillar inside NATO, this was portrayed as a step towards weakening NATO, leaving NATO, or forgetting about NATO. But the funny thing is [that] today, it is the United States themselves who are encouraging us to forge ahead, to increase our capacities, and to do that in a coordinated manner.”<sup>39</sup> There is also no shortage of declarations of intent, mechanisms for institutional cooperation, and several joint projects. What still seems to be somewhat lacking is political will at the highest level and the realization that failure to cooperate threatens the security of the Euro-Atlantic community. And this threat is very real.

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<sup>39</sup> Joseph Borrell, “Speech by High Representative/Vice-President about the World Confronted by Wars,” *Oxford University* (Oxford, 2024).

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# Reimagining Alliances: Tensions toward Transformation

Nathan Colvin

At the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NATO's founding, the alliance remains strong, simultaneously meeting old and new challenges. The NATO Academic Conference leveraged its diverse members in academic, business, government, military and other fields to think differently about the alliance's future. Several themes emerged during the "Reimagining Alliances" session, creating a natural dialectic of perspectives. Intellectual tensions are often seen as friction to be resolved. However, tensions also create dialogue that dissects issues into their basic elements, which can be reconstructed into new solutions.<sup>1</sup> This report highlights the re-imagination of the alliance through eight essential tensions, based both on the conversation and additional research:

1. Escalation Control vs. Freedom of Action.
2. Active vs. Reactive Approaches.
3. State vs. Self, or Identity vs. Security.
4. Authoritarian vs. Liberalism.
5. Technocratic Cohesion vs. Political Unpredictability, or Professional vs. Popular.
6. Attraction vs. Expansion.
7. Internal Cohesion vs. External Confusion.
8. Old Enemies and Friends vs. New Competitors and Cooperation.

While Russia's resurgence is at the forefront of the alliance's agenda, it also faces various emerging challenges both near and far. In other words, while NATO's history is essential, the future is more than "back to the future." NATO's members should remain proud of the legacy of democratic and open methods. However, historic and emerging competitors increasingly use the alliance's strengths against it. While descriptions may seem repetitive at times, this underlies the essential interconnectedness of issues and holism of solutions. NATO responses at 75 years must include considering more active and enduring operations in all domains, against threats old and new, both near and far.

## **Tension 1: Escalation Control vs. Freedom of Action**

The primary tension in the strategic environment is caused by the need for escalation control against the need to act in the face of malign activity. On one hand, nuclear warfare could lead to disastrous consequences—a death by chaos. On the other hand, inaction due to fear of escalation causes paralysis—a death by stagnation. The fear of nuclear warfare moderates the use of force amongst nuclear powers. The justifiable fear of nuclear weapons may limit the viability of conventional military force, at least between nuclear armed nations, but limit options for non-

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Currier Hunt, "Embrace Tension to Build a Stronger Team," IDEO U, August 2020, <https://www.ideo.com/blogs/inspiration/embrace-tension-to-build-a-stronger-team>.

nuclear nations confronted with a nuclear foe.<sup>2</sup> When nuclear nations partner with non-nuclear nations, it may be possible to provide a modicum of this dampening action.

Literature on escalation from conventional to nuclear war is well known from the Cold War, but we should use caution in drawing strict comparisons.<sup>3</sup> The strategic environment is more complex, covering more domains.<sup>4</sup> As the range, speed, and lethality of conventional weapons grows, de-escalation response time is proportionately decreased from the Cold War experience. Also, the ends of competitors are different than in the Cold War, now being tied very closely with the retention of regimes, rather than ideological supremacy.<sup>5</sup>

An escalating large-scale non-nuclear conflict could be tremendously destructive. Yet as NATO considers responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is critical to consider that not every response is necessarily escalatory even if the level of violence is increased, even in the shadow of nuclear weapons in a proxy situation. In other words, an escalation in ways and means may de-escalate the overall strategic or political ends. This idea is well understood in policing circles, where an initial use or show of force may be required to gain control of a situation.<sup>6</sup> The key is to use the minimum amount of force necessary to close the overall situation.

Much of classic escalation work is based in game theory. Yet the tit-for-tat concerns many pundits cite when formulating responses overlooks an important assumption—that the so-called *tit*, is equal the opponent's original *tat*. In the real application though, this may not necessarily be the case. If one side employs disproportionate ways and means as Russia does, the actions of the second player of the game may not impact the decision making of the first until they reach a similar threshold. In other words, *there is no escalation until parity is reached*. Only then can tit → tat and escalation occur. This means that Ukraine and NATO may yet have a significant freedom of action for increased conventional response without approaching escalation, since its support for Ukraine is so much lower than Russia's actions.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Cohen, *When Proliferation Causes Peace: The Psychology of Nuclear Crises* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Jonah Lo, Ng Kang Jie, and Hannah Lo, "Reconstructing the Ladder: Towards a More Considered Model of Escalation," *The Strategy Bridge* (September 1, 2022), <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2022/9/1/reconstructing-the-ladder-towards-a-more-considered-model-of-escalation>; Barbara Zanchetta, "The Relevance of the Cold War Today," *ETH Zurich* (May 25, 2016), <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/32b19a8c-6034-45b8-bd72-85194c111800#:~:text=The%20relevance%20of%20the%20Cold%20War%2C%20instead%2C%20rests%20in%20concrete,NATO%20and%20the%20European%20Union.>

<sup>4</sup> RAND Project Air Force, "Managing Escalation in Crisis and War," RAND, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.rand.org/capabilities/solutions/managing-escalation-in-crisis-and-war.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Heather Williams, Kelsey Hartigan, Lachlan MacKenzie, and Reja Younis, "Deter and Divide: Russia's Nuclear Rhetoric & Escalation Risks in Ukraine," *CSIS*, <https://features.csis.org/deter-and-divide-russia-nuclear-rhetoric>.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Borelli, "The De-Escalation Myth of Less-Lethal Force," *Blog, Officer*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.officer.com/tactical/less-lethal/article/21263336/the-de-escalation-myth-of-less-lethal-force>; Patrick Patterson, "Fog of Warfare: Broadening U.S. Military Use-of-Force Training for Security Cooperation," *Joint Force Quarterly* 105 (April 14, 2022), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2999156/fog-of-warfare-broadening-us-military-use-of-force-training-for-security-cooper/>.

To bypass limits to the use of force, Russia maintains a careful strategic approach to “win without fighting.”<sup>7</sup> The paucity of Russian conventional forces versus the difficulty in effectively utilizing a sizable nuclear capability to their advantage created the impetus to pursue a new strategic approach in new domains and the so-called “gray zone.” In doing so, competitors such as Russia sought to *sidestep* the strength of the alliance to achieve their goals. While many of NATO's members maintain exquisite capabilities in new domains, their use may be limited by NATO's structure, doctrine, and even perhaps modern values. Gray zone activities and the increasing destructive capability of non-nuclear weapons creates ambiguity in the strategic environment which may cause actors like NATO to pause until a level of clarity can be achieved, but then be forced to act with particular methods to “catch up,” accidentally signaling escalation where none exists.

### **Tension 2: Active vs. Reactive Approaches**

Article 5 of the NATO Charter remains the bedrock of the alliance.<sup>8</sup> Article 5 ensured a collective response to the 9/11 attacks on the United States and remains a primary reason why nations continue to seek membership in the alliance. The advantage of Article 5 also creates vulnerability, because there are currently no other mechanisms for defense beyond it, especially below the threshold of armed conflict. NATO should assume competitors will use every measure to work around Article 5 in pursuit of malign goals.

Article 5 is effective at deterring direct attacks because it is only used sparingly, for only the most dangerous situations. Using Article 5 for less than the most severe attacks could increase the communication ambiguity between competitors, which may increase uncertainty and the likelihood of conflict. Therefore, Article 5 must not be weakened due to overuse. However, with the emerging threats caused by the “gray zone” highlighted in the first tension, NATO must also be able to respond to new threats in new ways.

Currently, NATO is caught between Article 4 consultation and Article 5 response because of the limitations of the phrase “armed attack.” An armed attack is generally considered the use of weapons through violence for physical harm. This discounts the impact of attacks through or in cyberspace, until it reaches the threshold of “tantamount to that of a kinetic strike to cross the threshold of an armed attack.”<sup>9</sup> More concerning may be cognitive and psychological attacks. This

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<sup>7</sup> Ross Babbage, “Winning Without Fighting: Chinese and Russian Political Warfare Campaigns and How the West Can Prevail,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, July 24, 2019, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/winning-without-fighting-chinese-and-russian-political-warfare-campaigns-and-how-the-west-can-prevail>.

<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline Feldscher, “Mattis: NATO Commitment an ‘Absolute Bedrock,’” *Politico Pro* (March 31, 2017), <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/defense/whiteboard/2017/03/mattis-nato-commitments-an-absolute-deadlock-085742>.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Wiedemar, “NATO and Article 5 in Cyberspace,” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 323 (May 2023): 1-4.



is why so many “gray zone” operations are linked in some way to virtual terrain or human and cognitive dimensions, where ambiguity is prevalent, and so-called “salami slicing” is possible.<sup>10</sup>

The seam between Article 4 and Article 5 exasperates reactive approaches. Therefore, new means should be considered to operate in virtual worlds without allowing *fait accompli*, without disrupting the strength of Article 5 itself. This “Article 4.5” would provide the constitutional foundations for continuous combined operations, especially in NATO’s virtual territory. Protecting this space is especially critical considering competitor cognitive attacks, which do not respect national boundaries, but rather seek the members of society against the alliance and its values.

### **Tension 3: State vs. Self, or Identity vs. Security**

The return to Great Power Competition is an increasingly prevalent strategic narrative.<sup>11</sup> The invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the increasingly bellicose nature of China towards Taiwan and South China Sea neighbors seems to lend credence to Thucydides’ observation that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”<sup>12</sup> But what if we are misinterpreting the conditions of the strategic environment? What if the aggressiveness of certain states is a symptom, rather than the disease? What if the “great power” is not competing states, but rather the rise of individual agency pressuring the state system itself?<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, the growth and ubiquity of communication technology rapidly enhanced the power of individuals.<sup>14</sup> However, instead of creating a “flat world” of understanding, society appears to be reordering around *difference* and *identity*. Instead of ideology, progressively more particularized identities are forming, especially in virtual spaces.<sup>15</sup> As individuals are connected at a basic level, they are more capable of finding other like-minded individuals. Internet communication allows people to more readily connect with people who already think like them while also making it easier to disconnect from those who disagree with them, inhibiting some forms of traditional cooperation. An increasing “Balkanization” of virtual spaces is bleeding over into our physical societies. With varying shades of anonymity and degrees of physical distance, individuals are more apt to disagree and less willing to compromise. This leads to particularized, issue-based social groups, whose *modus operandi* for cooperation is often transactional and fleeting.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard W. Maass, “Salami Tactics: Faits Accomplis and International Expansion in the Shadow of Major War,” *Texas National Security Review* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2021/2022): 33-54.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Lynch III, ed. *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Warner, Rex (New York: Penguin Books, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> Moises Naim, *The End of Power From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States: Why Being In Charge Isn’t What It Used to Be* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Manuel Castells, “The Impact of the Internet on Society: A Global Perspective,” *OpenMind* (blog), accessed June 5, 2024, <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/the-impact-of-the-internet-on-society-a-global-perspective/>.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Picador, 2007); Nathan Colvin, “A Complex Adaptive Systems Approach to the Future Operational Environment” (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, May 22, 2014).

Identity and memory are necessarily based in the past, but the power of digital technology allows for the constant regeneration of identity at speeds that may be difficult for traditional systems of power to absorb. Exponential growth in information technology is the underlying phenomenon, but adversaries are accelerating the effects of this phenomenon to create an incoherence in alliances, states, and societies. Competitor psychological operations, often cyber-enabled, are not aimed at creating a new status quo per se, but rather seek to destroy the institutions that are built over time.<sup>16</sup> A dangerous assumption of competitors is that once these western liberal institutions are destroyed, the world can be reshaped in an image more amenable to their pursuit of control.

NATO and member state focus on national and alliance security represents a traditional state-institutional approach. Protecting borders, capitols, treasure, and the lives of populations is necessary but insufficient. Conventional force parity no longer provides the offensive foreign policy options it once did. Instead, while NATO and competitors are near-peers in a traditional sense, competitors increasingly rely on new, less defended avenues in the *gray zone* to gain cognitive advantage. By working outside of traditional means, competitors are increasingly causing lose/lose scenarios in migration, local economies, food security, health, and personal autonomy, more aligned with human security.<sup>17</sup> Mass dissatisfaction is the new capability of disruption.

Approaches in the cognitive and human dimensions of the *gray zone* often take place in virtual terrain. NATO is a victim of its own success in some ways, as malign competitors leverage western interconnectedness and development to their advantage. The map looks like this: successful interdependence and deterrence increased economic welfare of member and adjacent states and in turn, increased the welfare for successive generations. Newer “higher” needs emerge in individuals as they satiate lower needs.<sup>18</sup> Every generation expects more from their state and in turn, the alliance. With higher expectations comes the potential for more significant disappointment and discontent, which can tear at alliance cohesion. Russia and other competitors are successfully shifting the narrative away from the success of liberalism, toward its so-called failures to live up to its highest potential. The goal is to rot NATO from the inside, out.<sup>19</sup>

While NATO cannot dismiss its obligations to territorial defense, geographic boundaries may become a hollow shell if human security concerns are not protected from cognitive violence,

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<sup>16</sup> James Kirchick, “Russia’s Plot against the West,” *Politico* (March 17, 2017), <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-plot-against-the-west-vladimir-putin-donald-trump-europe/>.

<sup>17</sup> Maria Martisiute, “Russia’s War against Ukraine: Lessons on Human Security,” European Policy Center, August 12, 2023, <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Russias-war-against-Ukraine-Lessons-on-human-security~56a5a4>; Rick Chersicla, “People as a Weapons System: Moscow and Minsk’s Continued Attempts to Weaponize Migration,” Irregular Warfare Initiative, January 18, 2024, <https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/people-as-a-weapons-system-moscow-and-minsk-continued-attempts-to-weaponize-migration/>.

<sup>18</sup> A. H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50 (1943): 370–96, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>.

<sup>19</sup> Nataliya Bugayova, Frederick W. Kagan, and Kateryna Stepanenko. “Denying Russia’s Only Strategy for Success.” *Institute for the Study of War*, March 27, 2024. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/denying-russia%E2%80%99s-only-strategy-success>.

whether in physical or virtual spaces. Ultimately, Russia, China and other competitors are also subject to these same forces, but they leverage their technology to control and mislead their populations into believing their discontent should be aimed at external *boogeymen* instead of the failures of the increasing authoritarian regimes.<sup>20</sup> Competitors “securitized” and weaponized popular expectations in the human-needs domain. They hope to outlive the west, unseat liberalism as the end of history, and be the last systems standing out of the rubble. Therefore, human security cannot be an afterthought in, or outside, member states. Additionally, the tension between liberalism and authoritarianism must be of utmost concern to NATO.

#### **Tension 4: Authoritarianism vs. Liberalism**

While liberal-democratic political orders represent the best balance of individual rights and collective action, there is a growing challenge to this norm. Historically, NATO’s concern focused on the spread of communism throughout the Europe by force. Today, the more potent threat is the cooperation between autocratic/authoritarian states.<sup>21</sup>

Authoritarianism is not a new phenomenon. Whether an authoritarian government is right or left leaning, it takes advantage of the unease during reordering in society.<sup>22</sup> Authoritarian governments take advantage of the emancipation of individuals enabled by decolonization, digital processing, and digital interconnectivity, paired with weaponized dissatisfaction. During this period of digitized social reordering, there are relative, if not absolute, winners and losers in societies. Authoritarian governments can take advantage of perceived or actual “chaos” in societies as an alternative.

Historically, states in the liberal-democratic order acted on their common values and established institutions and norms to advantage those who would play by its rules. The liberal order sees this path as the most universally beneficial to all. Authoritarians are stepping in for nations who cannot transition to these institutions, while also denigrating institutions who are functional. Authoritarianism is reactionary to disorder and weakness in states and to the spread of liberalism.

When authoritarians claim NATO is a threat, the alliance often highlights its defensive nature. However, authoritarians worry that NATO guards a political system inevitably threatening their hold on power. The issue is not a NATO invasion but the observation and replication of liberal

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<sup>20</sup> Nathan M. Colvin, “Putin and Putnam: Interpreting Russian Military Activity Through a Three Player, Two-Level Game,” 2022, <https://doi.org/10.25776/03CG-RY71>.

<sup>21</sup> Christian von Soest, “Democracy Prevention: The International Collaboration of Authoritarian Regimes,” *European Journal of Political Research* 54, no. 4 (2015): 623–38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12100>; “The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule,” Freedom House, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>.

<sup>22</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, “How Democracies Fall Apart,” *Foreign Affairs* (December 5, 2016), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-05/how-democracies-fall-apart>.

democratic thought surrounding these islands of authoritarian power. Elites in these states fear their populations walking from the shore to the rising tide of emancipation.<sup>23</sup>

While not explicitly allied, cooperation between “outsiders” of the liberal order is increasing. Geographically adjacent competitors are receiving support beyond NATO’s traditional area of interest. Digital technologies increase the speed and reach of malign effects. For NATO nations to compete with emerging ways and means, its members need to realize that geographic proximity is not the only measure of threat.

The new competition is not of clashing ideologies but illiberal governments clinging to decreasing control and power. In this case, a new proxy threat emerges—Russia supported by states such as Iran and North Korea. While China is riding the edge of cooperation, its “partnership without limits” represents a growing concern.<sup>24</sup> With greater interconnectedness, access to the digital public square is amplified with cooperative authoritarian resources, to create fissures in institutions. This includes the division between so-called elites and popular will.

#### **Tension 5: Technocratic Cohesion vs. Political Unpredictability, or Professional vs. Popular**

Some note Russia's revanchism revives NATO’s *raison d’être*, and therefore, “the Alliance is back.” While the *alliance* may be back, others wonder “where are the members?” Questions like these highlight a growing divide between transnational institutional interests and national leadership concerns. This tension is felt in the rhetoric of a well-informed profession versus those who rally popular domestic desires.

The complexity of modern institutional governance requires expert agents and agencies, whom as a class, are often labeled technocrats.<sup>25</sup> Technocrats are the necessary backbone that allow NATO to reify itself as a quasi-independent actor. As the alliance improves its internal procedures, its technocratic capability in international relations, security, military operations, and several functional specialties increases. The growth of the Centers of Excellence system and other research centers are evidence of this institutionalizing and professionalization. This phenomenon increases the capability for specialized studies, professional coordination, and consultation with wider audiences.

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Person and Michael McFaul, “What Putin Fears Most,” *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 2 (April 2022): 18-27; Martin Sandbu, “Authoritarians Fear Transparency—Liberal Democracies Should Embrace It,” *Financial Times* (May 5, 2024), <https://www.ft.com/content/82653aa8-ba26-4baf-a1a9-d4de31731f7f>.

<sup>24</sup> Guy Faulconbridge and Laurie Chen, “Putin to Visit China to Deepen ‘no Limits’ Partnership with Xi,” *Reuters* (October 15, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-visit-china-deepen-no-limits-partnership-with-xi-2023-10-15/>.

<sup>25</sup> Nicole Scicluna and Stefan Auer, “From the Rule of Law to the Rule of Rules: Technocracy and the Crisis of EU Governance,” *West European Politics* 42, no. 7 (November 10, 2019): 1420–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1584843>.

Despite professionalization, NATO's agency is limited.<sup>26</sup> Interests between technocrats and citizens may increase over time. Leaders of democratic member states must remain responsive to the will of the people, both as a duty of position and for their political survival. Democracies also feel the increasing complexity caused by the individualization of society. The weakening of the middle ground, as well as increased nationalism and populism, are observed.<sup>27</sup> National leaders are put in the middle ground in the "negotiator's" position, looking for win-win solutions between the alliance and their domestic audience.<sup>28</sup> Those positions are more challenging to find and communicate in the accelerated attention environment.

When domestic support is uncertain, national leaders may decide on less than full support for alliance decisions. This creates a dynamic where "we agree when we meet and disagree when we go home." Ambiguity in strategic messaging occurs just as competitors, allies, and partners need the most clarity. Ambiguity increases gray zone attack surfaces, probing of policy boundaries, and increases potential miscommunication. While some may acknowledge this issue, NATO (non-public affairs) personnel must train to act in the face of this dynamic in sensitive, yet productive, ways. Beyond training, an expanded public relations campaign outside of government and security circles might help convey NATO's advantages. Its narrative should be compelling and clear to the average person rather than targeting those interested in international relations and defense. It should also ensure that we are not using language that reinforces malign narratives, such as NATO "expansion."

### **Tension 6: Attraction vs. Expansion**

Whether communicating to an existing audience or reaching out to a new audience, the strength of NATO should be about attraction, not expansion. Rhetoric highlighting NATO "expansion" or "enlargement" is nearly ubiquitous in reach and subliminally harmful in its effect. Commonplace even inside the alliance, these terms feed into competitors' narrative impacts. For example, Russian leadership fears the example of prosperous liberal democracies at their doorstep. The state transforms this viewpoint to create fear of a "blue menace" of military power aimed at Russia to justify its actions amongst its populace. In other words, "NATO is expanding to Russia's doorstep."<sup>29</sup>

NATO's narrative is best expressed when it reflects that at the end of the Cold War, individuals decided they wanted the freedoms guaranteed by liberal democratic standards. Based on history and emerging trends, they feared the eventual rise of an authoritarian government in Russia.

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<sup>26</sup> Jyri Raitasalo, "NATO Is Not a Real Military Actor," War on the Rocks, July 2, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/07/nato-is-not-a-real-military-actor/>.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Will the Populist Wave Wash Away NATO and the European Union?," NATO Review, January 6, 2017, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2017/01/06/will-the-populist-wave-wash-away-nato-and-the-european-union/index.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 03 (1988): 427–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027697>.

<sup>29</sup> NATO, "Setting the Record Straight: De-Bunking Russian Disinformation on NATO" (January 12, 2024), <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/115204.htm>.

These same people created institutions that represented them in their search to preserve individual rights, including the goal of collective security. Russia had every opportunity for reform that other states did. Yet states still ran from Russia and towards NATO. The existing members of NATO, acting with the long-held principles of the charter and the right for states to determine their outcomes, neither welcomed nor discouraged this movement. It was not easy to join NATO; it was hard. NATO did not expand; it aggregated around a political center of gravity of liberal democracy. NATO should avoid “expansion” or “enlargement” in its narratives and use every external mention of these terms as a springboard to reintroduce the positive message of the alliance. This includes confronting messages in friendly and unfriendly media when these terms are invoked, because even positive narratives are useless, if they do not reach the bulk of citizens. Recent outreach to popular entertainment outlets is a small step in the right direction, but more should be done to achieve internal and external clarity.

### **Tension 7: Internal Cohesion vs. External Confusion**

While NATO rightfully takes pride in its achievements in protecting its members, the integration of additional nations increases complexity. The heterogeneity of motivations, capabilities, and coordination between members becomes both a strength and a weakness. The strength of diversity is that it allows for a variety of approaches to emergent challenges. Potential weaknesses are reduced speed of action, increased collective action problems and strategic ambiguity.

Different perspectives lead to questions whether NATO is an alliance, security community, collective security organization, or a hybrid?<sup>30</sup> If an alliance to direct mutual defense, the invocation of Article 5 in response to the 2001 attack on the United States is an excellent example. Beyond an alliance, a collective security organization generally creates an “all against one” mindset to punish defectors-from-peaceful-coexistence and then bring them back into the security community.<sup>31</sup> No alliance members have been attacked by another alliance member—an incredible feat of collective security in world history. At other times, NATO treated adjacent non-member areas such as the Balkans, Libya, and Iraq as extended areas of interest to their security community.

These varying forms of cooperation result from the institution's adaptation to the heterogeneity of member security requirements and interests—the flexibility aids in keeping states together as NATO aggregates more members. Externally, the messaging is less clear. Is NATO only a military alliance for securing its members, or does it seek to be the protector of Europe? Does NATO represent the protection of members or the projection of liberal democratic values? Narratives from the alliance may create the impression that partners are closer to alliance membership,

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<sup>30</sup> Emily Robinson, “A Hierarchy of Interests and the NATO Security Community,” *NAOC*, May 15, 2014, <https://natoassociation.ca/a-hierarchy-of-interests-and-the-nato-security-community/>.

<sup>31</sup> Charles A. Kupchan and Clifford A. Kupchan, “The Promise of Collective Security,” *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 52–61; Emanuel Adler and Michael N. Barnett, ed., *Security Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

providing them with false confidence.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, competitors feel emboldened to strike, seeing ambiguity in the slow drift toward membership.

The peace dividend meant that NATO could be all things to all members, but as it dwindles, NATO may have to firm up its position and communicate change. While strategic ambiguity seems to help decision makers retain options, it's as likely to deceive NATO members, potential partners, and competitors who will interpret uncertainty through their particular biases. It may also invite competitors to test the alliance in the gray zone and just outside what it thinks NATO may see as its geographic scope. As previous sections pointed out, physical geography can play a decreasing role in the source of threats to the alliance.

### **Tension 8: Old Enemies and Friends vs. New Competitors and Cooperation**

It would be naïve to pretend the Cold War represents an era of black-and-white clarity. The brinkmanship of nuclear conflict resulted in vast political, strategic, operational, and tactical efforts. However, new capabilities do, in fact, create new dilemmas.<sup>33</sup> In the past, physical geography and violence were the primary security considerations. Range, precision, and capacity of weapons in land, air, and sea domains have grown, while increasing their presence in space. Beyond capabilities in physical domains, virtual terrain is increasingly capable of delivering effects against allies. As previously discussed, while NATO is imagined as a regional alliance, threats proliferate beyond the transatlantic region.

The latest tide of globalization brought a wave of interconnectivity between alliance members and non-liberal states. While some argue that the tide of globalization is temporarily receding, many connections to authoritarian and autocratic governments remain.<sup>34</sup> Previously, the geographic distance of these states from Europe provided a buffer from their values and interests, but that changed in the new strategic environment.

As the tensions described above are considered holistically, it is increasingly clear that NATO not only stands for the physical protection of its member states; it is also the guardian of liberal values such as individual rights, truly representative governments, and free trade in a rule-based order. The threats and the partners of these values extend well beyond the North Atlantic region. NATO must understand that contemporary threats do not respect regional boundaries in their means, ways, or ends. Moreover, NATO may not be able to stand up to these threats unless it builds a wider liberal alliance irrespective of where those values sit on a map.

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<sup>32</sup> Nathan Colvin, "Internal Cohesion, External Confusion: Impacts of NATO Securitization," paper presented at the 2024 GSIS Conference at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> NATO, "Countering Hybrid Threats" (May 2, 2024), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_156338.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Elisabeth Braw, *Goodbye Globalization: The Return of a Divided World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024).

## Recommendations

The nature of the international system abhors a power vacuum. Despite transforming the strategic environment to include a greater dominance of the virtual world, the physical world cannot be neglected. Additional complexity is additive in that previous requirements are not reduced but must be maintained. If credible traditional deterrent measures are not maintained, competitors will switch their means to take advantage of their absence. NATO's eastern flank members are correct in seeking integrated air defense, long-range fires, and maneuver capabilities sufficient to stand up against Russian aggression. Conventional and nuclear deterrence should remain the base of NATO capability.

That said, between Article 4 consultation and Article 5 response is the opportunity for the competitor's *fait accompli*. Competitors use gray zone operations to either achieve or shape their objectives. Ambiguity extends through strategic ends, ways, and means, especially in the cyber domain and cognitive dimension. Neither cyber nor cognitive assaults are considered armed conflict. While members can consult with each other about their concerns in these areas, they have little recourse for collective action under the NATO flag. These activities also require consistent monitoring and intervention to be successful.

Therefore, NATO should consider adapting its underlying framework to allow a more active posture for defensive and offensive cyber and cognitive engagement against malign actors. The newly established NATO integrated Cyber Centre might be the genesis for such an effort. A standing operational headquarters with assigned forces would actively monitor these areas with the authority to collectively respond at the speeds of its competitors, realizing the potential of a "new article." This would provide a more robust response than Article 4 while preserving the "big stick" effect of Article 5.

The security needs of individual nations differ from the alliance, and adversaries seek to take advantage of the seams between national defense plans. Therefore, what is needed is not more national capability, but more shared capability. To fund NATO common operations, the alliance maintains three common investment pools, albeit on a limited scale. By using the clarity of the Russian threat combined with Chinese competition, NATO could create meaningful strategic messaging campaigns that could harness popular will instead of fighting against it. If successful, this could lead to pooling more funds to expand the NATO Security Investment Programme or creating new common funds. In turn, these funds could purchase batteries of integrated air defense and long-range fire systems for the eastern flank and beyond.

Operated through common funds and forces, this approach would significantly increase the capabilities of NATO's smaller states on the eastern flank, who would be challenged to create and maintain interdependent networks on their own. States in the western portion of NATO also benefit from these systems because they would provide defense in depth. Alternatively, nations could invest in common funds for standing cyber and psychological defense forces or stability policing capabilities that could be employed for southern concerns. The key is to focus more on operational shared assets, not just developmental institutions.



Further, NATO can project its values and interests to like-minded partners by increasing security force assistance capability. A robust capability would include stockpiles of defense materials and the capability to train, advise, and assist in employing those material capabilities. Much of security force assistance can be done through the contribution of national forces, although a standing capability would be preferred. Pledges of material are valuable, but as the situation in Ukraine demonstrates, the material should be on hand.

In some ways, NATO is a victim of its success. NATO continues to provide collective defense against invasions by non-alliance states while also providing the roots of collective security amongst its members. Sometimes, it is easy to forget that such a vast concert of peace amongst so many European states would have been unimaginable less than a century ago. However, the threats to peace are adapting their ways and means, threatening this peace. Moreover, these capabilities extend beyond the immediate community. Competitors will use the desire for stability to create a paralysis of inaction in the alliance. NATO must plan not just for the worst but also for success—and everything in between.

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## **Section 2: The Russia-China Partnership**

# Current Russia-China Partnership Dynamics

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The combination of Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine and China's preparations for coercing Taiwan into submission has jump-started an already close strategic partnership into something approaching an alliance. This builds on momentum already present for forty years (despite some hiccups in bilateral relations over the decade to the mid-90s).<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, this multi-dimensional partnership remains troubled in some respects.<sup>2</sup> Its dynamics can best be clarified through a scorecard broken down into five dimensions: global geopolitics, global geo-economics, gaps in national identity, Eurasian regional architecture, and bilateral interconnections.

Some clarifications are in order. Global geopolitics refers to power politics at the highest level, seeking advantage among great powers. Global geo-economics is shorthand for positioning within the international economic order. If national identity encapsulates how a country defines what makes it unique relative to the outside world, the gap between the identities of two states signifies mutual views of their degree of compatibility in how they define themselves and see the world. The regional architecture of Eurasia points to organizational designs inclusive of areas from Northeast Asia to Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and, often South Asia. As for bilateral interactions, these are linkages between Beijing and Moscow that draw attention. All of these dimensions emerge in Chinese and Russian writings and can be analyzed as distinctive factors in understanding bilateral dynamics.

As the level of asymmetry between Moscow and Beijing has flipped and the level of dependency of each on the United States and U.S. allies has fallen, they have kept grappling with how to balance the above five dimensions of the relationship. If, at times, perceived troubles on one dimension or another risked equilibrium, such challenges were thrust aside by the end of the 2010s. First, national identity gaps were overcome, then stopgap measures dealt with regional architecture, later the state of global geo-economics stopped being a big obstacle, and finally the priority of global geopolitics could trump everything else despite some troubled bilateral interconnections. Relations solidified before 2020 and passed a vital test in 2022. This is not an alliance since neither side has committed to join in the other's wars, but they support such behavior and are determined to help each other succeed.

Separate sections below fill in some details clarifying the generalizations above. At the outset, I explain the analytical framework of five dimensions employed here. This is followed by a suggested scorecard for tracing their import over time. Next comes a section reviewing the Russian debate on China and the Chinese debate on Russia, which concludes with commentary

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Rozman, "China's Soviet-Watchers in the 1980s: A New Era in Scholarship," *World Politics* 37, no. 4 (July 1985), 435-74; Gilbert Rozman, "China's Concurrent Debate about the Gorbachev Era," in Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-Yu Li, eds., *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949 to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 449-76.

<sup>2</sup> Sergey Radchenko, "The Sino-Russian Relationship: It's Complicated," *The Asian Forum* 11, no. 6 (2023).

on the impact of the Ukraine war. A subsequent section, as part of the conclusion, considers whether problems in the Sino-Russian relationship offer serious opportunities for other countries to exploit.

### **The Five Dimensions Utilized in the Analysis of China-Russia Relations**

In the aftermath of the Cold War, where a single, overweening dichotomy defined the identity gap between two putative camps—communist and the “free world”—interest grew in a plethora of national identities. It was widely accepted that some set of assumptions about what makes one’s own country distinctive played a role in foreign interactions. This represented a backlash against international relations theories that exclusively focused on military security and balance of power as well as the spurt of optimism that economic complementarities following the Cold War could drive foreign policies. Already in the 1960s-1980s, identity awareness spread, e.g., in explanations of the Sino-Soviet dispute centered on rival interpretations of ideology and of the Japan-South Korean animosity centered on historical memory.

By the 2000s analysis discerned additional aspects of identity and more systematic ways to talk about the impact of identities on bilateral relations. These have been labeled national identity gaps and have been traced over time.<sup>3</sup> The Sino-Russian identity gap was wide in the 1990s, narrowed appreciably under the impact of directions from above or censorship in the 2000s, but still mattered in the 2010s.

What is the essence of the Sino-Russian identity gap? Some anticipated that the fact one had turned against communism and the other had retained it signified an ideological gap. This proved not to be the case, particularly as Putin embraced the Stalinist legacy and Xi the Maoist heritage without either recalling prior divisions. Many thought history, particularly what Chinese had dubbed “tsarist imperialism,” would leave a sharp identity gap. Agreeing in stages on border demarcation gave leaders an opening to say that history had been put behind them. At least, steps were taken to manage it. Rising Russocentrism and Sinocentrism posed another identity challenge, even as leaders avoided these terms and directed attention at identity gaps with the United States and the West, obscuring bilateral divides. Yet even beyond the year 2012 when Putin and Xi solidified control, a gap remained.

Differences over Asian regional architecture became pronounced in the 2000s. In spite of joining in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and in rejecting the U.S. alliances and security partnerships in Asia, Central Asia proved problematic. When Putin declared the Eurasian Economic Union and Xi Jinping quickly countered with the Silk Road Economic Belt (soon incorporated into the Belt and Road Initiative), the potential rose for deeper rivalry. Putin and Xi struggled to contain this divide. Jointly keeping Washington and its allies out eased tolerance for each other’s role.

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<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Rozman, ed., *National Identities and Bilateral Relations: Widening Gaps in East Asia and Chinese Demonization of the United States* (Washington, DC and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2013).



China and Russia took very different approaches to global geo-economics. Indeed, Russians worried that China's embeddedness in the international economy along with support for globalization limited its willingness to strengthen bilateral ties or confront the United States, as Russia intended. Through the first half of the 2010s this gap in outlook operated as one of the most substantial barriers to closer ties. Complementarity of energy supplies for industrial ones made cooperation easier.

The strongest driving force to a much tighter bond between Beijing and Moscow remained from the mid-1990s global geopolitics. Under Putin it mattered more, and Xi Jinping gave it a further boost. Yet, what to do about this shared outlook and when to act proved complicated. With other barriers losing potency and Xi and Putin forging a close relationship, a divide here was poised to be overcome. Both obsessed about altering the balance of power with the U.S., not each other.

Finally, irritants in bilateral relations kept troubling one side or the other even if censorship and a shared understanding about the lessons of the Sino-Soviet split made them manageable. These could be put aside if other factors boosted ties.<sup>4</sup> Critical to the frequency of such irritants is a low level of trust, low confidence in a shared future, and minimal, grassroots interactions forging cultural understanding.

The five dimensions are visualized separately, but the authoritarian leadership of Putin and Xi and the joint decisions taken at their numerous summits impacted all of them. Critical upgrading of relations occurred in 2014 after Putin's annexation of Crimea (which Xi did not openly endorse even as he seized the opportunity to strengthen ties), in 2019 amid Trump's trade war and North Korean diplomacy (which Putin grasped as an opening for alliance-like relations), and in 2022 (as a response to Biden strengthening various U.S.-led alliances, to which Xi and Putin answered with a "no limits" partnership). Overcoming the barriers associated with each of the dimensions proceeded over the course of a decade of their meetings.

### **Scorecard on the Evolution of China-Russia Relations**

The national identity gap had peaked with the Sino-Soviet dispute and lingered as relations kept improving through the 2000s. Only when Putin reaffirmed Stalin as well as the Soviet legacy as the "Russian Idea," an insight Yeltsin had been seeking, and Xi Jinping reverted to Mao's legacy as the crux of the "China Dream," were the main barriers to identity consensus overcome.<sup>5</sup> Any attempt to bring identity issues, such as historical disagreements, to the forefront would be quickly buried thereafter. As heirs to 1945 victor's hubris, celebrated side-by-side in 2015 at parades in the two capitals, Putin and Xi heralded a shared identity. The legacy of communism without class struggle brought the two sides together. It required abandoning ideological rigidity in favor of just a few prior tenets of belief: praise for a positive socialist legacy and its "anti-

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<sup>4</sup> For a running, bi-monthly record of how Russian writers on China raised irritants in the relationship, see "Country Report: Russia," *The Asian Forum*, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order: National Identities, Bilateral Relations, and East vs. West in the 2010s* (Washington, DC and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2014).

imperialism,” rejection of values at odds with autonomous dictatorship, and complete suppression of civil society.

Consensus on regional architecture proved to be a more daunting challenge. In 2013-16 tensions were palpable over Central Asia, North Korea, Vietnam, and the Northern Sea Route, among other regional issues. Even the Shanghai Cooperation Organization could not manage their differences as Putin launched the Eurasian Economic Union and Xi Jinping countered with the Silk Road Economic Belt—the start of his Belt and Road Initiative. When Putin yielded on Xi’s BRI—but not to Russia’s inclusion—as Xi paid lip-service to Putin’s Greater Eurasian Partnership, they succeeded in lowering the heat over regional architecture. Tensions would flare again, as in 2020 over India, but priorities were already understood by both.<sup>6</sup> The Korean nuclear diplomacy of 2018 only confirmed their need to be together. No full consensus resulted, but agreement on managing the differences sufficed. By 2017-18, the tensions that had reared in 2013-16 were clearly subsiding.

The Trump “trade war” proved to be the catalyst to defuse geo-economic discord between Beijing and Moscow. If Russians had doubted China’s resolve to stand up to the United States in a “New Cold War,” in 2019 they took satisfaction that China had changed. Trump loomed as more catalyst than cause for a shift finally under way. De-dollarization in bilateral trade was becoming easier. The dearth of Chinese investment in Russia was not a deal-breaker. China could continue to champion “globalization” that made other countries economically overdependent. Russia welcomed de-coupling key supply chains as long as it clung to its “energy card.” By 2020 there was reassuring consensus that geo-economics defers to geopolitics.<sup>7</sup>

Five events in rapid succession sealed the new, aggressive understanding behind Sino-Russian relations: the Korean diplomatic fiasco of 2018-19, which left Beijing and Moscow to soothe Pyongyang’s wounds; Trump’s foreign policy incoherence that raised their confidence; Xi’s pandemic hubris that accelerated bipolarity; the Biden diplomatic counterattack, which met hostility in both Moscow and Beijing; and the full-scale Ukraine war, in which China could not let Russia be weakened. If Moscow surmised that the Grand Strategic Triangle seen in the 1980s was reborn, while Beijing pursued a Sinocentric sphere in Asia along with a G2 while feigning “multipolarity” in which Russia is the leading other, geopolitics reigned supreme.

Perceptions of the United States are a driving force in Sino-Russian relations. After they had deteriorated beyond repair in Russia, the focus shifted to China’s views. If in 2013 to 2016 there was wavering, the years 2017 to 2020 sealed the deal.<sup>8</sup> Negativity hardened further from 2021,

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<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Rozman and Gaye Christofferson, eds., *Putin’s Turn to the East in the Xi Jinping Era* (London: Routledge, 2023); Danielle F.S. Cohen, “China’s Strategic Thinking toward India, 2017-2020,” *The Asan Forum*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2024).

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Rozman, “Repulsing Challenges to Sinocentrism in Northeast Asia, 2017-2020,” *The Asan Forum* 12, no. 1 (2024).

<sup>8</sup> Yun Sun, “China’s Strategic Thinking toward the U.S. Role in the Indo-Pacific, 2013-2016,” *The Asan Forum* 11, no. 4 (2023); Yun Sun, “China’s Strategic Thinking toward the U.S. Role in the Indo-Pacific, 2017-2020,” *The Asan Forum* 12, no. 1 (2024).

extending the geopolitical turn to Russia. It was not U.S. insensitivity to China's or Russia's interests driving the two together as seen in the diverse attempts by presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden to appeal to one or both countries. No U.S. leader could have satisfied the Russocentric and Sinocentric ambitions of leaders obsessed with a mission to fulfill a historic dream.

Bilateral ties are not close, and potential for tension is never far away. Chinese museums on bilateral history are off-limits to Russians, reminding us that only a few years ago a flare-up occurred over celebrating the history of Vladivostok. In the face of greater Central Asian wariness toward Moscow, Beijing is making its case in security as well as economics despite a lack of cultural rapport.<sup>9</sup> Chinese insensitivity and arrogance leaves Russians concerned but with little leverage. We have seen that bilateral distrust can be kept within bounds in the atmosphere of today's confrontation with the United States and its allies. Russia has narrowed its options with little leverage in the foreseeable future. China is in the driver's seat.

Russia's intentions have been laid bare, with no uncertainty about the accelerated timetable. China's plans remain subject to its shifting balance of geopolitical and geo-economic goals, leaving its timetable for more assertively supporting Russia or moving to rein in Taiwan more uncertain. The Chinese debate on the Ukraine war provides some perspective, although the existence of a minority viewpoint is no indication that the mainstream faces a serious or imminent challenge. Key to the debate is thinking about Russia, its history, and future Sino-Russian relations.

### **The Russian Debate on China and the Chinese Debate on Russia**

Russian writings on China and Sino-Russian relations have shifted in stages during the years of Putin's "Turn to the East" since 2012. In search of multipolarity, early analysis tilted toward balancing China despite a mainstream intent on very close relations. After Putin's annexation of Crimea, joining with China in a framework for infrastructure and economic integration pushed multipolarity with U.S. allies aside even as skeptics warned of asymmetry. A further turn toward China occurred in the late 2010s only to arouse concern that China was so confident it was ignoring Russia's interests. The mainstream grew emboldened to herald Chinese ties even more after the onslaught into Ukraine, while censorship tightened over those still seeking some balance in the Greater Eurasian Partnership. Just as the debate in China heated up from 2022, that in Russia narrowed to reinforce Putin's policies.

Why have assessments of Moscow since the 1980s stirred Beijing more than any other major power? The answer is centered in three defining words: parallelism, triangularity, and legacy. China's leaders have an abiding recognition of stages of socialism and its reform or dismantling, grasping for answers in the parallel paths of China and the Soviet Union/Russia. Moreover, in an obsession with the Grand Strategic Triangle, including relative comprehensive national power, China keeps its focus on Moscow as the third leg in a triangular view of geopolitics even as the

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<sup>9</sup> Gaye Christofferson, "China's Strategic Thinking toward Central Asia: 2013-24," *The Asan Forum* 12, no. 1 (2024).

pull of bipolarity keeps growing. Finally, memories of the Sino-Soviet dispute are never far from sight, making avoidance of any repetition a matter of high priority.

Two unequal forces have driven commentary on Soviet/ Russian history in China over four decades. The mainstream—the security core of international relations analysis, Marxist “theorists,” and orthodox historians who place the official line above the search for truth—contends with advocates of “reform and opening up,” who prize truth and fear that the wrong lessons will be drawn about the history of socialism—that Beijing and Moscow will converge in restoring its past principles and forging a bond against the existing international order. Defending the Soviet order and blaming Gorbachev for the upheaval that brought about the collapse of the socialist bloc and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the mainstream attacks what it calls “historical nihilism,” in recent years accelerating critiques of archival and other serious scholarship. Close ties with Putin’s Russia, committed to similar use of history, serves to defend a worldview steeped in assumptions of parallelism between the trajectories of the two countries. Skirting over sharp differences over the course of the Sino-Soviet split, national identity discourse is now overlapping.

Without historical parallelism, driven top-down by the Communist Party leaders, the Chinese debate about Russia would lack an overarching narrative sensitive to the fate of China’s Party system. Serious historians, social scientists, and foreign affairs analysts would have an opening to reach beyond narrow observations. It is difficult to make the case that Beijing should distance itself from Moscow if failure of the latter—in the light of Gorbachev’s perceived capitulation to the West—is equated with imperiling the survival of China’s own Communist system or identity.

Triangularity also limits any prospects of distancing China on great power matters, such as the Ukraine war, from Russia. By 1982, Beijing had set its sights on making the Grand Strategic Triangle equilateral, conditioning normalization with Moscow on it backing down on three regional issues that denied it a sphere of dominance along China’s borders while conditionally building up ties with the United States and its allies. Gorbachev’s 1986-88 “new thinking” appeared to satisfy Beijing in two respects—backing down on Deng Xiaoping’s “three conditions” while firing the leading figures in demonizing China—but it drew scathing reactions for its impact on the Grand Strategic Triangle, as if this was obsolete in a harmonious new era. After three years of angst over the end of the socialist bloc and the ongoing collapse of the Soviet Union, as if these “disasters” meant the full fury of the United States would be turned against China in the new, skewed triangle, it took years of prodding Yeltsin and then Putin to reconstruct the triangle as two vs. one in China’s favor. Triangularity continues to shape perceptions today.

Much as serious historians challenge the premises of parallelism, international relations experts, including many on the U.S. and its allies and some on Russia, do not agree with the core arguments of triangularity. The U.S. did not concentrate on weakening or isolating China and is ready for cooperation and competition not just confrontation; Russia is a second-rate country not only unworthy of playing a balancing role but determined to exacerbate Sino-U.S. tensions in ways harmful to China’s interests; and geopolitics is a distorting lens given China’s vast assets. For the mainstream’s great power centrism and zero-sum logic, the uphill battle to move beyond triangularity saps the will to confront the West, marginalizing it.

Finally, the legacy of the Sino-Soviet split shadows thinking about Russia itself. In the 1990s, Chinese and Russians, previously enlisted in castigating the other side, found that both sides agreed that their unmitigated clash had been a disaster for each of their national interests and must not be repeated. In the face of lingering distrust on many matters, including a border dispute that required a compromise but could not be put fully to rest, they had to suppress open, mutual criticisms. It is this consensus on censorship and “feigned respect” that shapes the responses to the Ukraine war, lessening the chances that Chinese critics get a public hearing or Russians dissatisfied with China’s partial support or encroachments are heard.

Whereas the Russians have feared both China’s geo-economic interests standing in the way of closer ties and Sinocentric designs coming more to the surface, the Chinese have lacked trust in Russia, as too oriented economically and culturally to Europe and still suspicious of China’s intentions. Local Russian demagogues over the 1990s even warned of the “yellow peril.” Overwhelming such doubts are the memories of the price of the schism in the 1960s-80s. Leaving Russia in the lurch in the 2020s over the Ukraine war would go against China’s verdict on that legacy.

Of all the events since the beginning of the 1990s, the war starting in 2022 has the greatest historic significance, testing bilateral relations in an unparalleled way. It is widely viewed from a broad perspective, not for the morality of Russia’s moves but for the historical transformation of which it is a part and an accelerant. For the Chinese mainstream, the war was “forced” on Russia due to U.S. hegemonism, manifested in the expansion of NATO in the West, similar to the beefing up of alliances in the East. Only by supporting Russia’s fight against such pressures does China act in its geopolitical interests. Whether Moscow’s precise timing or moves were well-advised or not, Beijing has no choice, in this perspective, but to side with it. Only the prism of the Grand Strategic Triangle matters in this worldview.

At the opposite extreme are bold voices, struggling to get their message heard, saying that Russia’s war was misconceived on the basis of reasoning not in line with China’s national interests. Moscow is acting out of a narrow obsession with rebuilding its empire and weakness in its economic prospects. Moreover, it is not strengthening its position as a pole worthy of Beijing’s principal partner, but only weakening and isolating itself. Backing its war does not help China geopolitically and has negative spillover for it geo-economically. China should instead prevent the United States and its allies from treating Beijing through guilt by association for this war. Even if the geopolitical path will be confrontational, China should not fall for the strategic trap laid by Russia on a timetable not of China’s choosing and with galvanization of the US and its allies to a degree not in China’s own interests.

Not only is the geopolitical fallout from the war against China’s interests, say the critics of the mainstream, the geo-economic fallout centered on preoccupation with economic security and limiting economic dependence on an adversary or potential adversary is also harmful for China. Of all the dimensions manifest in the Sino-Russian relationship, the geo-economic one is where China has the greatest incentive to distance itself from Russia’s war. The spillover is hurting China

just as its economy is reeling and in need of more outside cooperation. The case these outliers air could be boosted by putting more pressure on China for its behavior.

China is taking advantage of the war to alter the terms of Sino-Russian relations. On regional matters, China is pressing its advantage, e.g., in Central Asia through the new C+5 grouping, excluding Russia and adding a security element previously reserved for Russia. On the Northern Sea Route, China is not filling the vacuum left by Russia's shortage of funds but advancing its own priority of turning the port of Vladivostok into a transshipment point for Northeast China to connect to the rest of the country. Meanwhile, China does not need to yield bilaterally; it can drive a hard bargain, as in negotiations over the Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline. A further boon is the rising prospect of enlisting Russian energies in the pursuit of China's strategic objectives in the Pacific, joint exercises and new declarations of support for China's territorial assertiveness, among them. Such concessions by Russia may take time to materialize, but military cooperation is in the forefront.

### Conclusion

Over the twelve years of summitry between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, Sino-Russian relations have continuously improved despite repeated challenges. Each time one of the five critical dimensions of the relationship raised concern in one or the other country, an answer was found to keep the partnership on track. If in 2012-13, uncertainty remained regarding each dimension, a succession of steps to refocus ties or set differences aside led to mutual confidence by the end of the decade that the relationship was secure enough for each side to proceed with the geopolitical priorities it most desired. Skeptics about loss of multipolarity in the "Turn to the East" had been overwhelmed by the boosters of China, but Putin still realized that a bold initiative would be advisable to gain China's respect, i.e., a war to conquer Ukraine. Those who doubted the value of an economically weak Russia for empowering China's rift with the United States and its allies also lost influence. By 2020 bilateral relations were solidified, and in 2022 they passed a critical test.

On the Russian side, Putin is too dug in on his war and anti-West diatribe, and it would take an egregious provocation against Russia by China to even elicit the slightest recalculation. Voices in Moscow calling for more multipolarity in Asia rather than increasingly asymmetrical reliance on China could only gain traction by a shock from China, not from U.S. or allied moves. More likely, Moscow would quietly resist Beijing's insensitivity, yielding ground, without active distancing. The debate inside Russia proved to be too limited to suggest limits well before 2022.<sup>10</sup>

On the Chinese side, the strains with the U.S. and its allies arise less from bilateral relations than from strategic rethinking. A shift would not result from satisfying China's one-sided demands—excessive and not amenable to resolution—but from additional pressure making clear the costs of endorsing the agenda of Russia and reasonable overtures that de-risking does not mean de-

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Russia's Policy towards China: Key Players and the Decision-making Process," *The Asan Forum*, March 5, 2015.

coupling and deterrence is not synonymous with containment. Unilateral U.S. actions are less impactful than multilateral approaches with a critical group of allies and partners, preparing for an extended challenge. Today's broad export control sanctions are proof of this.

China's mainstream thinking rules out directly driving a wedge between Moscow and Beijing. It is also likely that just applying pressure on China will not suffice since that strengthens the hold of the mainstream viewpoint and does not rally U.S. allies and partners together. Yet, without a more united front intensifying the pressure, the mainstream will hesitate to change course. If a change were to occur, the most that could be expected is not a 1972 or 1989 game-changing transformation of the Grand Strategic Triangle, but a limited reassessment of the scope and timing of confrontation. This is worth trying, but the chances of success remain low, especially if the costs of staying on the current course are left vague.

The prevailing Chinese view in 2022-24, as in 1989-91, was that any weakening of Moscow would mean intensifying pressure from Washington against Beijing. Thus, Beijing must join with Moscow (or in the 1990s, rally it) against Washington. Some readiness exists to recalculate the costs to China's economy in uncertain times. An ongoing debate on the pros and cons of Russia's war is testimony to other options.

A joint strategy on Russia since 2022 is not matched by a joint strategy on China. To counter a full-scale war by a state with energy revenue able to survive apart from extensive economic ties to the West or its Asian allies is very different from managing an economic powerhouse. Without clearer costs for China, its support for Russia is unlikely to diminish. China has much more at stake in global trade; so there may be ways to limit its willingness to support Russian adventurism in the short run. Geo-economics is the dimension most relevant to China's calculations. The debate in China on Russia and economic issues is much livelier than the debate in Russia. This is evidence that there are forces inside China contemplating some flexibility.<sup>11</sup>

What is more likely to move Beijing: the carrot or the stick? The carrot has been tried repeatedly. The stick is known to have some effect but has not been wielded with sufficient consensus and to maximum effect. As China provides a lifeline to Russia, North Korea, and Iran, only a more united and determined response might cause it to pull back to a degree. This would not mean driving a wedge between Beijing and Moscow.<sup>12</sup> That is beyond realistic hopes. Rather, it could mean getting Beijing to put new limits on its support for Moscow's aggressive moves, aware that they would wind up contrary to China's short-term, geo-economic interests.

At no point since the 1990s was it feasible to drive a wedge between Beijing and Moscow. After the strengthening of their relationship, as seen in the dynamics of the five dimensions raised, this is even more inconceivable. That does not mean the two powers have identical strategies. The

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<sup>11</sup> "Russia Is Sure to Lose in Ukraine, reckons a Chinese Expert on Russia: Feng Yujun Says the War Has Strained Sino-Russian Relations," *The Economist*, April 11, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Putin and Xi's Unholy Alliance: Why the West Won't Be Able to Drive a Wedge between Russia and China," *Foreign Affairs*, April 9, 2024.

Chinese debate over the Ukraine war suggests that even as the mainstream holds to the logic that Beijing must stick closely to Moscow, a minority raises doubts that could be the basis of appealing for greater distancing from Moscow without expecting any kind of serious split. Such appeals would best be backed by sticks more than carrots, imposing costs on China's economy, where it is vulnerable, while pointing to long-term benefits.

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## Russia-China Relations: Limitless or Limited?

Natasha Kuhrt

Russia and China began mending ties during the Gorbachev period in the late 1980s. Relations had been in the doldrums since the Sino-Soviet split of 1961, and the two powers narrowly avoided all-out war in 1969. The Soviet collapse in 1991 did not significantly change the trajectory of their relations, in particular due to the pressing need to demilitarize and demarcate their 4,000-kilometer-long border and develop the Russian Far East. By 1997, they had declared a “partnership, aimed at strategic cooperation in the twenty-first century.” With Vladimir Putin’s accession to Russia’s presidency in 2000, speculation increased regarding the durability of the relationship, as Russia appeared initially to seek cooperation with the West on 9/11 and other issues. In 2001, however, China and Russia signed a “Treaty of Friendship and Good-Neighbourliness,” and cooperation began to develop in a number of different areas including arms sales, energy sales, and in Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> Russia had previously sought to diversify its relations in the Asia-Pacific in order to avoid overdependence on China, but by 2012 it had already become dependent on China for energy exports.

A pivot to Asia was declared in 2012, but with Russia’s annexation of Crimea, this had in reality become a pivot to China alone. The relationship has focused on increased military cooperation, closer economic ties, and increasing coordination on various issues in international politics. In particular, Beijing and Moscow have increasingly aligned on normative issues. Both resisted the institutionalization of the responsibility to protect and its invocation in the case of Libya in 2011. Moscow came to view the so-called “colour revolutions” in Ukraine (2004 and Maidan 2014), Georgia (2003), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) not as spontaneous home-grown uprisings, but instead as regime change orchestrated from without. The Kremlin saw the Arab Spring in the same light, and Beijing joined Moscow in deploying the same terminology condemning regime change. Moscow has reciprocated, designating the Umbrella revolution in Hong Kong as a “colour revolution.”

At the Beijing Olympics in February 2022, the two states declared a “no limits partnership,” one which was “superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War Era.” The declaration noted their joint opposition to NATO enlargement, describing it as “U.S. hegemonism.” While China reaffirmed its adherence to the one China policy regarding Taiwan, there was no specific mention of Ukraine, other than that both sides oppose attempts to undermine security and stability in their “common adjacent regions.”<sup>2</sup>

The continuing primacy of the United States, while not the driving force behind their relations, acts as an accelerator, along with their growing convergence of views on international order as well as on domestic politics. However, official Russian and Chinese accounts have refrained from describing the relationship as an alliance. Russia has referred to it as a “flexible strategic

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<sup>1</sup> Natasha Kuhrt, *Russian Policy Towards China and Japan: the El’tsin Period* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

partnership” while in official Chinese discourse there is no discussion of alliances, in line with the three “no’s”: non-confrontational, non-aligned, and not directed against third parties.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, however, that as Russia’s war on Ukraine has continued, official Chinese statements no longer describe the relationship as having “no limits” but rather refer to a “good-neighbourly relationship, comprehensive strategic coordination and mutually beneficial cooperation,” a somewhat less expansive formulation.<sup>4</sup>

### **Economic Cooperation**

From the start the trend in bilateral trade was for Russia to export raw materials and hydrocarbons to China, while China exported mainly consumer products and manufactured goods to Russia. While this might seem like a sensible complementary arrangement, there was for some years a certain resentment among Russian elites regarding their country becoming a “raw materials appendage” to China, effectively reducing Russia to a “vassal state” of China. Sensitivities regarding Russia’s status, greatly reduced after the end of the Cold War, exacerbated this feeling. However, such concerns were nipped in the bud by the Yeltsin and then the Putin regimes, to the extent that any criticism of relations with China was actively discouraged and eventually became almost taboo.<sup>5</sup>

Russia-China trade is at an all-time high, and turnover reached \$200 billion in 2023. However, the bulk of Russian exports to China still consists of raw materials, mainly hydrocarbons. This trend has been exacerbated by the war and Russia’s disconnection from European markets. China buys cheap Russian oil and the Power of Siberia gas pipeline transports gas almost exclusively to China. China has diversified its supply, however, so Russia is just one of many Chinese suppliers even as it has become increasingly dependent on China. The Russian regime is heavily dependent on the rents from these energy exports, which significantly offset the effects of Western sanctions. Both countries have strengthened their efforts to de-dollarise trade as a means of circumventing sanctions and opposing the United States’ domination of the global economy.

### **Military Cooperation**

In the military sphere, despite high levels of Russian arms sales to Beijing and joint military exercises and patrols (including in the Indo-Pacific), military cooperation has not reached an advanced stage. There are no joint command structures, no joint deployments or base sharing, and no common defence policy. Russia has long sold weaponry to China, including S-400 missiles that could theoretically reach Taiwan. Overall, however, exports to China have dropped off, in particular as China no longer needs as much Russian equipment due to reverse engineering, while

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<sup>3</sup> Natasha Kuhrt, “Russia and China,” in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Graeme Gill (New York: Routledge, 2023), 568-78, 570.

<sup>4</sup> The State Council, People’s Republic of China, “Xi says to continuously consolidate, develop Russia-China ties serves the fundamental interests of both countries,” December 31, 2023. [https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202312/31/content\\_WS659159adc6d0868f4e8e2ab0.html#:~:text=31%20%2D%2D%20The%20development%20of,serves%20the%20fundamental%20interests%20of.](https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202312/31/content_WS659159adc6d0868f4e8e2ab0.html#:~:text=31%20%2D%2D%20The%20development%20of,serves%20the%20fundamental%20interests%20of.)

<sup>5</sup> Kuhrt, *Russian Policy Towards China and Japan*.

China is also improving its indigenous production capacity.<sup>6</sup> India also remains a significant buyer of Russian arms.

Russia and China have been conducting joint exercises and drills in Central Asia and the Russian Far East for a number of years, and since 2012 they have conducted joint naval maneuvers on an annual basis as well as patrols in the Indo-Pacific. In 2015, they conducted a joint naval exercise in the Mediterranean as well as in the South China and Baltic Seas. 2019 saw their first joint strategic aviation patrol: two Russian bombers and two Chinese warplanes flew over the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan. In December 2020 another joint patrol prompted Japan and South Korea to scramble fighter jets. In the Indo-Pacific, joint bomber patrols around Japan and South Korea show support for Beijing's military tactics of using force for intimidation purposes.<sup>7</sup> In general, while previously Russia had maintained a relatively neutral stance on the Indo-Pacific, in the past few years it has begun to echo China's rhetoric, for example calling Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan a "provocation."<sup>8</sup>

The Chinese military learns from these exercises. The PLA has no significant combat experience, so Russia's capabilities and ability to project military force—especially since its intervention in Syria and now in Ukraine—is of great interest. China is learning from the Russian experience in Ukraine of defending against land-based attacks on naval forces,<sup>9</sup> though overall the situation in Ukraine is clearly not analogous to the maritime context of Taiwan. China will continue to watch and learn from Russia's war, not least in the area of logistics (where Russia has struggled), as this would be key to retaking Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> Overall the costly and lengthy nature of Russia's invasion—which China had assumed would be a short campaign—is more likely to deter China from resorting to force on Taiwan.<sup>11</sup>

So far, there is no sign that Beijing would risk openly transferring weapons to Russia. However, China is transferring a number of components to Russia that fall into the category of dual-use technology. Russia's machine-tool industry is by some estimates almost completely reliant on China for machine tools and parts that are critical to arms manufacturing, including diggers and heavy trucks which can be used as military vehicles. Silicon chips used in drones, artillery, and missiles are also imported from China. Private individuals in Russia can easily purchase drones

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<sup>6</sup> Cullen Hendrix, "Russia's boom business goes bust," *Foreign Policy* (May 3, 2023), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/03/russia-arms-sales-weapons-exports-worldwide-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>7</sup> Natasha Kuhrt, "Russia-China relations and the Indo-Pacific," *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies* 5, no.1 (June 2023).

<sup>8</sup> TASS, "Pelosi's Taiwan visit inspired by U.S.' desire to prove its impunity—Lavrov" (August 3, 2022), <https://tass.com/politics/1488503>.

<sup>9</sup> Lyle Goldstein and Nathan Waechter, "What Chinese naval planners are learning from Ukraine," *RAND Commentary* (April 4, 2024), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/04/what-chinese-navy-planners-are-learning-from-ukraines.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Lyle Goldstein and Nathan Waechter, "China ponders Russia's logistical challenges in Ukraine war," *RAND Commentary* (August 28, 2023), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/08/china-ponders-russias-logistical-challenges-in-the.html>.

<sup>11</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Potential Lessons from Ukraine for Conflict over Taiwan," *Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2023), 7–25.

over the border in China.<sup>12</sup> There have also been reports of goods critical to arms manufacture reaching Russia via Central Asia, thus evading sanctions. For example, China's exports to Kyrgyzstan of ball bearings (which enable the production of tanks) increased by 2,550% in 2023.<sup>13</sup>

While the military relationship has not reached the level of an alliance, the two defence ministers consult each other regularly and have pledged to increase military cooperation. A secure border with China has meant that Russia was able to transfer a greater number of forces from the Russian Far East to Ukraine for the war effort. At the same time, strong relations with China also embolden Russia to shift troops to areas that border NATO countries, such as the Baltics and Finland.

### **Central Asia: A Shared View on a Shared Neighbourhood?**

In Central Asia, Russia and China have long been cooperating within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was established in 2001 as a result of confidence-building measures arising from border demarcation in Central Asia. For China, the SCO has been an important means of learning not only about Central Asia but also arguably about international relations, where China lacks experience. China has been the driving force behind the organization, which has at its heart a "compact" that calls on its members to fight the "three evils" of separatism, fundamentalism, and terrorism. Tensions have arisen due to Beijing's attempts to pursue economic cooperation with some Central Asian states by using the SCO. As one Russian analyst put it, China was using the organization as a "cover" for economic activity. Overall, however, Russian support and accommodation of China in Central Asia has assisted Beijing in achieving economic goals.

China needs stability in Central Asia in order to realize its plans for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with this region being a key part of the Silk Road. Russia responded by announcing the "Greater Eurasian Partnership," which seeks to position Russia as an equal to China by harmonizing Russia's Eurasian Economic Union with the BRI. However, Chinese acquiescence to this plan is widely seen as a ploy to assuage Russian fears of Chinese dominance.<sup>14</sup> China will seek to protect its economic assets, particularly given its fears regarding terrorism in Xinjiang and Central Asia. It has already signed various bilateral agreements with Central Asian states, has

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<sup>12</sup> Markus Garlauskas, Joseph Webster, and Emma C. Verges, "China's Support for Russia has been hindering Ukraine's Counteroffensive," *New Atlanticist* (November 15, 2023), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/chinas-support-for-russia-has-been-hindering-ukraines-counteroffensive/#:~:text=Large%2Dscale%20Russian%20imports%20of,which%20Chinese%20exporters%20have%20provided.>

<sup>13</sup> *Bne Intellinews*, "Kyrgyzstan has 'the balls' to send Russia parts crucial to making tanks, trade data suggests" (September 21, 2023), <https://www.intellinews.com/kyrgyzstan-has-the-balls-to-send-russia-parts-crucial-to-making-tanks-trade-data-suggests-293734/>.

<sup>14</sup> David Lewis, "Strategic Culture and Russia's pivot to the East—Russia, China and Greater Eurasia," *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies* 34 (July 2019), <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/strategic-culture-and-russias-pivot-east-russia-china-and-greater-eurasia-0.>

started using Private Security Companies in the region, and has helped Tajikistan set up patrols near the border with Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

While previously Russia and China had well-delineated roles in Central Asia—with Russia emphasizing political and security aspects while China pursued economic cooperation—China is showing signs of becoming both a more political actor and more proactive in the security arena. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 placed in question Russia’s role as a regional security provider while its military remains fully engaged in Ukraine. Nevertheless, China is not ready to take on the role of a full-blown security provider. While China has some small-scale units protecting its Central Asian borders, Russia’s presence there still far outstrips China’s.

One area where Russia and China as well as other SCO members arguably diverge is on the issue of sovereignty. When Russia recognized the declarations of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008 (after Western recognition of Kosovo independence the same year), China did not follow suit, nor did the Central Asian states. In 2014, while not explicitly condemning it, China signaled disapproval regarding Russia’s annexation of Crimea. China has not recognized Russia’s annexation of the DNR and the LNR. Moreover, China has sought to reassure Kazakhstan of its support for its territorial integrity, a pointed nod to potential Russian designs on Northern Kazakhstan (which is home to a significant Russian minority).<sup>16</sup>

In January 2022, just before Russia’s renewed invasion of Ukraine, the “winter” revolution in Kazakhstan was put down by Russia with troops from the CSTO. This was the first time that the organization had activated its military provisions—on previous occasions, in 2010 during protests in Kyrgyzstan and in 2020 during Armenia’s conflict with Azerbaijan, the CSTO had failed to act despite requests for it to intervene.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Kazakhstan in 2022, however, Moscow was concerned that the revolution could spread to Russia given their joint border. Russia depicted the uprising as the work of outside forces, a narrative echoed by China. The CSTO intervention demonstrated that Russia remained Central Asia’s main security actor. It also highlighted the fears of Central Asian leaders, as well as China and Russia, of the contagion of so-called “colour revolutions” spreading to them.

Conflict along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in autumn 2022 was portrayed by Russia as the work of the West. Despite pleas from the Kyrgyz leader for CSTO intervention, however, no action was taken, irrespective of the fact that both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are CSTO members.<sup>18</sup> Russia—

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<sup>15</sup> “China planning to help Tajikistan protect Afghan border,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (September 26, 2016), <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-planning-help-tajikistan-afghanistan-border-posts/28014407.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Vusala Abbasova, “China’s President vows to support Kazakhstan’s territorial integrity,” *Caspian News* (September 16, 2022), <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/chinas-president-vows-to-support-kazakhstans-territorial-integrity-2022-9-16-0/>.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Ambrosio, “The Collective Security Treaty Organization: A Lifeless, Shambling ‘Alliance,’” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (March 4, 2024), <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2024/03/04/the-collective-security-treaty-organization-a-lifeless-shambling-alliance/>.

<sup>18</sup> Shuhrat Baratov, “Russia’s Faltering Promises to Post-Soviet States,” *Australian Outlook* (October 5, 2022), <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/russias-faltering-promises-post-soviet-states/>.

preoccupied with the war in Ukraine—clearly did not want to repeat its intervention in Kazakhstan. At the SCO summit in September 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping allegedly told Putin that he had “concerns” about the war’s progress. This was a reminder that China needs a secure and stable environment in Central Asia for the BRI project to be successful, and it had been partly relying on Russia to provide this. The two have overlapping security concerns in Central Asia, but there is limited cooperation on security in the region. China’s meeting with Central Asian leaders in Beijing in 2023—without Russia—signaled that China may be taking advantage of Moscow’s preoccupation with the war in Ukraine. China shows no signs of taking over from Russia as a security provider in the region, and the two are unlikely to clash, but the Central Asian states are looking increasingly to diversify foreign and trade policies away from both Moscow and Beijing.

### The Arctic

In the Arctic, China seeks a stronger economic and political presence, and Russia seeks financial support for its development projects. China wishes to jointly develop Arctic fossil fuels, while Russia has made the Arctic a bigger part of its core development programme—militarizing the region with new installations and increasing air and sea activity in Arctic waters, eliciting concern from NATO members. While they need each other to further their Arctic goals, Russia seeks to preserve its Arctic sovereignty. It remains concerned regarding China’s longer-term motives and its aspirations as a “near-Arctic state,” including possible espionage, as witnessed by the downturn in joint scientific cooperation since April 2022. This may indicate insufficient levels of trust.<sup>19</sup> The invasion of Ukraine has jeopardized several Sino-Russian Arctic projects, including plans for Chinese investment in port facilities in Indiga and a titanium mine.

Western governments worry that Beijing may be enlisting Moscow’s help to secure a greater strategic presence in the Far North, given its importance for the development of the “Polar Silk Road,” and Chinese icebreaker missions and research stations could be seen as dual-use operations. The PLA has worked with the Russian military on joint maneuvers near the Arctic Ocean, including in the Bering region during joint naval operations in September 2022 as part of the Vostok strategic stimulations. China is interested in the Northern Sea route, which due to climate change is now navigable outside summer months and provides a shortcut to Asia, but questions remain as to how close the two want to be on Arctic policy. China has often been lukewarm regarding energy projects in the region, and it has shown itself unwilling to use the NSR due to fears of Western sanctions.<sup>20</sup>

Yet Russia also seeks to bring other actors into the Arctic such as India, Brazil, and the UAE. Unlike Central Asia, Russia sees much of the Arctic as a key part of its sovereign territory.<sup>21</sup> On the other

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<sup>19</sup> Marc Lanteigne, “A China-Russia Arctic Alliance? Not so Fast,” *The Diplomat* (February 21, 2024), <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/a-china-russia-arctic-alliance-not-so-fast/>.

<sup>20</sup> Lanteigne, “A China-Russia Arctic Alliance?”

<sup>21</sup> Colin Wall and Njord Wegge, “Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (January 25, 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-arctic-threat-consequences-ukraine-war>.

hand, China's original plans in the Arctic envisaged cooperating with a range of Arctic states (not just Russia), and Beijing will likely not wish to be fully reliant on Russia for access to energy resources there. Indeed, China has slowed cooperation on energy as well as on shipping.

Given NATO's designation of the Far North as a region of increased strategic concern, a close eye will need to be kept on whether military developments between NATO and Russia might spill over into the Arctic. The region assumes greater urgency with the accession of both Finland and Sweden to NATO, while their entry also deters Russia. It is likely that Russia will use hybrid tactics in the Arctic region against neighbours such as Norway, including GPS jamming. However, we should not assume a convergence of interests between Russia and China there. Moscow guards its sovereign territory jealously, which is why China still does not hold majority stakes in any energy projects on the Yamal peninsula. While China is usually depicted as the power that prizes stability, in this region it is rather Russia that prioritizes stability, viewing China as an expansionist power.<sup>22</sup>

### **Russia, China, and the Global South**

China's implicit support for the invasion of Ukraine provides Russia with strong symbolic aid. Both see the West as seeking to advance its geopolitical interests and influence under the cover of liberal values and soft power—via the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and other instruments. Given widespread suspicion in a number of Global South countries regarding R2P (and human rights in general), this can find traction.

Within the UN General Assembly, China has a high level of control over discussions of human rights, presenting itself as amplifying the voices of the Global South within a multipolar order. Meanwhile, Moscow has capitalized on humanitarian concerns about hunger as a way to reinforce the often-implicit notion of its indispensability to resolving global challenges.<sup>23</sup> However, China can speak to the Global South using its shared identity as a developing power and on shared decolonizing ground. Moreover, China has a successful developmental story to tell, while Russia does not. On the other hand, China benefits from Russia's more extensive diplomatic experience, in particular at the UN.

China still seeks to project itself as a “responsible global power” when speaking at the UN, and its position as both a major funder and a major contributor to UN peacekeeping lends it authority and legitimacy—arguably even vis-à-vis the P3 (the United Kingdom, the United States, and France). Russia and China have been increasingly proactive in courting Global South countries, often leveraging residual anti-Western (or at least Western-sceptic) biases. This is not a new

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<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Buchanan, “Why Russia and China Won't go the Distance in the High North,” *Royal United Services Institute* (May 8, 2024), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/why-russia-and-china-wont-go-distance-high-north>.

<sup>23</sup> UN News, “Russia's weaponization of food and energy impacts all countries, Zelenskyy tells UN Assembly” (September 19, 2023), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/09/1141002#:~:text=President%20Volodymyr%20Zelenskyy%20of%20Ukraine%20told%20world%20leaders%20in%20the,all%20of%20yours%20as%20well.%E2%80%9D>.



phenomenon, but the Ukraine war has consolidated and brought into focus what was already a growing trend. The war highlighted a divergence of emphasis/priorities. In the West, the emphasis was on the values at stake as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and Western leaders spoke of defending a rules-based order. Other actors such as South Africa or India preferred not to frame the war in this way. There were a number of reasons for this, ranging from not wanting to be drawn into conflicts seen as far removed from them in geographical and geopolitical terms, to their relations with Russia and/or China.

More people in developing countries see China in a positive light than they do the United States, although it is close —62% versus 61%. In the developing world, 75% of those polled in South Asia held a positive view of Russia; 68% in Francophone Africa, and 62% in Southeast Asia.<sup>24</sup> These figures are not completely new: the trajectory had been steadily rising since before 2014, and most people cited a dissatisfaction with democracy as the overriding reason for their opinions rather than Russia's attractiveness.

At the February 2023 G20 forum, India told the United States that the forum was primarily for discussing economic issues and that it should not be “hijacked” for political purposes.<sup>25</sup> A number of “middle” powers have refused to follow the U.S. lead in condemning Russia for the invasion, including Brazil, Indonesia, India, Mexico, and South Africa. For India, the relationship with Russia, while weaker than it was, still has value in balancing relations with China. It also helps dilute any perception that India is becoming a Western ally. India's relations with Russia have been severely tested by its role in the Quad, and India's role as a spokesperson for the Non-Aligned Movement remains an important facet of its identity. India now seeks to build its identity on the basis of “multialignment,” a stance which finds favour with a number of Global South countries that do not wish to be seen as siding with the West (or, for that matter, with Russia and China). At the Munich Security Conference, several leaders (including Namibia, Brazil, Colombia, Philippines, and Indonesia) suggested that they had a different view of the war from the United States'. Many, like India, are looking at the revival of the nonaligned movement as a diplomatic force but shun bloc politics. Credit Suisse describes a Global West facing a Global East (Russia, China, and their allies), while the Global South is “reorganizing to pursue its own interests.”<sup>26</sup> The increased agency of the Global South countries makes them targets of Russia and China.

Russia has increased its efforts at disinformation on the African continent, largely leveraging existing anti-Western feelings—the disinformation campaign against France in Mali being a prominent case. Russia is also increasing the number of foreign correspondents stationed in Africa as part of a new front in its information war. In June 2023, Russia hosted the second Africa-Russia summit in St. Petersburg. In 2021, China launched its Partnership for Africa's Development, and

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<sup>24</sup> Xavier Romero-Vidal, “The world has divided into liberal and illiberal spheres,” *Cambridge Stories*, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/worlddivided>.

<sup>25</sup> Atlantic Council, “Experts React: Did India's G20 just crack the code for diplomatic consensus?” *New Atlanticist* (September 10, 2023), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react-did-indias-g20-just-crack-the-code-for-diplomatic-consensus/>.

<sup>26</sup> Credit Suisse, *Investment Outlook 2023: A Fundamental Reset*, [https://data.stagingmag.nl/2763/issues/39432/494150/downloads/2209270\\_cs\\_io\\_2023\\_en\\_rgb\\_digital.pdf](https://data.stagingmag.nl/2763/issues/39432/494150/downloads/2209270_cs_io_2023_en_rgb_digital.pdf).

it has since become more vocal in promoting capacity building for African peacekeeping via the African Union, including by providing funding. Russia lacks China's financial clout, but it plays a more duplicitous role, acting as a provider of niche security services and using its private military troops for often-nefarious activities. China and Russia might have a shared interest in pushing out the West, but China still needs a stable security environment to conduct its economic activities, so Russia's meddling can be a hindrance. One example of the potential for a clash was the killing of nine Chinese workers at a gold mine in the Central African Republic. The Wagner Group was widely believed to be responsible.<sup>27</sup>

Overall, Russia and China compartmentalize their activities in Africa, and there is no evidence of coordination. On the other hand, both countries are weapons suppliers, in some cases to the same countries—including Mali, Sudan, CAR, Angola, Ethiopia, and Sudan<sup>28</sup>—so competition for markets cannot be ruled out. Moreover, as China's economic footprint continues to grow, it may require greater security provision to protect its assets.

### **Antagonism toward the West as a Unifying Factor?**

While the two share an antipathy toward the Western-led liberal international order and align regarding threats to regime security, their identities as “civilizational states” mean that there is potential for a clash as different visions of world order may fail to align. China promotes a global security initiative along with a global civilization initiative and a community of common destiny. A more nationalistic China might resurrect territorial claims on the Russian Far East, a region which is already largely dependent on China for exports.

NATO's creation of a joined-up security space—combining the Atlantic and Indo-Pacific to address the dual threats of Russia and China—is a belated acknowledgement of the strength of their strategic partnership. NATO was slow to acknowledge the dual threat. At the same time, individual members of the alliance have different priorities, and bundling the two powers together could be dangerous. Why? Because Russia and China have long pointed to a Western bloc mentality that seeks to contain them, so this might provide evidence of their encirclement.

At the same time, the West calling them out makes it harder for Russia and China to maintain the ambiguity surrounding the depth of their partnership. Strategic ambiguity contributes to the deterrent value of their relationship, making a formal alliance unnecessary. It is unlikely that Russia and China will form an alliance. For China, that would mean a loss of maneuverability, which would be key should Russia be weakened. An alliance assumes similar goals, yet China still wants to work with the global order to some degree. However, Russia is the only strategic partner of global stature that China has, and it is not easily replaceable.

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<sup>27</sup> Jason Burke and Zeinab Mohammed Salih, “Russian Mercenaries accused of deadly attacks on mines on Sudan-CAR border,” *The Guardian* (June 21, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/21/russian-mercenaries-accused-of-deadly-attacks-on-mines-on-sudan-car-border>.

<sup>28</sup> Robert E. Hamilton, “The Dragon and the Bear in Africa: Stress-testing Chinese-Russian Relations,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (November 9, 2023), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/11/the-dragon-and-the-bear-in-africa-stress-testing-chinese-russian-relations/>.

The Indo-Pacific is where China's main concerns lie, and the increasing dialogue between the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific mean that security issues in one space resonate in the other. A weakened Russia that is more dependent on China could conceivably intervene on China's behalf should there be conflict in the Indo-Pacific. However, a weakened Russia could equally leave China more exposed in the Indo-Pacific. Both China and Russia have expressed support for a world order in which the West plays a reduced role. Yet the Russian invasion of Ukraine has, if anything, underscored the differences in policy direction and the growing power gap between the two nations. Beijing wishes to develop a globalized world with itself closer to the centre, while Russia's actions have clearly indicated a desire for an expanded strategic sphere of influence.

Although the outcome of the Ukraine conflict remains unknown, Beijing already faces notable diplomatic and financial losses, including a worsened relationship with Europe, a stronger NATO which has begun improving relations with friends like Japan and South Korea, and the possibility of open markets being replaced by supply line cuts should Russia be subject to long-term international ostracism. Further, China is concerned that Russia's failures in Ukraine could be a precursor to its own miscalculations regarding Taiwan. Finally, neither an imperialist, expansionist Russia nor one which has been significantly weakened to the point of ineffectualness will serve Beijing's expanding international interests, including in its relations with the United States.

Beijing and Moscow understand that the European Union will have different priorities from NATO. In this respect, Beijing has rather different interests from Russia. Beijing still needs to maintain its economic relations with the West (Europe at least). A report written in 2023 by Russian experts close to the Kremlin acknowledges that China still has to tread carefully in its relations with the West, unlike Russia. The report notes, "There are concerns that once China has achieved strategic self-sufficiency, it may partially lose interest in relations with Russia in the long term. Therefore, Russia needs to diversify ties with the World Majority countries and eventually normalize relations on the western flank to the extent possible. The sooner we force the United States (including using the nuclear factor) to look for ways to normalize relations, the better."<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

For China, Russia's war on Ukraine represents a learning point. On the economic front, Beijing is drawing lessons from Russia's handling of Western sanctions. Like Russia, China is also carefully observing the resilience and unity of Western nations in the face of Russian aggression. For China, the EU countries still represent an opportunity to test the West—as they struggle with their loyalty to the United States as it seeks to decouple from China, their varying degrees of dependence on China make it a difficult choice for some European capitals. As one analyst puts it, China considers Europe to be a "gray zone": while it "cannot be trusted," it can be useful given that its policies are not always in harmony with the United States.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sergei A. Karaganov, Alexander M. Kramarenko, and Dmitry V. Trenin, *Russia's Policy Towards World Majority*, (Moscow: Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, 2023).

<sup>30</sup> Yifan Ding and Alice Ekman, "China-Europe Relations, Two Years After Russia Invaded Ukraine," *Carnegie Endowment* (March 11, 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2024/03/11/china-europe-relations-two-years-after-russia-invaded-ukraine-pub-91940>.

China is walking a fine line between neutrality on the world stage and partiality at home, a line which may become increasingly difficult for Beijing to tread. Beijing's wider external security environment in Europe—and potentially Asia—is being complicated by the war in Ukraine. Japan has already increased its defence spending, and Taiwan is preparing for its own defence more robustly. Now that NATO has explicitly referred to China as a “threat,” this might become more serious were Russia to be defeated in Ukraine and a new leadership to come to power.

Russia and China are not in full lockstep, but they increasingly coordinate their media or echo narratives. A number of trends in their relationship have been exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but we should be wary of viewing them as outcomes of the war alone. Beijing's and Moscow's jaundiced view of the West will continue to unite the two powers, but this does not mean that a “wedge” strategy or a “reverse Kissinger” would be successful.

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# **NATO's Gray Zone Challenge: Implications of the Russia-China Partnership**

**Kristian Smith**

While Russia and China have made concerted efforts to broaden their partnership for more than the past decade, the advent of Russia's war of choice with Ukraine is laying bare the full nature of this dangerous and evolving relationship. Immediate concerns within NATO are likely to figure prominently as member nations undertake the crafting of appropriate strategies and force development initiatives to keep pace. But the evolving threat is increasingly broader than just the military realm, will not be limited to the geography of Europe, and in its most ambitious form represents a concerted effort on the part of Moscow and Beijing to assume a greater share of global leadership clout and upend the normative behavior of nations subscribing to the international rules-based order set in place following the Second World War.

Russia and China's self-proclaimed "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination" is both broad and deliberately vague in its construction, defying useful comparisons between it and the NATO alliance where few, if any similarities exist. Unlike NATO's military-based alliance that remains focused on collective defense, the evolving partnership between Russia and China is seemingly based on a strategic opportunity, convenience, and temporal assurances of mutual support for each other's norm breaking pursuits rather than any principled ideology. And while Russia and China claim to be threatened by security concerns relating to NATO expansion accompanied by efforts intent on containing it, these assertions amount to little more than preludes to the justifications made by both nations as they actively pursue spheres of influence in multi-dimensional ways.

Neither nation has ever embraced the kind of alliance represented by the NATO organization that exists today. In the past, Russia has seen purpose in collaborating with others for mutual benefit. World War II offers the most significant historical example from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More recently, Russia has predominantly found purpose in forming bilateral partnerships with other authoritarian states beyond China, including North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela. China maintains a 2,000+ year history of going it largely on its own, resting on the historical understanding of itself as the Middle Kingdom, rightfully ruling over all others as vassal states based on a mandate conferred to it from Heaven.<sup>1</sup> Much like Russia, in more recent times, China has seen fit to develop partnerships with various countries capable of contributing to its own strategic objectives. In addition to Russia, China maintains a relationship with North Korea as an entity conveniently capable of destabilizing North Asia in time of need, though that relationship has rarely proven an easy management problem for Beijing. China's relationships with Laos and Cambodia are transactional at best and exist for likely little more purpose than to frustrate ASEAN's adherence to a consensus-based approach in its formulation of organizational policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 10.



Despite this handful of convenient partnerships of varying depths, in practice, Russia and China demonstrate a decidedly anti-alliance bent when viewed through a Western lens.

In essence, alliances are anathema to the imagined future both nations craft for themselves. Russia and China are revanchist states seeking a return to the imagined glories of a past era that neither ever existed nor would be worth returning to for the vast majority of their citizens. While Putin bemoans the fall of the Soviet Union, claiming it to be the “greatest political catastrophe of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,”<sup>2</sup> Xi and his party elites manipulate the historical memory of 1.4 billion Chinese citizens and leverage all facets of national power to confront those nations called out as responsible for imposing “a century of humiliation” on China.<sup>3</sup> In Russia’s case, a return to spheres of influence seems in historical harmony with the same country that embarked on hundreds of years of expansion and subjugation in the name of its own security just as the “China Dream” seeks to reinitiate its mandate to rule over “all under heaven.” In both cases, this amounts to unfettered nationalism being underwritten by a fictionalized interpretation of their own histories, conveniently side-stepping the amount of conquest their actual histories wrought over others in the realization of their modern-day borders.

While each country has incredibly rich histories, the modern states addressed here share a common and far more recent origin story, stemming from 19<sup>th</sup>-century Marxist intellectual, economic, and political theories, though neither Russia nor China ever came close to living up to such idealized philosophical principles. Rather, each adopted forms of communist practices as a means to establish an elite and ruling tier over what continued to be highly subjugated societies. In Russia’s case, this corrupt communist model ultimately failed under its own weight, resulting in the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and giving rise to the Russian Federation. Little changed in the years that followed despite great hope to the contrary in the West. The Russian Federation retained an elite governing class that looked much like their forebears, now propped up by a syndicate of oligarchs made enormously wealthy through the country-wide purchase of state-owned enterprises at fire-sale prices.<sup>4</sup> China’s communist system collapsed under its own weight as well. Mao’s Great Leap Forward proved to be one of the greatest human catastrophes in history. His regime survived only by doubling down on the subjugation of its own people and the regime’s internal critics. Tens of millions of lives were taken in the process.

Russia and China both emerged from these revolutionary chapters signaling a desire to collaborate more closely with the broader international community. Russia leaned in the direction of the West economically, politically, and militarily—even engaging in combined efforts with NATO militaries under the banner of “Partnership for Peace.” Similarly, Deng Xiaoping oversaw major economic reforms and set conditions by which China would later join the World Trade Organization. However, such reforms also inspired calls for improved standards of living and for democracy, which proved altogether too unsettling for the ruling elite of the Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Osborn, “Putin: Collapse of the Soviet Union Was ‘Catastrophe of the Century,’” *The Independent* (April 26, 2005), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putin-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-was-catastrophe-of-the-century-521064.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Tony Wood, *Russia without Putin: Money, Power and the Myths of the New Cold War* (London: Verso, 2018), 23.

Communist Party, leading to the massacre of 10,000 peaceful protesters and fellow countrymen in Tiananmen Square in 1989. In the face of global outrage relating to this massacre, Deng crafted what would come to be known as China's "Hide and Bide" strategy, which it would follow for at least the next two decades. The essence of the strategy was to maintain a low profile, build capability and capacity quietly, and wait for the time to become ripe for its use. Similarly, while Moscow's honeymoon with the West may have ended earlier, it was certainly over in 2008 when Russia invaded the Republic of Georgia, demonstrating its resolve to confront what it viewed as the potential for NATO expansion on its periphery. In this light, it is unsurprising to understand how Moscow and Beijing have found utility in leveraging such a common past, and the evolution of this partnership continues to this day, manifesting an increasing array of threats to the international system they both seek to upend and reshape to their purposes.

Developing a clear-eyed understanding of the comprehensive threats this partnership portends, the contextual challenges NATO nations face as these threats evolve, and an equally weighted effort to identify opportunities inherent in the current and future security environments are of paramount importance. Left to their own devices, these partners will continue their concerted efforts to chip away at the foundations of human rights, national sovereignty, and alliances more broadly. With these mutual interests forming the basis of their relationship, Russia will employ "ways" designed to discredit and weaken the West and the NATO alliance because it lacks the relative power to do much else without risking its own regime's survival. Conversely, China will pursue these overarching goals by continuing to evolve its relative strength internationally, across all instruments of national power, emphasizing its economic influence most prominently.

Addressing Russia's and China's efforts to expand and modernize their militaries for the purpose of improving their coercive power potential will prove a necessary and familiar effort for NATO strategists and planners. To be sure, there are complex military problems to solve, innovation and burden sharing agreements to orchestrate, and the bolstering of national will across the Alliance to not only fund such efforts but also to be ready to employ capabilities in creative ways with a greater tolerance for risk. To do this well, NATO needs to continue evolving its understanding of the threat in its conventional and unconventional manifestations, to begin aggressively pursuing strategic counter-approaches that deter these threats, and to expose and confront their nefarious and destabilizing behaviors, all while demonstrating NATO's collective adherence to the values that continue to resonate with like-minded nations across the globe.

### **Conventional Threats**

Russian and Chinese nuclear and conventional arsenals are certainly formidable, and China's recent decision to further increase its arsenal presents threats the world over. While war involving a nuclear exchange remains possible, the arsenal protecting NATO members offers an equally formidable deterrent to its use. Below the threshold of nuclear capabilities, China boasts the world's largest army and navy, and the third largest air force.<sup>5</sup> But this force is, at least

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2020).

currently, almost exclusively situated in East Asia. China possesses few overseas bases and none, currently, in Europe—though its Belt and Road Initiative should be understood as, at least partially, a condition-setting effort for its military posture ambitions. In addition to possessing the world’s largest nuclear weapons arsenal, Russia’s conventional forces remain formidable in both size and capability despite the heavy attrition thus far experienced in Ukraine. Due to its vast land mass, Russia is also necessarily an Atlantic and Pacific Ocean power, capable of significant power projection across the globe from its own proximate shores and land borders.

What resides at the core of NATO’s ability to continue to outpace extant conventional threats and thus deter them is the health of the Alliance itself, which proved slow to start as Russia annexed territory from Ukraine in 2014, but which was decidedly more up to the task as Russia ruthlessly pursued even more ambitious ends in 2022. It should surprise no one that the state of the Alliance requires maintenance and innovation to ensure its continued relevance and ability to leverage its significant potential when need arises. In this way, NATO remains a complex system of systems that, when finely tuned, more than matches its adversaries’ systems of opposition with formidable systems of collaboration—in Europe. Ensuring the alliance retains its overarching unity of purpose, resolve, and resilience when tested remains a foundational aspect of its power and international standing. In the near term, the Russia-China partnership is likely to play out in ways designed to strengthen Russia’s conventional force hand in Europe. Across longer timelines, China’s formidable conventional force is likely to threaten the interests of Alliance members more globally. Its Belt and Road initiative and its designs on achieving influence in the Arctic should be seen in this context.<sup>6</sup>

### **Unconventional Threats**

While the world watches as Russia carries out its war against Ukraine with a largely conventional force, both Russia and China have invested significant effort in devising a vast array of irregular warfare capabilities and approaches, embracing changes to the character of the way wars are being fought, and redefining their approach to realizing advantages across the entirety of the peace war continuum. Neither Russia nor China make distinctions between these two realms and a failure to account for this and counteract these efforts will unnecessarily and potentially irrevocably cede advantage to Moscow and Beijing.

In practice, irregular warfare accounts for cyber campaigns, covert action, support to state and non-state proxies, misinformation, disinformation, espionage, and economic coercion.<sup>7</sup> Russia refers to this as New Generation Warfare, some also refer to it as the Gerasimov Doctrine, but this approach is not a new tool in Russia’s inventory.<sup>8</sup> The KGB actively engaged in most of these activities throughout the Cold War.<sup>9</sup> Its recent readoption, for which Russia’s Chief of General

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan E. Hillman, *The Emperor’s New Road* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 73-74.

<sup>7</sup> Seth G. Jones, *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2023), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, *Three Dangerous Men*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

Staff, Valery Gerasimov, is given significant credit, is said to be a reaction to the perceived agility of the United States and other NATO member states in the irregular warfare realm during what became known as the Arab Spring.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of its current auspices, New Generation Warfare should be more accurately understood as a refined approach to previous practice and an acknowledgement of Moscow's renewed emphasis on irregular approaches.

Neither are such approaches new for Beijing. In fact, by China's own acknowledgement, this approach to war dates back nearly 2,500 years, during a time known as the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE). These nearly timeless approaches recently found modern interpretations in a White Paper titled "Unrestricted Warfare," written by two PLA Colonels with the central assertion that war and warfare exist through every medium available to the practitioner.<sup>11</sup> Though not considered formal PLA doctrine, the publication of the concepts closely coincided with the formation of its Strategic Support Force, an organization devised to centralize the PLA's strategic space, cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare missions and capabilities.<sup>12</sup> While China recently elected to disaggregate the elements of this force, all of its constituent organizations continue to exist under the leadership of the PLA.<sup>13</sup>

Despite their vast collective arsenal of nuclear and conventional force capability, it is through the irregular warfare competition space that the Russia-China partnership is proving the most pervasive and pernicious. By adversary design, the NATO Alliance is finding itself challenged by these less obvious—though no less vexing—threats. Both adversaries are ardently authoritarian, insulate their regimes from any meaningful realization of democratic participation in state affairs, and view human rights as anathema to their form of governance.

Little imagination is required to contemplate what life would be like under the occupation of either nation. Russia's well-documented clamp downs on dissent are on full display in today's international media coverage, evidencing a system much like that from its notorious past, where state security was assured through a combination of intimidation and political oppression realized by an "archipelago" of overcrowded gulags and state-sanctioned murder. Compare Alexei Navalny's poisoning and the ever-lengthening prison sentence resulting in his death to the efficient and cinematic elimination of Yevgeny Prigozhin after openly challenging the nucleus of Russian power in what appeared to be a sputtering and indecisive coup d'état attempt. As examples, these two human dramas occurred within Russia's borders and concluded with the same outcome—the targeted victim's death. But Moscow's lethality has no respect for borders, bringing its brand of incorporated murder to other nations with a casualness intended to flout norms and discredit the sovereignty of its adversaries and potential adversaries alike. Recall the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in bucolic Salisbury, UK, or the recent mob-style murder of Maksim Kuzminov in a seaside town in Spain after he defected via his Mi-8 helicopter

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<sup>10</sup> Jones, *Three Dangerous Men*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Qiao Liang, *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America* (New York: Echo Point, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*.

<sup>13</sup> Matt Bruzese, "Farewell to China's Strategic Support Force. Let's Meet Its Replacements," *Defense One* (April 28, 2024), <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2024/04/farewell-chinas-strategic-support-force-lets-meet-its-replacement/396143/>.

and provided Ukraine with troves of classified documents relating to Russia's war effort.<sup>14</sup> These examples are not exceptional cases, rather simply the most widely-reported in recent times. As outrageous as this may seem, Beijing has taken such oppression of its own citizens to an entirely different level. Historically, Mao Tse Tung is estimated to be responsible for the murder of between 20-30 million people as a result of flawed policies relating to the Great Leap Forward program. He subsequently initiated the Chinese Cultural Revolution that resulted in an estimated 7.7 million deaths. In a macabre acknowledgment, Mao was entered into the Guinness Book of World Records as the world record holder for mass murder, a category the authors understandably discontinued.<sup>15</sup> These figures are so large that they inspired the creation of the concept of "democide" by the U.S. political scientist Rudolf Rummel, defined as "the intentional killing of an unarmed or disarmed persons by government agents acting in their authoritative capacity and pursuant to government policy or high command."<sup>16</sup> As referred to earlier, when reform-minded citizens sought democratic reforms in Tiananmen Square, Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, ordered their elimination as he and ruling elites considered them a threat to the regime. 10,000 Chinese citizens were murdered in one day.<sup>17</sup> Modern threats to the regime's rule are referred to as "the Five Poisons" and include pro-democracy activists, members of Falun Gong, Uyghur separatists, and activists promoting the independence of Taiwan and Tibet.<sup>18</sup> And today, China imposes the death penalty significantly more than the rest of the world combined. According to an Amnesty International report from 2018, "China remains the world's top executioner—but the true extent of the use of the death penalty in China is unknown as this data is classified as a state secret; the global figure of at least 690 recorded in 2018 excludes the thousands of executions believed to have been carried out in China."<sup>19</sup> Said a different way, China kills an estimated three times as many of its own citizens compared to the rest of the world combined. If Moscow and Beijing demonstrate such little regard for their own citizens, being subjugated to these regimes under occupation presents a nightmarish prospect. Tragically, the world doesn't need to resort to imagination on this topic. The lines of effort guiding Russia's campaign in Ukraine are characterized by the perpetration of incessant war crimes and crimes against humanity. The indiscriminate bombing of civilian population centers, indefensible abduction of scores of children, and reports of widespread war crimes have several objectives, not least of which is to put potential adversaries of Russia's designs on notice that a similar fate awaits others at a date and time of Russia's choosing. And China's efficient crackdown of protests

<sup>14</sup> Michael A. Schwartz and José Bautista, "A Russian Defector's Killing Raises Specter of Hit Squads," *New York Times* (March 31, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/31/world/europe/russian-defector-murder-spain.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Ilya Somin, "Remembering the Biggest Mass Murder in the History of the World," *Washington Post* (August 3, 2016), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2016/08/03/giving-historys-greatest-mass-murderer-his-due/>.

<sup>16</sup> R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997), ch. 2.

<sup>17</sup> BBC News, "Tiananmen Square Protest Death Toll 'Was 10,000'" (December 23, 2017), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-42465516>.

<sup>18</sup> Samantha Hoffman and Peter Mattis, "Managing the Power within: China's State Security Commission," *War on the Rocks* (July 20, 2016), <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/managing-the-power-within-chinas-state-security-commission>.

<sup>19</sup> Amnesty International, "Death Penalty," <https://www.amnesty.org/zw/what-we-do/death-penalty/#:~:text=China%20remains%20the%20world's%20top,been%20carried%20out%20in%20China>.

in Hong Kong, strong-arming of neighbors with conflicting claims in the South China Sea, and imprisonment and reeducation of over three million Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province (all the while eluding any significant international response) are similarly designed to signal to Taiwan the fate that lies in store for them at a time of China's choosing.

These campaigns of mounting oppression and threats to neighbors across multiple domains, referred to by some in the policy community as coercive gradualism, are intended to normalize the world to egregious autocratic behavior that is designed as an affront to the normative behavior that undergirds the international rules-based order. A failure to challenge such activities not only threatens the legitimacy of responsible actors around the world, but it also invites Moscow and Beijing to continue such activities, facing little in the way of resistance.

The Russia-China partnership shares another foundational and enabling aspect, they are both unabashedly criminal states. Putin's rise to power was at the behest of an oligarchical consortium that acts as it pleases with complete impunity.<sup>20</sup> The same must be said of China, where Xi makes claims of "total victory" over graft and corruption "after purging nearly five million individuals, mostly party officials, over the past 10 years."<sup>21</sup> Whether they were actually corrupt, which scores of them no doubt were, or were simply understood to be less than sufficiently loyal to Xi amounts to a distinction without any real difference. Corruption is also exported by both nations well beyond their own internal borders, co-opting societal elites and politicians in a manner to gain influence over countries of interest, from South and Southeast Asia to the heart of Europe, where, for example, a viable French political candidate, Marine Le Pen, and her far-right political party were potentially rewarded for their fealty to Moscow until fallout from such close ties and loans from Russia led the party to pay them back.<sup>22</sup> Further afield in Europe, burgeoning authoritarian aspirants in other countries are ripe for the very same influence efforts.

Economic leverage is yet another instrument each country has militarized to complement the activities referred to above. Until several European countries sought different sources, Russia threatened and ultimately followed through with cutting off natural gas access to those clients to control public reaction to its first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and subsequently in 2022.<sup>23</sup> It is now denying Ukraine the opportunity to export its grain to much of the world. This might be a legitimate war aim, denying Ukraine a funding stream, were the war itself legitimate. It is not. Instead, the effort extends the suffering experienced by Ukraine in the form of widespread grain shortfalls and resultant hunger across more than a handful of nations who rely on Ukraine's significant grain crop to feed their citizenry.

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<sup>20</sup> Wood, Russia without Putin.

<sup>21</sup> Chan Ka Sing, "China's war on corruption turns into high wire act," *Reuters* (January 18, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/breakingviews/chinas-war-corruption-turns-into-high-wire-act-2024-01-18/>.

<sup>22</sup> Leila Abboud, "Le Pen's RN party pays back €6mn Russian loan," *Financial Times* (September 19, 2023), <https://www.ft.com/content/572af411-abd9-49ab-8cf9-f9fba4d54380>.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Flanagan, "How a Russian Natural Gas Cutoff Could Weigh on Europe's Economies," *IMF* (July 19, 2022), <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2022/07/19/blog-how-a-russias-natural-gas-cutoff-could-weigh-on-european-economies>.

The more nefarious aspects of China's now somewhat fraught Belt and Road Initiative must be understood through the lens of irregular warfare as well. The effort is demonstrably rife with the corruption of politicians and elites, relies on the widespread application of debt traps, and sets conditions for the expansion of China's military posture across a wide swath of the globe. Closer to home, China's nine-dash-line claims in the South China Sea have led to de facto control of the region despite an international court's decision asserting otherwise and resulting in the denial of fishing rights of neighboring states whose citizens have relied on this essential resource for thousands of years.

The prospects associated with this evolving threat invite a retrospective quote from Bismark as a warning: "We live in a wondrous time, in which the strong is weak because of his scruples and the weak grows strong because of his audacity."<sup>24</sup> In summary, neither Russia nor China constrain themselves by the normative boundaries of the rules-based order in pursuit of their individual and mutual strategic aims. Their partnership only makes them bolder in the process, provided each country's objectives are served by such collaboration. And we should expect the relationship and similar approaches to continue unabated—that is, until self-interests prove irreconcilable with the benefits of partnering.

### **What Is to Be Done**

By reviewing the ends sought by Moscow and Beijing, the way they collaborate with each other to accomplish associated objectives, and the operating concepts they employ to achieve their collective purposes, it is clear that this challenge is far larger than just a military problem for NATO to solve. In this author's opinion, the most immediate threat is that NATO cannot afford for Russia to win its war of conquest in Ukraine and the Alliance's collective response since the invasion in February 2022 is (to a degree) laudable, must continue, and must become more robust. In a dark chapter only recently concluded, European nations within the Alliance responded admirably as U.S. politicians negligently allowed funding to slip for what were crucial months of the war, which likely added to the duration and expense of the war effort and certainly failed to consider with any gravity the suffering of Ukraine's citizenry remaining within its borders. A clear-eyed understanding of the impact that such complacency wrought must be understood by all and, more importantly, never repeated.

Beyond the immediacy of the war in Ukraine, NATO's continued efforts to improve deterrence in all its manifestations are of paramount importance as well, and they will be an essential component for securing the operating space required to compete in the more nuanced irregular warfare realms. Evolving military capabilities that not only strengthen deterrence but also imbue NATO with the ability and will to create security dilemmas for Moscow and Beijing are essential. NATO cannot afford a singularly reactionary approach. In doing so, NATO must see fit to embrace a fuller definition of resiliency, that is, to withstand expected challenges and to subsequently take measures to reduce or eliminate such challenges in the future—an idea many learn on the playgrounds of youth. Winston Churchill often opined about Russia, asserting his conviction that

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<sup>24</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 230.

“there is nothing for which they have less respect than for weakness, especially military weakness.”<sup>25</sup> Acting upon this insight is a change that is called for if NATO seeks to confront Moscow in ways intended to change or limit the way Russia wields its own force.

It is fitting that NATO is taking heed of lessons learned in the war over Ukraine and participating in some of the most novel innovations to emerge from the conflict. One lesson learned that should prompt the concerted effort of the Alliance concerns the depth of its arsenal and the productivity and resilience of its collective Defense Industrial Base. War planners are faced with increasing evidence regarding the resource intensity of modern wars, leading to deductions about the close relationship between the depth of one’s arsenal and the likelihood of achieving military success. Through the collective application of its 32 member states, this is a competition NATO can win, and one it cannot afford to lose.

NATO’s efforts to refine the operational concept of Comprehensive Defense is commendable, and its two-volume handbook series on the topic offers an excellent blueprint for real and lasting institutional change across the Alliance. Another entirely unclassified product, the Resistance Operating Concept, is also an excellent resource on this topic. Many NATO members on Russia’s periphery, but not all, realize the merits of these concepts and are far along in tailoring their own Comprehensive Defense approaches. In both cases these concepts assert theories of merit and encourage a “form follows function” approach to preparing societies to be resilient in the face of threats across the peace-war continuum, and to be prepared to resist in the event of partial or total occupation. No two nations face the same threat, and these concepts do an excellent job to frame how to think through factors like geography, population, demographics, economics, culture, and national will.

The utility of this concept is not limited to nations that share a border with Russia, nor any nation with respect to China. Misinformation, disinformation, cyber campaigning, espionage, and assassination are activities demonstrably unconstrained by borders, and all member nations of NATO must understand they are being actively targeted by both Moscow and Beijing militarily, economically, diplomatically, and cognitively. Raising societal awareness of the irregular threats posed by Russia and China and defining activities all citizens can take to defend against these myriad threats, conventional and unconventional, directly contributes to a nation’s and by extension NATO’s resilience. And the approach itself has the potential to generate significant deterrent energy, bolstering the will of increasing percentages of people within targeted societies. The “war footing” on which such an approach places a nation is not just for those threatened with occupation. Insulating a society from the wide array of irregular warfare approaches is an educational necessity for any nation in the irregular crosshairs of Moscow or Beijing, no matter its location relative to a particular border. NATO members must strive to imbue their societies with increasingly sophisticated awareness in cyberspace and social media, investing in approaches designed to inoculate against forms of mis- and dis-information, and to undergird principles of democracy and sovereignty inherent in each nation’s political system.

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<sup>25</sup> Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography* (New York: Scribner, 2015), 12.



In addition, Comprehensive Defense should be understood as an exportable approach to those partners across the world facing similar threats posed by authoritarian regimes and intent to act in bolstering their own defenses. The central tenets within these concepts have broad application and invite a tailored approach to its adoption. In this way, NATO can leverage an activity understood to be related to resilience and deterrence, creating a wider array of dilemmas for both Russia and China and fostering a community of like-minded states that are increasingly attuned to Russian and Chinese irregular warfare activities. In so doing, NATO has the potential to create an even wider array of dilemmas intended to stifle Moscow and Beijing's nefarious behavior by further imposing reputational costs and negatively affecting their standing in the world.

Preventive efforts alone will prove insufficient. NATO should more broadly embrace an increase in its active approaches to complement its passive defenses, exposing the kind of behavior described above to the global community, including citizens of Russia and China, by navigating the firewalls each nation has emplaced to isolate their citizens from the ideas espoused by the outside world. NATO should lead the way in bringing evidence of violations of normative behavior to international criminal courts, pursuing war crimes indictments for incidents that meet this threshold. Put differently, NATO should more robustly create dilemmas for Russia and China in the cognitive domain to force the expenditure of resources as they address challenges to their legitimacy in the court of international opinion. Anything less than a comprehensive approach to combating their irregular activities—defensive and offensive—belies a lack of will to confront adversaries that have proven themselves fully invested in destroying the fabric of the Alliance and the societal health of member states that undergirds it.

The world has watched as NATO and other concerned nations have chosen to increase support to Ukraine in the quantity and quality of capabilities, crossing risk averse “red lines” with increased frequency. We must take from this the fact that Russia seeks to limit the breadth of the conflict, evidencing this by failing to respond to the application of improved capabilities in word but not deed. In both cases, Moscow and Beijing view regime survival as the first of their national priorities, and they view escalation as an approach with significant downsides. China does not supply Russia with arms directly, fearing sanctions and other responses from countries on which its economy is dependent. This marks the difference between an erstwhile partnership and an alliance. This is no time to let up. In fact, doubling down is now entirely called for based on this evidence.

In so doing, NATO is likely to realize, over time, a broader community of like-minded nations that find it impossible to ignore the nefarious behavior that Moscow and Beijing have made such a familiar feature of the security environment. Simultaneously, NATO should continue to invoke the values and principles that underwrite the rules-based order by portraying the actions and activities of Russia and China as anathema to acceptable behavior according to the majority of the world. Measuring effectiveness will take time and will require NATO and like-minded nations to persevere in the face of new and likely even more vexing challenges.

However, over time, if the coercive gradualism embraced by Russia and China is proven to be detrimental to their aims, NATO's approach is likely to eventually lead to changes in behavior and, perhaps go further to drive a wedge, once and for all, between the partnership that Moscow and Beijing find strategically convenient.

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# The Importance of Lawfare: Protecting NATO Values from Russia and China

Joanna Siekiera

The aim of this chapter is to shed light upon a deeply troubling and complex issue: how state actors are using and abusing international law and the rules-based order against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). What demands our regional (Euro-Atlantic) and global attention is Russian and Chinese leverage of legal norms to justify their malicious, illegal, and dehumanized tactics against NATO's core values: democratic pluralism, rule of law, protection of human rights including the rights of minorities, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and freedoms of speech, religion, and navigation. In recent decades, those values have been targets of both governments in Moscow and Beijing.

The key to opposing Russian and Chinese assaults on NATO values is understanding these adversaries. We must eschew our Western lens and begin seeing the other party as they are in order to understand Russia in the war in Ukraine or China breaching international law regulations against the Philippines in the South China Sea. Such understanding must be at all levels—not only military training or technology advancement, but also from the legal standpoint. Here, the author dares to say, that the West is not doing enough. International law in general will not be obeyed and does need to be enforced. Also, Western legal culture strongly depends on good faith as one of the most important values in international law. The principle of good faith (Latin *bona fide*) refers to honesty, loyalty and reasonableness in social and legal relationships. In the realm of international law, it requires adopting a standard of behavior, stressing fidelity to treaties, proportionality and prohibition of the abuse of power for different actors. From this general value, we derive other rules, like *pacta sunt servanda*, the prohibition on the abuse of rights, or estoppel.<sup>1</sup> The principle of good faith means that we enter into international relations—treaties, customs, political declarations—with goodwill, expecting all parties and states involved to follow the rights and duties with the same approach. Based on natural law and morality, good faith is well-equipped to be a fundamental standard of behavior in contemporary international law,<sup>2</sup> including the law of armed conflict (LOAC).

Yet authoritarian regimes and terrorist groups have proven many times they will not conform with our norms. What is more, they will intentionally abuse the promises—written in treaties or agreed arrangements—in order to strike us where it hurts the most: our values. Thus, it is the author's personal and professional mission to promote legal culture as the most effective framework to understand these opponents.<sup>3</sup> Again, it is not about accepting their deeds, omissions, or motives but noticing, recognizing, and admitting their true rationale. Legal culture brings an important,

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Reinhold, "Good Faith in International Law," *UCL Journal of Law and Jurisprudence* 2, no. 1 (2013): 40-63.

<sup>2</sup> Talya Uçaryılmaz, "The Principle of Good Faith in Public International Law," *Estudios de Deusto* 68, no. 1 (2020): 43-59.

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Siekiera, "Legal culture in Protection of Civilians," *The Center of Excellence for Stability Police Units Magazine* 3 (2022): 16.

but missing element of acknowledging of a state/nation/group's core intentions, values, heritage, and ethics. Hoping we all share the same ethics is not only false and defective but also detrimental to getting the whole multidimensional and multilayer picture of the situation, at war or peace—or most likely in between.

### Using Legal Culture to Understand Russia's War in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine *de iure* started in February 2022 when Russian troops illegally entered the sovereign territory of another state: Ukraine. Yet *de facto* we must emphasize that Russian aggressive and unprovoked actions had already begun in March 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, an integral part of the Ukrainian territory. Between those years, Russia justified its own actions by international law. One of the major methods of lawfare (a term discussed later in this chapter) used by the Russian Federation has been influencing or forcing false separatist elections.<sup>4</sup> And here is important to understand the mentality of Russian imperialism. It did not use legal warfare methods so Western countries would recognize that Eastern regions of Ukraine voluntarily joined the Russian Federation. The target of the Kremlin's "democratic" messaging of elections has been for Russia's own people and sympathetic nations.

From the Central and Eastern European states' perspective, the situation looks far different from those of Western neighbors and NATO Allies. What is happening in the war in Ukraine should not only be analyzed from the strategic (military) standpoint, in isolation from the historical, socio-cultural context. For nations such as Poland, the Baltic states, and other former Soviet republics, Russian rhetoric—both political and military—is predictable and deliberate, while for some Western allies, it remains a geostrategic riddle. Before 2022 and during the first months of the war, many Western experts asserted that attacking Ukraine would not make sense from the military (and indeed strategic) point of view. Ukraine did not have enough energy resources to claim, and Russia would suffer internationally and lose its position in the Global South. Russia did not need to start a conventional war, as from every perceived standpoint, it made absolutely no benefit. Yet Russia did.

Here, the best example could be the quote by U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin during the 2023 Asia-Pacific Security Forum of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue.<sup>5</sup> The Shangri-La Dialogue is an annual gathering of the heads of ministries of defense or national security from the Indo-Pacific region. Secretary Austin reiterated the generally acknowledged theme in the West that the Russian act of aggression against Ukrainians was "shocking."<sup>6</sup> Yet for states that suffered under communism during the times of the Second World

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<sup>4</sup> Oksana Kuzan, "Falsifications and Intimidation: How Russia Held Illegitimate Election in the Occupied Luhansk and Donetsk Regions," *Ukrainian Security & Cooperation Center* (September 21, 2021): <https://uscc.org.ua/en/falsifications-and-intimidation-how-russia-held-illegitimate-election-in-the-occupied-luhansk-and-donetsk-regions/>.

<sup>5</sup> The 2023 event took place in Singapore on June 2-4.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Jeong, Ellen Francis, and Justine McDaniel, "Ukraine Live Briefing: Austin Says War is a Warning for Asia; Kyiv Promises to Keep Shelters Open," *Washington Post* (June 3, 2023): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/03/russia-ukraine-war-news-austin/>; U.S. Department of

War and afterward, during the so-called “liberation” by the Red Army, the act of aggression against Ukraine was completely predictable. It had been only a matter of time. What is more, CEE countries have been warning their Western partners about the Russian imperialist appetite. However, those countries had been ignored and were instead called Russophobes and paranoid.

An international legal framework for the Russo-Ukrainian war is not sufficient to truly understand the rationale of this armed conflict and then to find a solution on how to resolve it. The cultural context of the two neighboring Slavic nations must also be taken into consideration. The vast majority of Western analyses and media mischaracterize this as “Putin’s war.” Rather, this is a case of Russia claiming civilizational superiority towards a former Soviet nation. The author herself traveled to Russia and engaged in conversation with Russian professors, judges, academics, as well as ordinary people. Many argued based on the civilizational notion of the “heritage ladder,” where Russians are at the top while other Slavic nations, like Ukrainians, should not exist as sovereign but rather should be brought under the rule of Russia for their own benefit.<sup>7</sup>

The political propaganda used first by the Russian tsars, then communist dictators Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, has always emphasized civilizational dominance,<sup>8</sup> and therefore the vital role of Russia, Orthodox<sup>9</sup> and “white,”<sup>10</sup> in contrast to the Asian (much larger) parts of that country. There were two main reasons for this. The first was to polarize Russians against the rotten West along with other regions such as the unbaptized Asians. The other was to radicalize their own population, which would be deeply subordinate to its rulers, obey the orders imposed on them, and never question the good intentions of those in power who know better how to protect their own people against the external and internal threats to their heritage, religion, and statehood.

Russian President Vladimir Putin wrote his infamous article in 2021, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”<sup>11</sup> He followed the same propaganda, claiming that Ukraine must come back to “a single whole.” Therefore, the war crimes committed by the Russian troops in this war were carried out in order to rebuild the spheres of influence known and much-loved by Russians, called “Great Russia” (Ru: Большая Россия), as well as to control the larger territory with its resources—human, raw material, infrastructure—while not to cleanse a national (Ukrainian)

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<sup>7</sup> The most commonly expressed sentences were: “Ukrainians are like cattle,” “Crimea has always been Russian,” “We must take back what is ours.” More vulgar and inappropriate arguments will not be quoted.

<sup>8</sup> Isabelle Mandraud, “Russia’s War in Ukraine is also a Culture War,” *Le Monde* (June 3, 2023): [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2023/06/03/russia-s-war-in-ukraine-is-also-a-culture-war\\_6028932\\_23.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2023/06/03/russia-s-war-in-ukraine-is-also-a-culture-war_6028932_23.html).

<sup>9</sup> Not in a religious sense, but misusing the faith for political purposes.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Domańska, “Putin’s Article: ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,’” *Center for Eastern Studies* (July 13, 2021): <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-07-13/putins-article-historical-unity-russians-and-ukrainians>.

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” *Kremlin* (July 12, 2021): <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

group. The Russian side does not need to kill Ukrainians to achieve their military goal. While they deliberately target civilians and break LOAC norms by torturing and killing prisoners of war, this is not a decisive factor on the nature or outcome of the war.<sup>12</sup>

So what is legal culture? Legal culture can be described as the lens through which we perceive the order in our society. It constitutes a fundamental aspect of any legal system, serving as a guide through which individuals observe and interpret the law. “Legal culture refers to the socially shared understandings and expectations that shape the attitudes, behavior, and actions of legal actors within a given legal system. It encompasses not only the formal legal rules but also the informal norms and practices that influence the operation of the legal system.”<sup>13</sup> Legal culture is not limited to formal legal rules. It encompasses broader societal values and principles that shape the understanding and application of the law. The most controversial example would be differing legal approaches to same-sex marriage: in some countries, homosexual couples can get married, in some they can also adopt a child, while in others it is codified in the penal code, even with capital punishment.

Both China and Russia represent totalitarian regimes that center on the needs of the nation. This may be the Caucasian Orthodox part of Russian society, or the Han Chinese East Asian ethnic group within Greater China. This may also be the ruling sect, be it the Soviet Communist Party,<sup>14</sup> the codependent oligarchs and federal services system affecting the choice and government of the Russian president, or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) using its influence over appointing its leader and at the same time the president of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Unlike in most modern Western civilizations, where the rights and freedoms of individuals are at the top of the legally-protected hierarchy, totalitarian regimes have always used their citizens for the regime’s own purposes, and the lives of their citizens held no legal meaning. All elements of society, according to those legal cultures, must be totally subordinated to the plans of the community. If they are not, they will be punished for their misbehaving, as that would potentially trigger other citizens to protest and thus change the status quo. The most severe cases in both Russia and China include murder, abduction, detention, torture, sterilizing, and forced abortions on their own citizens as well as political opponents, religious, ethnical, national, and sexual minorities.

### **Lawfare as a Central Tool for NATO to Contest its Major Adversaries**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the use of the law as a tool of warfare gained prominence and popularity in the media. While this is not inherently negative, its abuse and malicious interpretation undermines the principles of the international rules-based order, based on democracy, transparency, and respect for human rights. Lawfare is being used in order to leverage

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<sup>12</sup> Compare the legal-cultural argumentation made by the author is her article Joanna Siekiera, “Between Genocide and War Crime – Legal-Cultural Analysis of the Russian aggression in Ukraine,” *Review of European and Comparative Law* (Special Issue, 2023): 55-76.

<sup>13</sup> Susan S. Silbey, “Legal Culture and Cultures of Legality,” in *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, ed. John R. Hall, Laura Grindstaff, and Ming-Cheng M. Lo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 470–79.

<sup>14</sup> Having different names in the course of the history of the Soviet Union.

their own legal arguments and existing international institutions to achieve military and political objectives. The term derives from the combination of the words “law” and “warfare.” It encompasses both the use of law as a weapon and the exploitation of legal systems for political and strategic gain. Finally, it also refers to the strategic manipulation of legal frameworks and mechanisms to gain an advantage in armed conflicts.

The first use of the term “lawfare” was in 1975 by John Carlson and Neville Yeomans. Yet their definition was unclear and only briefly mentioned the essence, stating: “Lawfare replaces warfare, and the duel is with words rather than swords.”<sup>15</sup> In 2001, Major General Charles Dunlap expanded on this, saying that “the use of law as a weapon of war, is the newest feature of 21<sup>st</sup> century combat,” and “the rule of law is being hijacked into just another way of fighting (lawfare), to the detriment of humanitarian values as well as the law itself.”<sup>16</sup> Lawfare quickly captured scholarly, analytical, and popular imaginations.<sup>17</sup> Dunlap had demonstrated that lawfare is a weapon that is not only wielded by U.S. adversaries but also by the U.S. government in its global war on terror—through “counter-lawfare.”<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, depending on the usage, there are a few concepts and interpretations of lawfare and how it can be, should be, or should not be used. The most common defines lawfare as the use of law and legal processes as an instrument or weapon of war. In other words, one justifies one’s own actions and omissions by international law norms and principles. It serves as a fast, cheap, and recognizable tool to undermine the legitimacy of an opponent, regardless of whether that is a state or non-state actor, or if that occurs during a time of armed conflict, peace, a post-conflict, or in the gray zone. Yet some researchers suggest forging this definition of lawfare into its reflexive component. Rather than using the term to discredit an opponent’s reliance on the law and legal process, the alternative definition of lawfare focuses on the relationship between law and war, where lawfare is used to describe the art of managing law and war together, not as opposing elements.<sup>19</sup> The last concept of lawfare restores the original “neutral” meaning. Here, lawfare is simply an impartial instrument of war. Yet, we must pay attention to the uses and abuses of law as an instrument of war as the enemies of the Western civilization legal system are not afraid of using another very convenient tool in their strategy.

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<sup>15</sup> John Carlson and Neville Yeomans, “Whither Goeth the Law – Humanity or Barbarity,” in *The Way Out – Radical Alternatives in Australia*, ed. M. Smith and D. Crossley (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., “Law and Military Interventions: Preserving Humanitarian Values in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conflicts,” *Carr Center for Human Rights, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University* (2001), Working Paper.

<sup>17</sup> Melissa A. Waters, “‘Lawfare’ in the War on Terrorism: A Reclamation Project,” *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 43 (2010): 327.

<sup>18</sup> Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., “Does Lawfare Need an Apologia?” *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 43, no. 1/2 (2010): 121.

<sup>19</sup> Scott Horton, “State of Exception: Bush’s War on the Rule of Law,” *Harper’s Magazine* 74 (July 2007): <https://harpers.org/archive/2007/07/state-of-exception/>; David Kennedy, *Of War and Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Wouter G. Werner, “The Curious Career of Lawfare,” *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 43 (2010): 61.



Therefore, we may say that the concept of lawfare is well-embedded in Clausewitzian analysis. Carl von Clausewitz, the great military theorist, spoke of a trinity of the people, the government, and the military, whose combined energies produce victory in war. Belligerents attempt to impose the converse on their adversaries, that is, the deconstruction of this trinity. The traditional U.S. approach, which the law of armed conflict endorses, focuses on the military element and seeks to diminish the enemy's armed strength. The United States' and the Alliance's challengers focus on the people element and seek to diminish the strength of their support for the military effort.<sup>20</sup> Yet until now, lawfare has not been commonly used in official documents and policy plans. NATO has not worked on it thoroughly, but only briefly issued the term "legal operation" used instead of lawfare.<sup>21</sup> The only government that officially uses lawfare in its policy is the CCP. The People's Republic of China defined lawfare in 1999 as a major part of the military strategy. Since then, the PRC has been seeking to actively employ lawfare against U.S. hegemony in the international realm, both political and economic.<sup>22</sup>

The policy of the People's Liberation Army was integrated into the Three Warfares Doctrine (Chinese 三种战法) in 2003. The Three Warfares doctrine applies the teaching of Sun Tzu, where the most vital principle is: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting."<sup>23</sup> Carl von Clausewitz's ultimate objective of war—achievement of the compulsory submission of the enemy without violence or physical force—is also expressed in this doctrine. Its three components are the following: media (or public opinion) warfare, psychological warfare, and lawfare. Hence, the Three Warfares doctrine achieves its military-political aims through psychological warfare by affecting an adversary's decision-making process; via media warfare by enacting continuing influence on an adversary's attitudes and perceptions; and finally, by legal warfare when exploiting domestic and international legal systems to achieve commercial and political objectives and ultimately compulsory subjugation of the enemy.<sup>24</sup>

China and Russia are opponents of the legal values presented by Western civilization and the largest political-military coalition: NATO. The recent 2022 NATO Strategic Concept, for the first time in the Alliance's history, addressed the PRC's coercive policies challenging NATO's interests, security, and values, as well as malicious hybrid, cyber operations, and confrontational rhetoric targeted at the Allies' security. "The deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., "Law and Military Interventions."

<sup>21</sup> "'Lawfare' is now referred to as 'Legal Operations' as defined in para. 1.2.b." being "Legal Operations is the use of law as an instrument of power." NATO SHAPE, ACO Legal Operations, SH/OLA/RVB/191/22-009839/1 of May 5, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Orde F. Kittrie, *Lawfare: Law as a Weapon of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Listner, "Law as Force in Hybrid Warfare," *Irregular Warfare Initiative*: <https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/law-as-force-in-hybrid-warfare/> (accessed March 25, 2024) based on Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Listner, "Law as Force in Hybrid Warfare"; Jill Goldenziel, "Law as a Battlefield: The U.S., China, and Global Escalation of Lawfare," *Cornell Law Review* (2021): 1085.

<sup>25</sup> NATO Strategic Concept, Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid 29 June 2022.

Beijing and Moscow are both using every possible means, including lawfare, to achieve their political, economic, and military goals. What both of those regimes are committing in their own territories, against their own citizens, including minorities and political opponents, is one thing. China keeping over 5 million Uyghurs in concentration camps, torturing and poisoning journalists and activists publicizing the truth about the CCP, reducing the legal autonomy of Hong Kong and Taiwan, domestic censorship in the public domain including the internet,<sup>26</sup> as well as Russia abducting, deportation to penal colonies in severe Siberian conditions, killing 300,000 Chechnya civilians in the late 1990s; the 2008 war in Georgia (20% of its territory has from that day been occupied by Russian troops, just as Transnistria is *de iure* part of the Republic of Moldova, yet *de facto* a fully militarized Russian sphere since the Russian “peacekeeping operation”<sup>27</sup> after the 1990–92 Transnistria war); the 2014 Crimea annexation; the 2019 cyberattack on the government in Tallinn, and the 2019 detonation of a Czech weapons depot by two Russian agents—are the most known examples of the functioning of those two totalitarian regimes.

Beyond that, we must not stay blind to Chinese and Russian legal messaging to their own allies. The countries supporting those regimes, or at least not opposing their internal and external politics, vote in their favor or abstain in the United Nations General Assembly. Also, developing states in Africa, South America, and Oceania support the “new regional alternative,” especially amid the lack of an alternative from the West, and the abundance of various forms of donations, humanitarian aid, providing equipment to schools and hospitals, and basic infrastructure. As everything in this world has a price, the same comes with such aid: following each Ruble or Yuan comes values—the legal culture of those two regimes.

The endorsement of lawfare, expressed in an open speech by both Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin on March 17, 2023, went unnoticed and ignored by the Western media. Yet it was impactful for the allies and like-minded partners of both Russia and China. While the Western world was clapping on each other’s shoulders for prosecuting the head of state of the Russian Federation for the war in Ukraine, they overlooked the legal basis for the International Criminal Court to prosecute a citizen of a state which is not a party of the Court.<sup>28</sup> Russia and China took advantage of this when Xi Jinping together with Vladimir Putin announced that China with Russia were ready “to stand guard over the world order based on international law.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jordan J. Foley, “China’s Authoritarian Grip: How China Reinforces Social Control, Cultivates a Climate of Fear, and Minimizes Dissent,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific* 6, no. 8 (2023): 91.

<sup>27</sup> The author visited Moldova twice in 2021, including Transnistria. It proved to her how Russians are perceived there by the Transnistrian population—as friends, allies, liberators, and economic providers (cheap natural resources and other products).

<sup>28</sup> ICC, *Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova*, March 17, 2023: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and-maria-alekseyevna-lvova-belova>.

<sup>29</sup> Pjotr Sauer and Amy Hawkins, “Xi Jinping says China ready to ‘stand guard over world order’ on Moscow visit,” *The Guardian* (March 20, 2023): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/20/xi-jinping-vladimir-putin-moscow-ukraine-war>.

## Conclusion

The Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China are openly against NATO and its values. Other states and nonstate actors are outside of the scope of this chapter, yet using legal-cultural analysis would apply to any other conflict or gray zone dilemma, in order to understand the true rationale behind their tactics. While Russia is trying to rebuild its Great Russia over the former Soviet Republics near or at NATO's eastern flank, China is trying to convert the Indo-Pacific region into a predominant Chinese federation, legally tied through political and economic arrangements.<sup>30</sup> Such legal, economic, and political actions undertaken by both Russia and China in the international arena make many states and territories heavily dependent on still-alive Soviet imperialism and the PRC's system of values. This has already put "at risk the rule of law, international order, democratic values, maritime freedom, sovereignty, and territorial integrity."<sup>31</sup>

At NATO, we believe in the democratic values we stand for, and are ready to defend our countries, their citizens, as well as allies and like-minded partners, for whom the specter of communism is unacceptable. The Alliance took on its political-military duty to guard "the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties [that] is threatened."<sup>32</sup> In addition, Western civilization has the moral duty to protect all the principles, written in treaties and practiced through customary law, which make up the international rules-based order: "To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace," as the United Nations Charter states.<sup>33</sup> Yet, in a codependent and intertwined world, we are also responsible for one another, and for this reason, we are obliged to spread our values of democracy, rule of law, protection of human rights, and civil freedoms. Every person deserves the same human rights, regardless of where they were born. Thus, NATO might play even greater than a regional role.

"Stronger Together" is one of the Alliance's mottos. Yet, its strength lies also in understanding each other's history and obstacles. If the old, Western members of NATO had listened to their newest partners from Central and Eastern Europe, the war in Ukraine might have not occurred or occurred in a different way. We are strong because all 32 Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, along with partners and like-minded states from all around the world, stand for the same values. Yet our freedom must not be taken for granted. Totalitarian regimes—the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China—have values on the other side of the spectrum. And they have proven many times they will not stop in their pursuit of regaining spheres of influence.

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<sup>30</sup> Joanna Siekiera, "The Indo-Pacific security importance for the Alliance – NATO Strategic Concept and NATO Strategic Foresight Perspectives Report," in *Maritime Security in the Scope of NATO's New Strategic Concept* (NATO Maritime Security Center of Excellence, 2024).

<sup>31</sup> Paragraph 2 of the NATO Strategic Foresight Regional Perspectives Report on the Indo-Pacific, August 2, 2022: <https://www.act.nato.int/article/strategic-foresight-regional-perspectives-report-on-the-indo-pacific>.

<sup>32</sup> NATO, "The North Atlantic Treaty," art. 4 (April 4, 1949): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm).

<sup>33</sup> United Nations, "United Nations Charter," art. 1 (June 26, 1945): <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter>.

As analyzed in this essay, legal warfare—lawfare—represents a central tool of contestation between NATO and its major adversaries, while legal culture shapes contrasting ways in which NATO and its adversaries approach lawfare. Those two underappreciated and insufficiently-researched concepts should factor into NATO’s strategic thinking more directly. The West made a mistake in underestimating Russia’s imperialistic appetite. Russia’s war in Ukraine illustrates both points of centering lawfare as NATO’s strategic method of securing its democratic values, as well of using legal culture for better understanding of the perpetrators and their true intentions. We cannot afford to repeat this with China.

Russia and China have proven to use international law, both global and regional, as well as national law to gain the strategic and military advantage against the Western world’s order. Now it is time for the Western world to start using legal-cultural analyses of armed conflict in a more efficient way for our own protection.<sup>34</sup> Lawfare, as a tool of war, has been deployed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the PRC. Again, it is the right time for NATO and other international organizations to begin perceiving legal methods as equally valid and beneficial to support conventional military methods. The law is the weapon, just like any other form of warfare. If it can kill, it can also save lives. It is our legal and moral duty to use any means available in our toolkit to protect the international rules-based order we stand for.

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<sup>34</sup> The United States has a long history of both leading the development of international law and using international law to justify its own policies—what one might call lawfare. See Lucrecia Garcia Iommi and Richard W. Maass, ed., *The United States and International Law: Paradoxes of Support across Contemporary Issues* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

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# Current Russia-China Partnership Dynamics Through a Student Lens

Guljannat Huseynli

The NATO Academic Conference held at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, in March 2024 saw academia meet with military officials along with many other officials and practitioners. The conference offered a unique chance to explore the topic of the China-Russia partnership through both a panel discussion and a breakout session covering periods from the historical perspective to the modern space domain, and themes from hybrid warfare to the social media interests of the new generation.

## How Should We Best Understand the Partnership between China and Russia?

First and foremost, we should revisit the historical perspective and acknowledge its significance in both analysis and the evolution of this relationship. Among the historical milestones, the beginning of China's Reform and Opening-up policy under Deng Xiaoping in 1978 marked a significant shift in its foreign and domestic policies, paving the way for gradual improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. In 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, initiated policies of "Glasnost" (openness) and "Perestroika" (restructuring), signaling a willingness to thaw relations with both the West and China.

Gorbachev's visit to Beijing in 1989 marked a formal end to the Sino-Soviet split, re-establishing diplomatic relations and setting the stage for future cooperation. Under Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin, Russia and China laid the groundwork for a "constructive partnership" during the 1990s. Efforts were made to resolve border disputes and enhance economic cooperation, culminating in the signing of the Agreement on the Russian-Chinese Border in 1997. That agreement laid a positive foundation for the future of the relationship, showing that the two sides could agree and enabling them focus more on their mutual geopolitical goals.

Inheriting this historical background of the relationship, Moscow sought to embrace a closer relationship with Beijing since the start of the 21st century in order to regain its former reputation in the global arena. The two countries declared a "strategic partnership," focusing on mutual economic interests, military cooperation, and coordination on international issues. The Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation was signed in 2001,<sup>35</sup> encapsulating the principles of mutual respect, equality, and support for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, in addition to signaling their broader strategic partnership.

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<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Treaty of good-neighborliness and friendly cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation" (July 24, 2001): [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/200107/t20010724\\_679026.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/200107/t20010724_679026.html).

We can see this strategic partnership on display during Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. China's announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 further symbolized a new phase in their economic cooperation, despite Russia's cautious engagement with the project. These historical events set the stage for understanding the evolving nature of this relationship. Despite the lack of a formal alliance declaration akin to NATO's Article 5,<sup>36</sup> the partnership has been described in terms by both nations' leaders that suggest a strategic, albeit flexible, cooperation. This raises the critical question about the nature of the Russia-China partnership: *Is it a mere convergence of convenience motivated by a shared opposition to the West, or does it signify a deeper, strategic alliance?*

On one hand, the partnership illustrates deep ideological and strategic alignment between Russia and China, focusing on maintaining domestic stability, "resisting" Western influence, and extending the tenure of their respective regimes through constitutional reforms. These alignments are clearly observable from several dimensions. For example, their ideological and anti-Western alignment was on display as far back as 2012 in the use of veto power in the UN Security Council to block the resolution condemning the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, both Russia and China have enacted constitutional reforms that effectively strengthen the tenure of their respective leaders. In Russia, Vladimir Putin pushed through constitutional amendments in 2020 allowing him to potentially remain in power until 2036. Similarly, China abolished presidential term limits in 2018, enabling Xi Jinping to remain in office indefinitely. These changes reflect a shared ideological commitment to centralized, long-term leadership aimed at ensuring domestic stability and continuity in governance. Another good example is their military cooperation, considering the "Vostok" regular-basis joint trainings aimed at "showing off" their power and unity especially against the West. Vostok 2018 was the biggest military demonstration since the Cold War.<sup>38</sup> For China, it served to deepening the mutual understanding of their military cooperation, developing the comprehensive partnership to enhance both sides' ability to jointly respond to security threats. For Russia, however, such demonstrations are not only about the partnership but also to show that it is not completely isolated from the international political community, especially after 2022's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

On the other hand, the differing perspectives that Russia and China hold regarding their partnership are pivotal to understand the nature of their partnership. Russia views this

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<sup>36</sup> "Article 5 provides that if a NATO Ally is the victim of an armed attack, each and every other member of the Alliance will consider this act of violence as an armed attack against all members and will take the actions it deems necessary to assist the Ally attacked." NATO, "Collective Defence and Article 5" (July 4, 2023): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_110496.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm).

<sup>37</sup> "Russia and China Veto UN Resolution to Impose Sanctions on Syria," *The Guardian* (February 28, 2017): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/01/russia-and-china-veto-un-resolution-to-impose-sanctions-on-syria>.

<sup>38</sup> BBC, "Russia launches biggest war games since Cold War" (September 11, 2018): <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45470460>; Dave Johnson, "VOSTOK 2018: Ten Years of Russian Strategic Exercises and Warfare Preparation," *NATO Review* (December 20, 2018): <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2018/Also-in-2018/vostok-2018-ten-years-of-russian-strategic-exercises-and-warfare-preparation-military-exercises/EN/index.htm>.



relationship through a geopolitical lens, emphasizing strategic military and political alliances. Conversely, China adopts a geoeconomic approach, focusing on economic growth and sustainability. This divergence does not undermine their cooperation; it rather complements it, as seen in energy projects like “Power of Siberia 1 and 2,” where Russia’s resource abundance meets China’s energy needs.<sup>39</sup>

The nature of the partnership is thus closer to a “mutually beneficial” cooperation rather than a security alliance. While China has helped Russia get around Western economic sanctions since 2022, for example, its voting behavior in the UN against Russia’s position in the Ukraine War supports the argument that the relationship is not a more unified political coalition. China’s interest in the postwar reconstruction of Ukraine may further show its divergent interests in that conflict.

In addition to the diverse drivers in the relationship between China and Russia, a clear distinction between the nature of the Russia-China partnership and NATO is noteworthy. Unlike NATO, which is a formal military alliance with a mutual defense commitment, the Russia-China relationship is characterized by strategic alignment without a binding defense pact, emulating a more informal alliance. This distinction is critical to understanding their cooperation, which prioritizes flexibility and strategic interests over formal military commitments, and it should inform NATO’s future strategic planning.

### *Hybrid Warfare*

China and Russia are increasingly adopting hybrid warfare, particularly through cyber and space operations. China’s “geo-economic warfare” is silent and strategic, utilizing investments in foreign land, businesses, ports, and airports to secure influence. Russia employs disinformation campaigns and exploits social divisions to destabilize Western societies. For instance, in the realm of cybersecurity, through companies like Huawei, China has been able to exert influence over the technological backbone of many countries. In the geo-economic realm, China’s COSCO Shipping owns a significant stake in the Zeebrugge Terminal in Belgium, as well as Port of Piraeus in Greece. It is also noteworthy that China is not investing solely in Eurasia. China’s investments in technology and infrastructure companies across Africa and Latin America have extended Beijing’s influence in these regions, and its BRI has strategically positioned China at the heart of global trade and supply chains. Meanwhile, Russia’s approach to hybrid warfare often includes sophisticated disinformation campaigns designed to exploit social divisions within Western countries. A notable instance is Russia’s alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where Russian entities are accused of spreading false information and amplifying societal tensions, as concluded by multiple U.S. intelligence agencies. Through such efforts, China and Russia have sought to gain influence abroad as well as to interrupt the stability of strategically important domains gradually and unconventionally.

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<sup>39</sup> Sergey Vakulenko, “What Russia’s First Gas Pipeline to China Reveals about a Planned Second One – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,” *Carnegie Politika* (April 18, 2023): <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89552>.

### *Economic Sanctions and the Russia-China Partnership*

Economic sanctions imposed on Russia, particularly in response to its actions in Ukraine and other geopolitical maneuvers, have indeed helped to push Russia closer to China. This realignment is primarily driven by Russia's need to mitigate the economic impact of Western sanctions and find alternative markets and sources of investment, which China can provide. The Siberia 1 and Siberia 2 projects, the BRI, and China becoming the main importer of Russian gas are a few examples to support the argument that Western economic sanctions have further deepened the mutual interests underlying the partnership between Russia and China.<sup>40</sup> Those sanctions made Russia put extra effort into bypassing sanctions through Central Asia. The gas pipeline projects show how China and Russia mutually benefit from this partnership, although it brings some sacrifices like gas sales going from China to the EU instead of Kazakhstan (now selling gas to the EU through Azerbaijan's pipeline project). However, sanctions also highlight potential vulnerabilities in the relationship, considering their fluctuating historical relationship as well.

The intensification of economic sanctions has further forced Russia to pivot towards China, seeking to leverage Beijing's economic strength to buffer against the financial isolation imposed by the West. This shift is evident in increased bilateral trade agreements, energy deals, and military collaborations, which are seen as strategic moves to counterbalance Western economic pressure. China, in turn, benefits from access to Russia's natural resources and technologies, particularly in the energy sector, which is crucial for its burgeoning economy.

### *China is Learning from Russia's Experience*

China's geoeconomics approach toward its partnership with Russia could be understood as reflecting its learning how best to pursue its own benefits. By observing and analyzing Russia's responses to the Western sanctions, China is not only supporting its partner but also gaining valuable insights that could bolster its own resilience against potential future economic constraints imposed by the West on itself. Chinese scholarly and government publishing are not always directed for Westerners' use. It is logical to expect that China is learning the following according to Chinese academic sources directed at its own internal audience:

1. *How to avoid frozen assets*: Russia has faced significant challenges due to the freezing of its assets abroad. China is keenly observing these developments to devise strategies that could prevent similar situations for its businesses and state-owned enterprises. Learning from Russia's experience, China could be exploring more robust methods for asset diversification and considering jurisdictions that offer greater security against potential Western sanctions.
2. *How to circumvent the SWIFT System*: The exclusion of Russian banks from the SWIFT international payment system was a substantial blow, prompting Russia to develop alternative transaction systems. China is likely analyzing these developments closely, as it could inform the expansion and internationalization of its own Cross-Border Interbank Payment System

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<sup>40</sup> Sergey Vakulenko, "What Russia's First Gas Pipeline to China Reveals about a Planned Second One," *Carnegie Politika* (April 18, 2023): <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89552>.

(CIPS), offering a parallel structure to SWIFT that could reduce China's vulnerability to similar Western actions.

3. *How to manage trade and energy flows:* As Russia redirects its trade and energy exports away from Europe and toward Asian markets, China is observing the reshaping of these flows to understand better how geopolitical shifts can affect global supply chains. This knowledge is crucial for China as it seeks to secure its energy supplies and expand its influence over global trade routes.

This list could be extended to the South China Sea, where China likely seeks to apply lessons in pursuing control over a critical geopolitical arena. The South China Sea is a vital maritime route for global trade, and controlling it could give China considerable leverage over trade flows, similar to Russia's former influence over energy flows to Europe. This region's control would enhance China's ability to manage its trade security and negotiate from a position of strength in international disputes.

Moreover, the lessons China is learning from Russia's experiences are not merely academic; they have direct implications for its approach to Taiwan. Observing the Western response to Russia's actions, particularly the economic sanctions, may inform China's strategies regarding Taiwan. By understanding how to circumvent international payment systems and manage trade flows effectively, China could be preparing to mitigate the economic backlash it would face if it were to take more aggressive actions toward Taiwan. This preparation aligns with broader concerns about China's intentions in the region and its long-term strategic goals.

Thus, China's observation and analysis of Russia's handling of economic sanctions are part of a broader geoeconomics strategy aimed at enhancing its own economic security and strategic autonomy. The insights gained from Russia's experiences are likely being integrated into China's planning for future geopolitical and economic challenges, reflecting a deep, calculated engagement with the shifting dynamics of global power. This strategic learning process underscores the complexity of China's approach to its partnership with Russia and its broader ambitions on the global stage.

### *So, Are Russia and China Allies or Partners?*

In seeking to ascertain whether "allies" or "partners" is a more accurate descriptor for the Russia-China relationship, the characterization of Russia and China as strategic partners rather than allies is more apt. This distinction is crucial, as it underscores the absence of a formal defense pact akin to NATO's Article 5 between them. Instead, their relationship is defined by strategic alignment, mutual economic benefits, and a shared interest in counterbalancing Western influence, without the obligations that come with a formal alliance. This informal alliance, lacking substantial institutionalization and within which each side's commitments remain relatively ambiguous and uncertain, poses several important questions regarding its implications for NATO.

## **What Are the Key Challenges for NATO that Emerge from the China-Russia Partnership?**

One of the biggest concerns for NATO is the fact that Russia and China are deepening their security ties and intelligence sharing. The implications of such collaboration require scrutiny, especially regarding intelligence sharing, the development of space technologies, and other technological exchanges. Space capabilities are critical not only for surveillance and intelligence but also for communication, navigation, and early warning systems which play integral roles in modern warfare. Furthermore, China's advanced capabilities in areas such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing could be shared with Russia, potentially leading to advancements in cyber warfare tactics and electronic warfare capabilities, which are crucial for disrupting enemy communications and misguiding or disabling critical systems during conflicts. The exchange of such technologies and joint development in these areas can significantly enhance the military capabilities of both nations, increasing the threats facing the NATO community.

Russia's and China's strategic maneuvers in other regions, particularly in Africa, also pose challenges for NATO. These countries employ a combination of military, economic, and diplomatic strategies to establish and expand their influence, which starkly contrasts with Western focuses such as human rights and conditional aid. By forging robust economic ties through initiatives like infrastructure development and direct investment, China and Russia not only enhance their geopolitical footprint but also embed themselves deeply within the economic and political fabrics of these regions. This approach of geoeconomics enables them to create long-term dependencies and alliances that bolster their global influence and strategic depth. For instance, while Western "quality standards" may be higher for various technologies and investments of interest to countries in Africa and elsewhere, it takes significantly less time for China to provide competing products to those countries at a lower price. Additionally, when a country wants to partner with NATO it faces requirements regarding human rights that it may not be willing to or capable of fulfilling, and it may find alternatives with China and Russia where no such values are prerequisites for collaboration. For NATO, these actions represent a dual challenge as it seeks to counter the growing military and economic influence of China and Russia in these key strategic regions, but it must also contend with shifting ideological and diplomatic landscapes that could potentially realign global alliances away from Western democratic ideals.

Another challenge is hybrid warfare. As discussed earlier in this essay, the use of social media and disinformation to spread the Chinese and Russian propaganda may affect the younger generation within NATO member states, partners, and other countries. This poses a concerning threat when a new generation starts taking over important decision-making roles in NATO with potentially ill-informed understandings of key geopolitical situations. An illustrative example of a Russian disinformation campaign, conducted by the Russian Ministry of Defense during the conflict in Ukraine in 2022, utilized what is known as the "4D Concept" (dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay). The campaign involved disseminating fake, false, and distorted information strategically designed to cause targeted strategic, operational, or tactical effects. For example, the disinformation spread narratives propagated about foreign citizens fighting in the war on the side of Ukraine, which was systematically distributed to undermine confidence in public institutions and government, compromise the process of strategic decision-making in the targeted countries,

and spread confusion among the public. We can still see such examples through social media today amid the ongoing Ukraine War and the spread of Russian disinformation.<sup>41</sup> Since these activities are not morally compatible with NATO's worldview, it is posing a big challenge for NATO to think about.

Identifying points of conflict between China and Russia, such as differing interests in regions like the South China Sea and Central Asia, may present opportunities for NATO to leverage misalignments within their bilateral relationship. Strategic cooperation opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region and within the Euro-Atlantic area warrant exploration. China's way of taking over through economic means and Russia's way of taking land through military means or forcing post-Soviet countries to "bandwagon" within the Russia-led security organizations each pose challenges for NATO's collective security mission.

### **How Can NATO Best Address Those Challenges?**

To address the different challenges posed by the China-Russia partnership, NATO must adopt a comprehensive and adaptable strategy that aligns with the evolving global geopolitical landscape. NATO's strategy should continue emphasizing strengthening its partnerships in different regions, enhancing technological capabilities, promoting democratic values, and maintaining a credible deterrent posture. Thinking further about how else NATO can best address these challenges, based on the above analysis, the following should also be considered:

*Counteracting Geopolitical Power through Regional Power:* Given the strategic maneuvers of China and Russia in other regions and their influence in the Indo-Pacific, NATO should strengthen its partnerships with countries in that area. Building robust partnerships with nations like Japan, Australia, India, and South Korea could counterbalance China's geopolitical and economic ambitions. This can be achieved through joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and logistical support. NATO also needs to pay further attention to Russia's and China's efforts to change the status quo in Central Asia. NATO's relative lateness in paying attention to China implies that greater urgency is needed in reconsidering its strategic plans in nearby regions. Finally, NATO should reconsider its strategy for Africa, changing its approach towards African nations to employ more ethno-cultural awareness.

To counteract the geopolitical influence of the China-Russia partnership closer to home, NATO should focus on deepening European integration and defense capabilities. This involves encouraging EU member states to increase their defense spending to meet NATO targets and to develop a more integrated European defense industry. Lastly, the South Caucasus region as a proxy political battleground between the EU and Russia needs to be an attention point for NATO due to its geostrategic location, fluctuating history of its alignment, and importance for both transit capacity (connecting the EU with Turkey and Central Asia through the Caspian Sea) and energy resources (crucial for reducing Europe's energy dependence on Russia). It is important for

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<sup>41</sup> Darijo Klaric and Josip Mandic, "Case Study of the Russian Disinformation Campaign During the War in Ukraine – Propaganda Narratives, Goals and Impacts," *National Security and the Future* 24, no. 2 (July 2023): 97-139.

NATO members to diversify their energy sources and increase investments in renewable energy, in order to mitigate dependence on Russian natural gas and counter China's influence in global energy markets.

*Economic Aid and Development Programs:* Implementing rapid-response economic aid and development programs in strategically important regions can counter the influence exerted by China and Russia through their economic ventures. This approach should prioritize rapid deployment and flexibility to meet the needs of partner nations effectively.

*More Focus on Innovation, Cognitive and Hybrid Warfare:* As mentioned earlier, the trajectory of the Russia-China partnership remains uncertain, with implications for global security, economic relations, and geopolitical dynamics. Continuous monitoring and strategic planning are essential for NATO and its allies to navigate this dynamic landscape effectively. NATO should consider investing more in innovation, and it should be flexible in terms of taking different roles and becoming a multidimensional actor with more disciplines (such as propaganda and social media instruments). For instance, China's advanced capabilities in areas such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing present a challenge that NATO should meet by leading in these technologies. Increased funding for research and development in AI, quantum computing, and cybersecurity can provide NATO with a strategic advantage. In response to the hybrid warfare tactics employed by China and Russia, NATO must strengthen its cyber defenses. This includes the establishment of a dedicated cyber command to coordinate cyber defense across member states and to conduct offensive cyber operations if necessary. Moreover, when it comes to the space domain, EU countries are investing actively and individual countries have their own space programs, posing challenges for NATO to develop a common space program. However, this approach by NATO shows the lack of communication between NATO and the EU as well as a lack of ability to delegate tasks and reform itself to be able to take different roles such as coordinator or facilitator in areas of comparative disadvantage.

*Leading Legal and Ethical Challenges of New Warfare:* NATO should take a leadership role in promoting and strengthening international laws that govern state behavior in cyberspace, outer space, and in economic practices. This includes rallying international support to hold countries accountable when they violate these norms. As warfare evolves to include more cyber and drone operations, NATO must be at the forefront of defining ethical and legal standards for these domains to prevent adversaries from exploiting gray areas. This could be effective considering the unified approach of Russia and China towards international law and norms. NATO can win through transparency and by continuing to work on promoting respect for international norms.

*The Future of Defense:* Recognizing the long-term challenge posed by China and Russia, NATO should develop strategies that anticipate future geopolitical shifts. This includes investing in next-generation defense technologies and thinking strategically about global shifts in power. Additionally, as global dynamics evolve toward a more multipolar world order, NATO must reassess its role and strategies to ensure it remains relevant and effective. This might include expanding its focus from purely transatlantic security to engaging more substantively in global security issues.

## Conclusion

In summary, the NATO Academic Conference at Old Dominion University in March 2024 provided a robust platform for exploring the dynamics of the Russia-China partnership, drawing from historical contexts and contemporary geopolitical realities. It became evident from the discussions that the partnership between Russia and China is primarily strategic rather than ideological, focusing on mutual economic benefits and shared geopolitical interests against Western influence. This relationship, while deeply collaborative, stops short of a formal alliance, resembling more a strategic partnership where formal defense commitments like those in NATO's Article 5 are absent. This partnership has evolved significantly over the decades, influenced by historical shifts in policy and global realignments, and it is characterized by a flexible, pragmatic approach to cooperation.

The two nations have engaged deeply in areas of economic synergy and military collaboration, particularly as both face challenges from Western economic sanctions and strategic containment. This has led to significant cooperation in areas like energy and infrastructure, alongside joint military exercises that demonstrate their combined capabilities and alignment. However, their relationship is complex, varying significantly in their perspectives on global engagement—Russia through a geopolitical lens and China through a geoeconomic one. This bifocal approach facilitates broadly-aligned yet sometimes divergent approaches to international affairs, where Russia emphasizes military and political alliances, while China focuses on economic growth and sustainability.

Moreover, their partnership is not static, and it continues to adapt to global economic pressures and strategic opportunities, such as those arising from hybrid warfare tactics and the Belt and Road Initiative. These collaborations, while strengthening their global positioning, also present new challenges to NATO, particularly in how it approaches global security and maintains its relevance in a multipolar world.

In conclusion, the Russia-China partnership represents a complex challenge for the West, characterized by strategic cooperation across multiple dimensions, with significant implications for NATO's strategic planning and global security dynamics. While not a traditional alliance, its implications for global affairs necessitate a proactive and multifaceted response from NATO and its allies. Understanding the partnership's nature, identifying points of leverage, and developing strategic countermeasures are crucial for addressing the challenges posed by this dynamic relationship. Thus, this nuanced partnership requires continuous scrutiny and adaptive strategies from NATO to address the evolving geopolitical landscape effectively.

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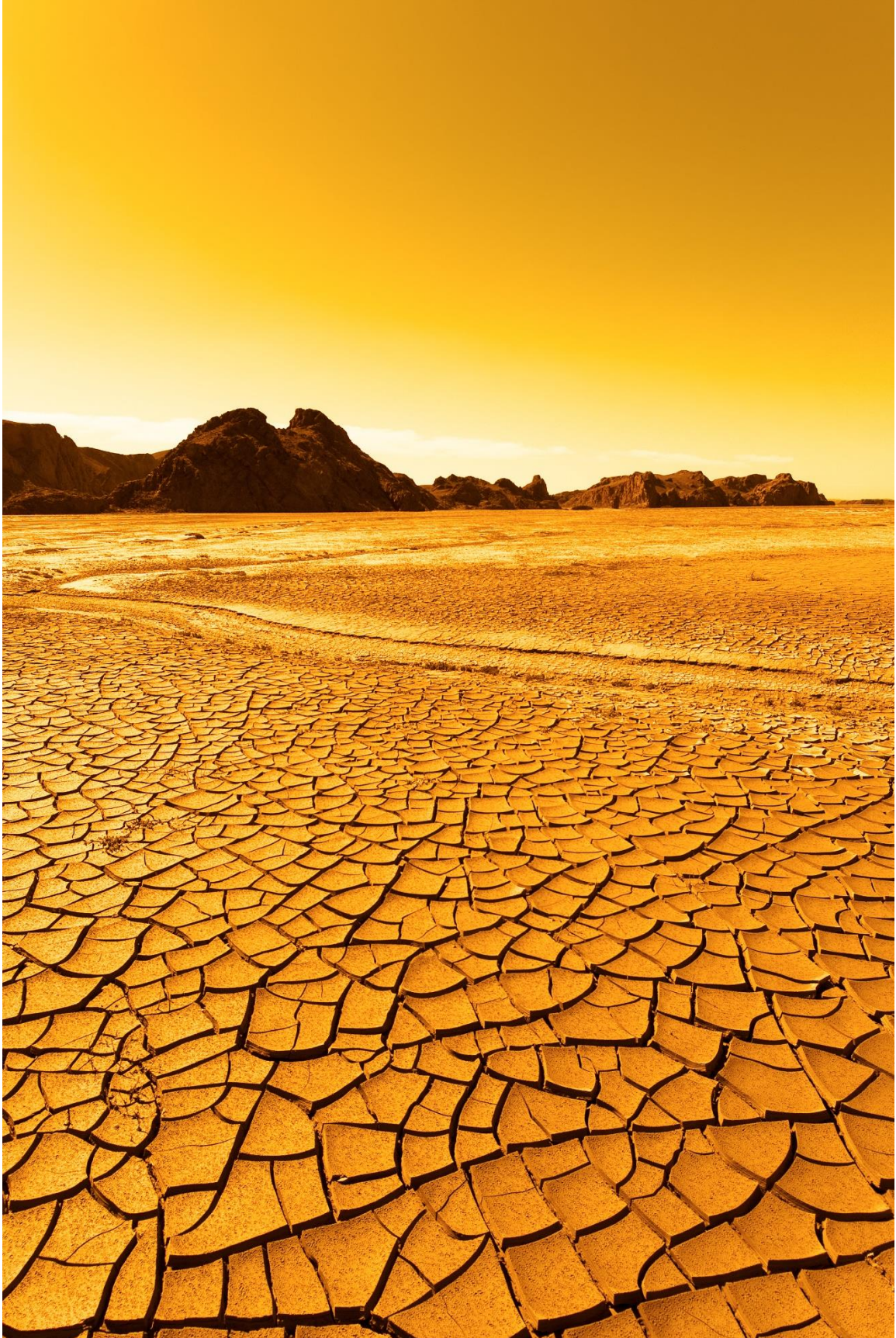
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## **Section 3: Sub-Saharan Africa**

# Understanding the Long-term Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa

Assis Malaquias

Most Sub-Saharan African countries are engaged in very complex processes of state-building. These processes present important long-term challenges for the continent because these countries are yet to overcome some of the key tensions and fragilities that have defined much of their existence as independent nation-states. Historically, such processes are often long. However, African countries—whose transitions from colonies to independent states are relatively recent phenomena, having started mostly in the 1960s—are under pressure (both internally and externally) to speed up their process—to accomplish in decades what often takes much longer to achieve. African countries are being asked—both by their citizens and by the global community—to deliver public goods under conditions when the state itself is not fully functioning. Moreover, the vast majority of sub-Saharan African states face a multitude of additional colossal challenges, often simultaneously.

Decolonization began in the mid-20th century, continued through the 1960s, and finished in 2011, with many African nations gaining independence from European powers. Each country's path to independence varied in timing and the circumstances of its struggle against colonial rule. In general, the transitions to independence in African countries were complex and multifaceted, involving a combination of grassroots movements, political negotiations, international pressures, and sometimes armed resistance to colonial rule. The specific strategies and methods employed varied depending on the colonial context and the unique circumstances of each country's struggle for independence. But all faced similar issues at independence.

For example, they were all highly susceptible to global economic shocks due to their heavy dependence on primary commodity exports and limited economic diversification. The susceptibility to external economic shocks posed significant economic stability and development challenges. African economies relied heavily on the export of primary commodities such as minerals, agricultural products, and raw materials. Fluctuations in global commodity prices directly impacted export revenues and government budgets. Prices of primary commodities were subject to significant volatility in global markets, driven by changes in demand, geopolitical events, and global economic cycles. Sudden price drops often led to revenue shocks for exporting countries. Many newly independent African countries accumulated external debt to finance development projects. Debt servicing obligations made these countries vulnerable to changes in interest rates and global credit conditions. The lack of economic diversification and industrialization, as mentioned earlier, meant that African countries had limited sources of income beyond primary commodity exports. This lack of diversification heightened vulnerability to external shocks.

In addition to economic challenges, new African states had to face the reality that, at independence, the fabric of their societies was severely stressed. The post-colonial project in Africa favored the State to the detriment of the numerous would-be nations that survived

colonialism. Expectedly, this had mixed consequences for social and political cohesion. While state-building efforts aimed to establish stable governance and foster national unity, they often encountered challenges in managing diversity, promoting inclusivity, and addressing socio-economic disparities. Addressing these challenges would require approaches prioritizing inclusive governance, respect for diversity, equitable resource distribution, and participatory decision-making to strengthen social cohesion and build resilient societies in post-colonial Africa. This was not always the case. For these and other important reasons, post-colonial states in sub-Saharan Africa remain unstable, insecure, and underdeveloped. Yet, they face colossal and mounting challenges.

### **Conflict**

Conflict and contradictions defined Africa's colonial experience. The promise of liberation revolved around non-repressive, non-exploitative, non-violent, inclusive models of development that promoted human security and human development for African citizens. The dominant political agendas at the time of independence focused on self-determination, national unity, social justice and economic development, Pan-Africanism, and democratic governance. First and foremost, the nationalist movements that emerged throughout the continent after the Second World War sought the end of colonial rule, self-determination, and the establishment of sovereign independent states. Second, they promoted national unity among diverse ethnic and linguistic groups within their territories as well as a sense of shared identity and purpose to reverse the effects of the arbitrary divisions imposed by colonialism. Third, they sought to address deep colonial-era injustices and disparities by embracing transformative agendas that reflected general aspirations for social justice, equality, and economic development. Fourth, nationalist movements emphasized establishing democratic governance and institutions, political freedoms, and participatory governance after independence. Fifth, beyond the colonies they sought to liberate, many nationalist leaders embraced pan-African ideals, advocating for continental solidarity and cooperation among African peoples.

Charismatic nationalist leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, Patrice Lumumba, and others played pivotal roles in mobilizing populations, articulating ideologies, and leading the struggle for decolonization. These leaders were instrumental in achieving independence and shaping their respective states' post-independence trajectories. However, the vision and leadership of Africa's liberators did not prevent the onset of violent conflict in post-independence Africa. Several countries descended into civil war at, or shortly after, independence. Examples include Angola (1975-2002), Chad (1965-2010), Djibouti (1991-1994), Eritrea (1972-1974), Ethiopia (1974-1991), Guinea-Bissau (1997-1999), Liberia (1989-1996), Mozambique (1977-1992), Nigeria (1967-1970), and Uganda (1982-1986).

The causes of violent conflict, including civil wars, in post-colonial African states are complex and multifaceted. Each has unique contexts and triggers. But there are important common factors. Some are inextricably connected to the legacies of colonialism. For example, the collapse of colonial regimes often exposed the lasting negative impacts of arbitrarily drawn borders that often ignored ethnic boundaries as well as cultural, linguistic, and political identities. The

grievances resulting from this process, repressed by colonial rule, exploded into conflict after independence in several parts around the continent. Post-independence leaders struggled to manage the divisions imposed by colonialism, leading to competition for power and resources along ethnic lines. Some politicians even exploited such ethnic differences to mobilize support, deepening divisions and fueling conflicts. Unfortunately for Africa, the newly independent states had inherited structures and institutions from colonial rule that were too weak to manage conflict. Instead, these weak institutions—by enabling corruption and patronage systems to flourish—contributed further to marginalization, which added grievances and triggered/fueled conflicts. Violent conflicts in Africa have exacted a tremendous human and physical cost. Civil wars have caused millions of deaths and extensive destruction of infrastructure and property. The disruption of livelihoods and negative impacts of physical destruction on economic growth has put additional pressures on African states and societies. Predictably, this pressure has resulted in more conflict—both intrastate and interstate.

Over the past decade, the number of violent conflicts in Africa has increased. Much of this increase can be attributed to the rise of violent non-state actors, including Boko Haram in Nigeria, jihadist and Tuareg insurgent activities in Mali, al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya, and affiliates of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State in West Africa Province. Indeed, the rapid expansion of various violent challengers to African states has become a dominant feature of the continent's security landscape. Such organizations have been adept at fully exploiting many of the challenges discussed above: large numbers of the young and unemployed provide a rich source of recruits while state fragility, corruption, marginalization, and exclusionary governance legitimize their anti-state agenda. Importantly, their attempts to deliver governance and social services in territories they control—however rudimentary—have further undermined many post-colonial states' legitimacy. This crisis in many African states is occurring at a time of rapid changes on the continent—all posing important challenges. Some of the most salient are discussed below.

### Demographics

Africa's population is very young and growing very rapidly. By 2035, Africa is projected to double its population to nearly 2 billion people. Fifty percent of the population will be under 21. This rapidly growing youth population will provide a large working-age labor force necessary for economic growth. Still, it could also exacerbate security challenges if unemployment remains high. Between 8 million and 11 million African youth will enter the labor market yearly. Africa must create 12 million-15 million jobs annually to absorb youth entering the labor market yet only about 3 million new formal wage jobs are created yearly.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brahim S. Coulibaly, Dhruv Gandhi, and Ahmadou Aly Mbaye, "Job Creation for Youth in Africa: Assessing the Employment Intensity of Industries without Smokestacks," *Brookings* (December 16, 2019): <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/job-creation-for-youth-in-africa-assessing-the-employment-intensity-of-industries-without-smokestacks/>; Camilla Rocca and Ines Schultes, "Africa's Youth: Action Needed Now to Support the Continent's Greatest Asset," *Mo Ibrahim Foundation* (August 2020): <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2020-08/international-youth-day-research-brief.pdf>.



Very high unemployment rates can have significant security implications, particularly concerning increased criminality, violence, and extremism. First, high unemployment often leads to higher crime rates, including property crime, theft, and drug-related offenses. When individuals lack legitimate opportunities to earn income, some may turn to illegal activities to survive. This can strain law enforcement resources and contribute to overall insecurity in communities. Second, youth unemployment can result in social unrest and protests. Young people facing bleak economic prospects and limited opportunities may become disillusioned and frustrated, leading to civil unrest, demonstrations, and public disorder. This unrest can escalate into violence if grievances are not addressed. Third, high unemployment, especially among youth, can create conditions conducive to radicalization and recruitment by extremist groups. Unemployed individuals feeling marginalized and alienated from mainstream society may be vulnerable to extremist ideologies that promise purpose, identity, and financial support. Extremist groups often exploit economic grievances to recruit new members.

Fourth, rapid urbanization combined with high unemployment can strain urban infrastructure and services, leading to overcrowded and impoverished urban areas with higher crime rates. Informal settlements and slums can emerge as hubs for criminal activities and gang violence. Fifth, high unemployment rates can contribute to political instability and undermine government legitimacy. Economic discontent among the population can fuel dissatisfaction with political leadership and trigger protests or even political unrest, leading to instability and governance challenges. Sixth, in regions where unemployment is high, organized crime networks may exploit vulnerabilities to engage in cross-border trafficking of drugs, weapons, and humans. Unemployed individuals may be susceptible to recruitment by criminal networks involved in illicit activities.

Predictably, many unemployed youths seek ways out of their condition, including irregular migration to Europe. The central Mediterranean route, particularly from North African countries like Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria, is a common pathway for African migrants attempting to reach Europe by sea. Some African youths also migrate through the Western Mediterranean. Overland routes through countries like Morocco and Algeria towards Spain and other European countries are also utilized by African migrants.

### **Urbanization**

In addition to having a very young and rapidly growing population, the continent is also urbanizing very quickly. In fact, Africa is experiencing one of the fastest rates of urbanization globally. According to the United Nations, Africa's urban population grew from 294 million in 1995 to over 567 million in 2020, more than doubling. The urbanization rate (the percentage of the total population living in urban areas) has steadily increased. In 1995, Africa's urbanization rate was around 33%, and by 2020, it had risen to approximately 43%. If Africa's population reaches 2.5 billion by 2050, as predicted, and the urban population reaches 1.4 billion, the urbanization rate will reach 56%.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Stanley, "A Demographic Transformation in Africa Has the Potential to Alter the World Order," *IMF* (September 1, 2023): <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2023/09/PT-african-century>; Bandar

Urbanization can present numerous development opportunities to drive economic growth, improve living standards, and foster sustainable development. However, addressing challenges such as inclusive and sustainable urban planning and management practices, such as housing affordability, social inequality, environmental sustainability, and infrastructure deficits, is important to realize development opportunities fully. By focusing on smart urban growth and policies that promote equity and resilience, African cities can harness the benefits of urbanization to drive long-term development and prosperity. Some of the main development opportunities associated with urbanization include (1) economic growth and diversification by increased productivity and stimulated innovation and entrepreneurship; (2) employment opportunities available through job creation in various sectors—both formal and informal—such as construction, manufacturing, services, and technology; (3) improved infrastructure and services by investing in transportation and connectivity within and between cities and investments in essential services such as water supply, sanitation, electricity, healthcare, and education, improving residents' overall quality of life; (4) social development inclusion, allowing access to Education and Healthcare, and developed cultural and social integration; (5) sustainable development with an efficient resource management system to achieve environmental benefits; and, (6) better governance structures and more efficient service delivery due to the concentration of administrative and governmental functions.

Although urbanization can bring about important benefits, there are also costs and challenges associated with it. Rapid urbanization often leads to the expansion of informal settlements or slums where poor living conditions and access to basic services are limited. The benefits of urban growth are often unevenly distributed, leading to significant economic disparities between different social groups. This can result in wealth concentration in a small population segment while a large portion remains marginalized. The influx of people into urban areas increases the demand for housing, which often outstrips supply. This can lead to skyrocketing housing prices and rent, making it difficult for many to afford decent housing. Consequently, many urban newcomers settle in informal settlements with inadequate infrastructure, poor sanitation, and limited access to clean water, electricity, and healthcare. These conditions contribute to health risks and lower quality of life.

Rapid urbanization can also strain existing infrastructure, such as roads, public transportation, water supply, and sewage systems. Such a situation could lead to traffic congestion, frequent power outages, and inadequate waste management. The pressure on urban infrastructure often results in environmental degradation, including air and water pollution, deforestation, and loss of green spaces. Urban areas may not generate sufficient formal employment opportunities to match the influx of new residents, leading to high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth. Also, many urban dwellers are forced to work in the informal economy, characterized by low wages, job insecurity, and lack of social protection. Overcrowded living conditions and inadequate sanitation in informal settlements can spread infectious diseases. Poor air quality and

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Hajjar, "The Children's Continent: Keeping up with Africa's Growth," *World Economic Forum* (January 13, 2020): <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/the-children-s-continent/>.

environmental hazards also pose significant health risks. Rapid urbanization can overwhelm existing healthcare facilities, making it difficult for residents to access necessary medical services.

Rapid urbanization often outpaces the capacity of local governments to manage and plan effectively, which may lead to inadequate service delivery, corruption, and inefficiencies in urban management. Lack of effective urban planning and regulation can result in chaotic urban growth, with insufficient infrastructure and services to support the population. High levels of unemployment, poverty, and social inequality often accompany rapid urbanization, contributing to higher crime rates, including theft, violence, and organized crime. There is also an environmental aspect in the sense that increased demand for water, energy, and land resources can lead to depletion and environmental stress. Many rapidly urbanizing areas are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events, flooding, and heat waves.

### **Rising Middle Class**

An important phenomenon taking place on the continent is the expansion of the middle class. The African Development Bank (AfDB) defines the middle class as individuals with a daily consumption expenditure of between \$2 and \$20 in purchasing power parity. According to the AfDB, in 2011, approximately 34% of Africa's population, or about 350 million people, were classified as middle class. The increase was notable, from about 111 million people (26%) in 1980 and 196 million people (27.2%) in 2000. In 2020, the middle class grew further, comprising around 43% of Africa's population, or roughly 490 million people. Some estimates indicate that the middle-class population in Africa could increase to 1.1 billion (42% of the total population) by 2050.<sup>3</sup> Several factors drive this growth, including strong economic growth, population growth, and increased access to education and health care.

There are key expectations and demands associated with the middle class including better quality and efficiency of public services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure; strong demand for transparent governance and accountability from public officials; the enforcement of the rule of law and robust measures against corruption; greater political participation and more robust democratic processes; a conducive environment for business and investment, generated via sound fiscal policies, low inflation, and effective regulation of markets; and social policies that promote equity and inclusiveness. But a rising middle class can also exacerbate income inequality and social exclusion, precipitating insecurity and social unrest. This phenomenon is evident in Africa, where income inequality remains a significant challenge. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, the richest 10% of the population capture more than 56% of the national income, with countries like South Africa, Mozambique, and the Central African Republic showing extreme levels of inequality where the top 10% earn 65% of the national income.<sup>4</sup> Also, many African countries

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<sup>3</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers, "The World in 2050 The Long View: How Will the Global Economic Order Change by 2050?" (February 2017): <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/research-insights/economy/the-world-in-2050.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Hamza Saoudi and Jean Louis-Sarbib, "Fighting Inequalities: A Major Challenge and an Essential Prerequisite for Inclusive and Sustainable Growth in Africa," *Policy Center for the New South* (October 2023): <https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2023-10/Background-Paper-Inequality-In-Africa.pdf>; Luca Ventura, "Regional Income and Wealth Inequality 2022," *Global Finance* (January 12, 2022):



have high Gini coefficients, indicating substantial income inequality. South Africa, for instance, has one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world, reflecting a significant gap between the rich and the poor. In addition, the wealthiest individuals in Africa hold a disproportionate share of the continent's wealth. This concentration of wealth among a small elite contributes to social tensions and can undermine social cohesion and economic stability.

Despite progress in economic development and a rising middle class, significant portions of the population remain marginalized and excluded from the benefits of growth. Social exclusion in Africa is a multifaceted issue influenced by economic, social, and political factors. As elsewhere, social exclusion in Africa takes many forms<sup>5</sup>:

- *Economic Exclusion:* (1) *Income Inequality:* Economic growth in Africa has often been uneven, benefiting a small elite while leaving large population segments impoverished. The richest 10% in many African countries capture a disproportionate share of national income, exacerbating wealth disparities. High levels of unemployment, especially among youth, contribute to economic exclusion. Many young people cannot find formal employment, pushing them into low-paid, insecure jobs in the informal sector. (2) *Access to Services:* Disparities in access to quality education and healthcare are significant. Many rural areas and poorer urban communities lack adequate schools and medical facilities, hindering social mobility and perpetuating cycles of poverty. Financial exclusion is also prevalent, with large portions of the population lacking access to banking services, credit, and investment opportunities essential for economic participation and growth.
- *Social and Cultural Exclusion:* (1) *Ethnic and Racial Discrimination:* Ethnic and racial divisions often result in social exclusion, with minority groups facing discrimination and limited opportunities. The situation is particularly evident in countries with a history of ethnic conflict, where marginalized groups are excluded from political and economic participation. Social norms and cultural practices can also reinforce exclusion, particularly for women and certain ethnic groups, limiting their access to education, employment, and political representation. (2) *Gender Inequality:* Women in many African countries face significant barriers to full social and economic participation. Gender-based violence, discriminatory laws, and cultural practices often restrict women's access to education, healthcare, and employment. Efforts to promote gender equality are ongoing, but progress is slow, and women continue to be underrepresented in the political and economic spheres.
- *Political Exclusion:* (1) *Lack of Representation:* Political exclusion is a major issue, with many African countries experiencing governance systems that do not fully represent all population segments. Marginalized groups often lack political voice and influence, leading to policies that do not address their needs and concerns. Corruption and weak institutions can exacerbate political exclusion, undermining the rule of law and limiting opportunities for meaningful participation in governance. (2) *Conflict and Displacement:* Armed conflicts and

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<https://gfmag.com/features/wealth-distribution-income-inequality/>; African Development Bank Group, "Income Inequality in Africa," [https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Generic-Documents/Revised-Income%20inequality%20in%20Africa\\_LTS-rev.pdf](https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Generic-Documents/Revised-Income%20inequality%20in%20Africa_LTS-rev.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> African Development Bank Group, "Income Inequality in Africa."

political instability contribute significantly to social exclusion. Displacement due to conflict disrupts communities and livelihoods, leading to long-term exclusion from economic and social systems. Refugees and internally displaced persons often face extreme levels of social and economic exclusion, struggling to access basic services and integrate into host communities.

### **Population Movements**

As a result of the challenges discussed above, large numbers of African citizens are on the move. This movement of people within and across national boundaries will continue to pose political, economic, and societal challenges. African migration has been characterized by significant intra-continental movement. As of 2023, most African migration occurs within the continent, with about 80% of migrants moving to neighboring countries for better economic opportunities. Major destination countries include South Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria, which serve as economic hubs in their regions. For example, the conflict in Sudan in 2023 caused an estimated 6 million cross-border displacements. Furthermore, climate change is expected to drive up to 10% of all African cross-border migration by mid-century, particularly affecting Southern Africa.<sup>6</sup>

The movement of populations between Africa and Europe is a dynamic phenomenon shaped by a complex mix of personal aspirations, economic conditions, security concerns, and policy frameworks. In 2023, migration routes from Africa to Europe saw significant activity, with various patterns observed across different routes:<sup>7</sup>

- *The Central Mediterranean Route* remains one of the most traversed, with many migrants embarking from North African countries like Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia aiming for southern European shores such as Italy and Malta. In 2023, The Central Mediterranean route experienced a 50% increase in irregular border crossings compared to 2022, totaling around 158,000.
- *The Western Mediterranean Route* includes migrations from Morocco, Algeria, and Syria to Spain (excluding the Canary Islands). Around 17,000 migrants crossed this route in 2023, 12% more than the previous year.
- *The North-West African Maritime Route*, used by migrants from Senegal, Mauritania, Western Sahara, Morocco, and Mali to the Canary Islands, marked its highest annual figure, with over 40,000 incidents (161% more than in 2022).

### **Conclusion**

The challenges discussed above are taking place in Africa, but they are not the continent's alone. They have far-reaching impacts. Therefore, long-term global solutions are required. Such solutions must be long-term, strategic, collaborative, and win-win. First, it is unrealistic to expect

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<sup>6</sup> Wendy Williams, "African Migration Trends to Watch in 2024," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies* (January 9, 2024): <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/african-migration-trends-to-watch-in-2024/>.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, "African Migration Trends to Watch in 2024."

African state-building processes to be fast, stable, and non-violent. Therefore, all frameworks for engaging Africa must be long-term and factor in the realities of instability and violence. Second, Africa's continued strategic importance must be factored in. Specifically, Africa's security and development is in NATO's strategic interest. To state the obvious, an insecure, unstable, underdeveloped Africa negatively affects NATO. Even more important, a secure, stable, developed Africa can be a true partner of NATO. In other words, a long-term strategic partnership is critical.

There is space for greater collaboration in the search for long-term, strategic solutions to Africa's current challenges. NATO can do more. For example, outside the Mediterranean Dialogue and NATO Strategic Direction South, NATO's global partners are poorly represented in Africa. There is a need to move from "direction" to "destination"—towards actual strategic "ends," not just "ways." The Partnership for Peace program provides an excellent model that could be innovatively adapted towards Africa. Finally, Africa urgently needs policy responses and mechanisms that are flexible, agile, iterative, and adaptive. There is a mismatch between the enormity and complexity of the challenges and the resources available. Partnership is key. But what kind of partnership? It must be win-win across the board. It must be based on strategies that are proactive, creative, coordinated, and comprehensive.

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# NATO Partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa

Nadia Gerspacher

*“The kind of NATO that we need... is an Alliance that defends its members against global threats: terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction and failed states... What we need is an increasingly global approach to security, with organizations, including NATO, playing their respective roles.”<sup>1</sup>*

After September 11, 2001, NATO recognized the global nature of security and updated how it viewed collective security, namely thinking beyond the protection of the Allies against threats. Since 2005, NATO has established a working relationship with the African Union (AU) to address shared security threats. In November 2019, NATO and the AU signed an agreement making their cooperation a formal political and practical partnership, and in March 2020, the Allies voted to further deepen that partnership, shifting from an *ad-hoc* to a more substantive partnership. Looking forward, the 2021 Brussels Summit set a goal to work more closely with like-minded partners to uphold the rules-based international order and institutions which defend it, starting with setting norms and standards in space and cyberspace, new technologies and arms control.<sup>2</sup> Since April 2011, NATO has endeavored to harmonize and streamline partnership tools to be more efficient in activities and exercises.<sup>3</sup>

NATO’s closer working relationship with the AU aims to address issues which plague the African continent and, more specifically, sub-Saharan Africa. These issues include terrorism, health, environmental disasters, civil wars, instability, refugees, failing governments, a youth bulge, weak economies, and governance.<sup>4</sup> The African continent is home to nine of the world’s ten most neglected crises,<sup>5</sup> attributing the continent’s dominance in this regard to a lack of media attention, aid, and political will. In 2018, there were 21 active civil wars on the continent—the highest number recorded in Africa since 1946.<sup>6</sup> These security threats represent a danger on a global scale, since minor crises can quickly develop and become transnational. The growing recognition of these threats can be summed up by French General Jacques Norlain’s claim that “Europe should feel particularly concerned by what is happening on its doorstep, and by what is

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<sup>1</sup> NATO, “Global NATO: Overdue or Overstretch? Speech by NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, at the SDA Conference, Brussels” (November 6, 2006): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_22449.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_22449.htm).

<sup>2</sup> NATO, “Brussels Summit Communiqué, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021” (June 14, 2021): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, NATO’s 2010 Lisbon Summit and 2011 Berlin Summit.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Gilpin, “Unpacking the implications of future trends for security in Africa,” *Brookings* (February 3, 2020): <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/unpacking-the-implications-of-future-trends-for-security-in-africa/>.

<sup>5</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council, “The World’s Most Neglected Displacement Crises 2023: Neglect is the New Normal,” <https://www.nrc.no/feature/2024/the-worlds-most-neglected-displacement-crises-2023/>.

<sup>6</sup> Therése Pettersson, Stina Högladh, and Magnus Öberg, “Organized violence, 1989–2018 and peace agreements,” *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 4 (2019): 589–603.

shaking countries with which some European nations have long-standing relations.” He added that “the shortcomings of the current system have to be corrected.”<sup>7</sup>

As NATO prepares for 2030 with the 2024 Washington Summit, the many advantages of working more seamlessly with both Allies and partners have become evident and even a priority. Current partnerships address cyber defense, maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, non-proliferation, defense science and technology, and Women Peace and Security. The nature of cooperation rests on participation in NATO’s military operations but also defense capacity building, training, and education. There is a widely recognized notion that it is time to move beyond operational engagement only, and that engaging partners in political consultation and intelligence-sharing at the strategic level has become crucial to meeting security challenges such as terrorism, proliferation, piracy, or cyber-attacks.<sup>8</sup> This is particularly true for sub-Saharan Africa. NATO is looking for greater situational awareness in regions such as Sub-Sahara Africa and to engage systematically in policy discussions around key security challenges. The logic rests in the recognition that security challenges are transnational and often include a political aspect.<sup>9</sup> The way forward includes a dimension beyond the operational, with political dialogue as a key means to addressing collective threats effectively.

Trust building and increased transparency are also expressed objectives, at the same time as flexibility has been built into NATO’s partnership policy. This shows the recognition that the 49 Sub-Saharan African countries are not one bloc but rather separate sovereign entities with distinctive interests, threat environments, and political realities. This essay arises from the astute engagement of the academic community by NATO ACT in March 2024 to contribute to a critical reflection on the future strategic direction of NATO, heeding the call of ACT’s Brigadier General Chris Badia and Dr. Vlasta Zekulic to share ideas that promote a review of current approaches and to refrain from telling NATO that all is done well. To that end, this essay articulates several considerations for NATO as it aims to gain the systematic capacity to engage Sub-Saharan African partnerships.

### **Building Trust**

Trust is a concept that has been widely discussed by policymakers and practitioners alike for quite some time, as it became clear that partners were interlocutors with rational interests and several dimensions of power over what are traditionally thought of as strong states. However, understanding trust and how to develop a partnership underpinned by trust has not been mastered on a systematic basis by NATO, its members and beyond. Going forward, it is crucial that partnership be conceptualized as a long-term commitment, reflecting a condition of mutual value whereby both parties are able to influence each other’s behavior *and* operate according to a set of rules that stipulates what behavior is admissible and what constitutes a violation of trust.

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Norlain, “Keeping or Restoring the Peace in Africa,” *Revue Défense Nationale* 693 (January 2007): 28-29.

<sup>8</sup> Bola A. Akinterinwa, “AU-NATO Collaboration: Defining the Issues from an African Perspective,” in *AU-NATO Collaboration: Implications and Prospects* (NATO Defense College, 2013), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Munich Security Report 2024, <https://securityconference.org/en/>.

Rules facilitate this exchange and offer a space for building trusting long-term working relationships.<sup>10</sup> Building in strategies to build trust lays the foundation for the crucial principle of reciprocity, which is urgently needed to integrate the shift from transactional to transformational engagements with partners.<sup>11</sup> And it is important to incorporate knowledge and skills in all levels of actors who will contribute to make these partnerships count.

### **The Issues from Perspectives of Africans**

Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa specifically, is often talked about as one actor, when it is a continent and not one political actor.<sup>12</sup> African perceptions of NATO differ widely.<sup>13</sup> For example, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has stated that NATO was involved in the murder of the President Patrice Lumumba.<sup>14</sup> Others see NATO as an instrument of control, often evoking the bombing of Sarajevo by NATO, or seeing the Alliance as having an agenda for regime change based on NATO actions in Libya, which also have been seen as including a marginalization of the AU.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, UN challenges in implementing peacekeeping mandates have resulted in the hope that NATO might offer an alternative to protect civilians and engage in humanitarian assistance efforts.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Africans do agree on the fact that they want NATO to respect international law and to value mutual trust, respect, and the recognition of African self-determination. While the AU offers an umbrella, individual African governments need to be treated as individual interlocutors with distinctive opportunities and challenges from both a security and political perspective. At the very least, political dialogue needs to account for those differences, and contextual knowledge should be considered to shift from one country to the next.

### **Like-Minded Partners**

While partnering with “like-minded” countries is a worthy goal in itself that is firmly grounded in international law and normative frameworks, a series of questions should guide partnering strategies and choices. The first is: what does “like-minded” constitute? How is it determined, and what happens when some factors of consideration change in a given country via elections, movements, climate change, among other reasons? Is Nigeria like-minded given its struggles with human rights and civilian harm? Is Kenya like-minded because it has been able to achieve a level

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<sup>10</sup> Akinterinwa, “AU-NATO Collaboration,” 63.

<sup>10</sup> Munich Security Report 2024.

<sup>11</sup> John Harriss, “Working Together: The Principles and Practice of Cooperation and Partnership,” in *Managing Development, Understanding Inter-Organizational Relationships*, ed. Dorcas Robinson, Tom Hewitt, and John Harriss (London, Sage Publications, 2000), 228.

<sup>12</sup> Paul D. Williams, “Keeping the Peace in Africa: Why ‘African’ Solutions are not Enough,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 22, no. 3 (2008), 316.

<sup>13</sup> Vojtěch Šikl, “NATO in Africa,” <https://www.studentsummit.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/NATO-in-Africa.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur L. Gavshon, *The Last Days of Dag Hammarskjöld* (London, Barrie & Rockliff, 1963), 50-51.

<sup>15</sup> Akinterinwa, “AU-NATO Collaboration,” 62.

<sup>15</sup> Munich Security Report 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Akinterinwa, “AU-NATO Collaboration,” 63.

of stability that is conducive to interoperability? Is Chad like-minded as it teeters between being a strong partner in fighting terrorism and showing a preponderance for the military in many governance aspects? And Niger? How to handle threats that come from Mali, Somalia, or Yemen? And if a country is not a like-minded partner, is it a threat? How does NATO deal with the threats of the entire region spilling into Europe and other parts of the world?

Given the varying levels of political will and capacity around key principles such as democracy, and the widely differing practices around human rights, the protection of civilians, governance aspects, and civilian harm mitigation, what is the threshold for a like-minded partner? At the very least, a level of transparency is necessary for constructive partnerships. Beyond parameters and factors, there is a question of whether, and how, to engage countries that are not “like-minded.” History shows that those who are not like-minded may represent a security threat to NATO allies and their neighbors, with dire consequences for global security. And, importantly, is like-mindedness about thinking alike and/or behaving alike? Who is alienated by the concept of like-mindedness? Do we cause havoc in the AU by grouping countries as like-minded and not like-minded? Who gets NATO humanitarian assistance: those who share its norms or those in need? Answering these questions on a case-by-case basis will empower engagement strategies.

### **Setting up Capacity Building for Success**

Given these important considerations, creating the space for political dialogue will take adopting mindsets, attitudes, and behaviors that are consistent with building partnerships, maintaining them, and becoming systematically effective at supporting partners in their capacity development and professionalization efforts.

#### *Creating the Space*

Political dialogue requires a privileged space that is conceptualized intentionally. It cannot function on a basis of asymmetry. Political dialogue needs to be guided by new norms which move away from telling partners about their gaps and areas of needed reform. Instead, there is a need for a new culture which privileges listening to partners to understand them, being willing to learn, being willing to change established belief systems, identifying common interests, understanding areas of divergence, understanding what we now call political will, and understanding partners’ capacity to change both human and economic resources. Political dialogue needs to be underpinned by a spirit akin to consultation, moving away from assessing partners, and moving towards determining commonly-defined objectives, challenges, and a vision for a more secure global system. Understanding the politics of a partner does require dialogue. And dialogue needs to be understood as a listening and learning exercise which rests on standards of exchange that employ sophisticated communication and negotiation tools and approaches.

For too long, international security cooperation and assistance has been unidirectional. Allies and donor states decide what is in their interest, and partners receive packages often designed fully by donors based on their understanding of requirements but forgetting one key aspect: the



misalignment of interests.<sup>17</sup> Failing to reconcile interests to some degree tends to create an asymmetry which has often resulted in unsustainable changes which are neither compatible with partners' political realities nor with their capacity to make those changes from legal, cultural, social, or economic perspectives. Considering partner interests means both understanding them to some level of depth and undertaking a process of reconciliation between diverging interests. Paying attention to interests—which often translate into what is called political will—is foundational for successful dialogues. Dialogue is not a luxury but rather a centerpiece of partnerships.

Relatedly, dialogue means ensuring partners are invested and not only in receiving mode. The old adage of “we want it more than they do” needs to become a red flag and can no longer just be an observation to be reckoned with. Dialogue needs to be substantive on both political and technical terms. And those dialogues need to happen in order to set up operations and capacity building activities for success. Dialogue and consultation should look more like a negotiation than a photo opportunity. Key leaders have a significant role to play in ensuring that partners are invested in a mutually agreed-upon change vision and process. Activities that result from these dialogues need to have a way paved by those exchanges. Countless projects have either failed or turned out to waste time and money and translate into reputational costs that play into narratives of competing actors. It is important to note that partners are gatekeepers to their processes, and they need to guarantee access to policies, officials, and processes. And partners need to commit relatively high-level individuals who can champion the changes, ushering the process from a change-management perspective. Anything short of this has shown to this author and countless others that capacity building efforts will be plagued by too many obstacles to yield the changes desired.

### *Mindset, Attitudes, and Behaviors*

The well-intended sentiment articulated by NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer in 2007, “We want to help implement African solutions to African problems,”<sup>18</sup> which has also been articulated across the international community working with African and other partners, rests on the oft-erroneous assumption that Africans have bought into the problems diagnosed by outsiders. In fact, African problems tend to be more problematic for NATO, other capacity builders, and those engaged in humanitarian operations or those around R2P. This reality needs to be considered when engaging partners at all levels, as divergence in problem identification reflects a dissonance in gaps and the buy-in of those gaps.

Given the need for this mindset change, the way partnerships are understood as a strategic objective needs to change for some policymakers and implementers alike. Indeed, partnerships need to be seen as a means to an end not as an end to itself.<sup>19</sup> In part because of the primacy of

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Biddle, “Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 126-38.

<sup>18</sup> Peter J. Lambert, “NATO in Africa: Ready for Action?” (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, April 2007), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Nadia Gerspacher, “Paradoxes of Partnership,” in *Effective, Legitimate, Secure: Insights for Defense Institution Building*, ed. Alexandra Kerr and Michael Miklaucic (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2017), 59-71.

trust-building, that has been the focus of lessons learned in capacity-building practice, partnerships have been approached by many as an end in themselves. Indeed, many engaged in working with partners tend to view the partnership as the primary way to gain access to partner systems, policies, and practices. Once a partnership has been established, experts deployed to build capacity tend to take over, more as action officers engaged in writing policies, processes, curricula, and/or strategies. Instead, a transformational scope to capacity building should replace a transactional approach, whereby partnerships are developed to lay a foundation for customized, partner-driven solutions to capacity gaps. Sharing expertise and good practices only lead to sustainable outcomes when partners actively participate in solutioning and then championing change.

Moreover, adopting a productive mindset and attitude towards working collaboratively with partners is not only about the politics of African states. Indeed, Allies need to buy-in the demands of a global approach and to move beyond the military solutions to security in order to maintain international order and security. Beyond reconciling interests, it is important to think strategically with partners. Key concepts of security sector governance such as accountability, transparency, and responsiveness provide a good backdrop for discussing key areas of improvement which help the partner government gain legitimacy, establishing the conditions for greater stability. Promoting civilian oversight, anti-corruption measures, and whole of government efforts to improve recruitment and retention, codes of conduct, and organizational culture are key aspects to discuss with partners. For this, NATO needs to integrate an understanding that military solutions have limitations to address partners' security problems. Indeed, many threats require a non-military approach, and NATO needs to incorporate non-military tools to work with partners to connect activities. Working with partners is about showing a commitment to security problems whose root causes are economic and social. Linking security issues with economic and social issues allows for the development of more viable solutions.

Moving away from the cookie-cutter solution is also crucial. While the expertise of advisors and/trainers is useful to guide partners' professionalization efforts, using fully-formed doctrines, training content, SOPs, plans, and other processes tends to result in little sustainable change given their relative lack of applicability across diverse contexts, not least the legislative. While local ownership is an often-used concept, operationalizing it effectively remains ad hoc. For all the reasons already discussed in this essay, supporting partners in any Sub-Saharan African country requires navigating politics, resources, processes, cultures, and many other aspects, which will necessitate heavy customization. Those engaged in supporting partners in professionalization will need to be provided guidance and structure that offer insights on how to build capacity effectively. This knowledge has been developed over the past fifteen years and has gained ground.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nadia Gerspacher, *Strategic Advising in Foreign Assistance: A Practical Guide* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 2016); Center for Army Lessons Learned, "Advising at the Senior Level: Lessons and Best Practices," No. 19-06 (2019); Nadia Gerspacher and Ludovica Glorioso, ed. *Insights on Strategic Advising for Security Force Assistance* (Rome: NATO SFA Center of Excellence, 2022); Nadia Gerspacher, Querine Hanlon, and Nicholas Weiland, *Sustainable Capacity Building: Guidelines for Planning and Project Design Communities* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2017).

## *Professionalization of Partnership Development at NATO*

Engaging and working collaboratively with partners requires adopting a productive mindset, a partner-driven attitude, and attempting to evolve behaviors. It is specifically those behaviors that allow for constructive cooperation. And this is where a rigorous review process of current practices in both decision making and activities is necessary. Indeed, shifting from a military-only approach to assisting states in crisis management operations, to strategic engagement on issues that are political in nature and target governance processes, requires an adaptation in the professionalization of NATO policymakers and implementers alike.

A review of current practices is useful to examine the nature, scope, and adequacy of education and training, standards, and requirements. A few areas of improvement, however complex given the membership aspect of NATO, are already understood widely, albeit requiring action. First, there is a need to empower education (imparting necessary knowledge), training (skills), and induction (information sharing) efforts with specific learning outcomes that are determined salient for partner armed forces and defense institutions.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the key areas to review for adequacy include selecting and guiding experts supporting those engaged in planning and implementation—namely to ensure that they have the resources (time, competence, tools) to understand and engage partners effectively, and that they have the right mix of knowledge and skills to understand what viable change looks like in a given partner context.

A shift from operational to strategic also requires a review of pedagogical and methodological approaches from the NATO course development process to the content in courses. Courses need to be learner-driven and to address performance gaps identified today. For example, there remains a propensity, in the absence of adequate commitment to preparation, to present partners with solutions to gaps which mirror those of the implementer's system back home. Moving away from this approach is paramount and requires time and the intentional content and methodology to embark on a co-development process with partners. The extensive expertise and professionalism of NATO advisors, for example, represent a significant resource for partners. However, it needs to be shared with the expectation that African states can build capacity and begin to solve problems locally, as many of their leaders have expressed the willingness to do. The shifts necessary for this approach have been taught widely, including with NATO's efforts to develop advising practice courses in the past few years.

## *Interoperability*

Given that interoperability is a key goal of collaborating with partners on collective security, it also needs to be reviewed to identify the developments needed for more comprehensive approaches than fighting together effectively. Interoperability is the ability to operate together

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<sup>21</sup> For more on these distinctions and how they offer a well-rounded preparation for capacity building efforts, see Nadia Gerspacher, "Preparing Advisors for Capacity Building Missions," *U.S. Institute of Peace Special Report* (July 27, 2012): <https://www.usip.org/publications/2012/07/preparing-advisers-capacity-building-missions#:~:text=Preparing%20high%2Dlevel%20advisers%20to,how%20to%20cultivate%20local%20ownership>.

using harmonized standards, doctrines, procedures, and equipment. It is widely understood that partners want to remain in control of the reforms of their defense and security strategies and policies. A move away from a lens of influence and conditions and a model of carrots and sticks is necessary. Partners are demanding to be considered as partners/peers and not as failed states. It is critical for NATO to integrate the idea that interoperability is not only about training, equipping, and operations, it also needs to be about understanding how each in a partnership thinks and the worldview from which their lens is shaped.

The challenges include a lack of understanding of the resources that interoperability requires, a reluctance to commit the necessary amount of time and funding, and a uni-dimensional attitude toward finding solutions.<sup>22</sup> Beyond these notional obstacles to interoperability, a framework to underpin reflection and the evolution of an approach constitutes “having common equipment, sharing the art of command, having individual interoperability, having interoperable communication and information systems equipment, and having interoperable processes.”<sup>23</sup> This is true among allies but also partners. The focus on processes and therefore institution-level transformations require attention when thinking about constructing partnerships.

### **Conclusion**

It is important for NATO to be poised to identify, develop, and maintain constructive and collaborative partnerships throughout sub-Saharan Africa to reach the expressed goals of collective security. Being poised requires examining the viability of current policies, processes, and approaches. It is one thing to protect civilians, it is another to partner for capacity building and leaning on each other. There is a need to go beyond crisis management support or the provision of periodic assistance by supporting the development of governance processes and systems.

Reconciling interests through political dialogue and long-term partnership development—which is based on mutual respect and a recognition of interdependence—is a key aspect that needs to be operationalized in mindset and approach. Resilience comes from partnerships, but the right types of partnerships: a new type of partnership which heeds all the lessons African partners have been contributing to for many years now with both their resistance and their pleas for more consultation and respect.

However, despite the enlargement and the current commitment to transformation, problems remain. Funding remains a central issue for the Alliance. When NATO began to carry out the Darfur mission in 2015, it was noted that only nine of its 26 member states had kept above the NATO goal of devoting 2 percent of their respective gross domestic products towards defense

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<sup>22</sup> Christopher G. Pernin, Jakub P. Hlavka, Matthew E. Boyer, John Gordon IV, Michael Lerario, Jan Osburg, Michael Shurkin, and Daniel C. Gibson, *Targeted Interoperability: A New Imperative for Multinational Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2075.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2075.html).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

expenditures. With multiple ongoing operations, the lack of financial support was beginning to strain the Alliance.

It is important to recognize that collective security and resilience come from establishing win-win partnerships which perceive partners as peers whose experience and knowledge is considered crucial to interoperability and a common security architecture. A zero-sum-game mentality which has consciously and unconsciously plagued partnerships is no longer useful, if it ever was. What good is a partnership if it does not allow both parties to leverage the very reason it exists? The task ahead is to connect the strategy of partnering with an approach that will make partnerships translate into security for allies and partners alike.

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## Engaging with Sub-Saharan Africa

Karis Thomas

As NATO seeks to rethink the notion of alliances and discover new threats to global security, it faces complex challenges within an increasingly interdependent and interconnected international system. Security has evolved over the past couple of decades, generating new threats involving technology, cybersecurity, outer space, instability among nations resulting in state failure, internal displacement, global migration, terrorism and neo-colonialism. To be proactive and efficient, NATO can no longer be an organization that serves security issues of the global North without engaging with states in the global South. The 2024 NATO Academic Conference that took place at Old Dominion University considered NATO's need to partner with nations in Sub-Saharan Africa and address relevant challenges within the region that are unique to the region, including how NATO's presence and support are vital to ensuring mutual benefits and long-term stability within the region.

### Relevant Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa is a highly diverse region with significant variations in geography, economy, and society across its sub-regions. These regions face many challenges, including existential climate threats arising from the Sahara (with temperatures 1.5°C higher than previous baselines),<sup>1</sup> millions experiencing internal displacement, low economic output, and widespread extreme poverty. Places like the Congo Basin constitute a critical global biodiversity hotspot, struggling with issues such as an influx of outside actors competing for influence, protecting its internal sovereignty, and standing on the global stage as home to some of Africa's most valuable rare earth mineral deposits.<sup>2</sup>

Certain regions in Sub-Saharan Africa also lack access to basic services and severely limited infrastructure. Only half of Africa's population has reliable electricity, an estimated one-fifth lacks access to safe sanitation, and fewer than 40% have assured internet connectivity.<sup>3</sup> Though many individuals can utilize internet services, they allow the spread of misinformation, which can undermine democracy. Such challenges and the scarcity of digital access hinder economic and social development at the national level.

Sub-Saharan Africa is on the wrong side of global supply chains. It bears a disproportionate brunt of worldwide crises through economic shocks, disrupted education, and government upheaval.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Chibuzor Umeh and Luis A. Gil-Alana, "Trends in Temperatures in Sub-Saharan Africa. Evidence of Global Warming," *Journal of African Earth Sciences* 213 (May 2024), 105228, [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1464343X2400061X?via%3Dihub](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1464343X2400061X?via%3Dihub).

<sup>2</sup> Dennis D. Cordell and Jean-Paul Harroy, "Ituri Forest," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ituri-Forest>.

<sup>3</sup> James Bond, "Infrastructure in Africa," *Global Journal of Emerging Market Economies* 8, no. 3 (2016): 309-333.

<sup>4</sup> J.J. Enoch, "Conflict & Disruption: Repositioning Africa in Global Supply Chains," *J.S. Held*, [www.jsheld.com/insights/articles/africas-place-in-global-supply-chains](https://www.jsheld.com/insights/articles/africas-place-in-global-supply-chains).

The COVID-19 pandemic was particularly devastating, with over 76 million students missing at least an entire year of schooling due to pandemic closures and election instability.<sup>5</sup> This can impact future generations, affecting literacy and posing challenges to the ambitions of youth in contributing effectively toward long-term solutions.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also compounded issues through spiking food and energy costs as well as declining foreign investment for certain states in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>6</sup> The pandemic and invasion crises exacerbate an already dire situation across Sub-Saharan Africa with disrupted economic activities, lower income, and increased unemployment, further destabilizing the region's economy in the last decade with little sign of improvement.<sup>7</sup> The emergence of external actors in the region has significantly affected policies, as exemplified when most sub-Saharan African nations did not support the UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine in March 2022.<sup>8</sup> It would be to the detriment of NATO to overlook Sub-Saharan Africa's potential to affect the future, long-term trends, and its ability to resolve specific challenges to global security today.

### *Instability & Collapse in Sub-Saharan Africa*

The challenge of state instability and collapse has been an important issue when dealing with certain states within Sub-Saharan Africa. The region continues to have a complex and often turbulent nation-building process. The lines on maps do not always reflect fully functioning states, in some cases being closer to the "artificial embryos" of new nations, meaning these boundaries often encompass diverse groups with distinct identities and histories who have not yet coalesced into a unified national identity. This situation leads to frequent internal conflicts as governments struggle to provide necessary public services and maintain order amidst competing demands and influences within and outside their borders. Historically, such wrenching transformations into modern statehood have spelled bloody upheaval, as seen when Europe violently consolidated nation-states during the centuries following the 1648 Peace of Westphalia.

The Western perception of the continent is often characterized by a continuous cycle of violence.

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<sup>5</sup> Rawlance Ndejjo, Andrew K. Tusubiira, Suzanne N. Kiwanuka, Marc Bosonkie, Eniola A. Bamgboye, Issakha Diallo, Steven N. Kabwama, Landry Egbende, Rotimi F. Afolabi, Mamadou Makhtar Mbacké Leye, Noel Namuhani, Yves Kashiya, Segun Bello, Ziyada Babirye, Ayo Stephen Adebawale, Marieme Sougou, Fred Monje, Susan Kizito, Magbagbeola David Dairo, Omar Bassoum, Alice Namale, Ibrahima Seck, Olufunmilayo I. Fawole, Mala Ali Mapatano, and Rhoda K. Wanyenze, "Consequences of School Closures Due to Covid-19 in DRC, Nigeria, Senegal, and Uganda," *PLOS Global Public Health* (October 16, 2023):

<https://journals.plos.org/globalpublichealth/article?id=10.1371/journal.pgph.0002452>.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Benton, Antony Froggatt, Laura Wellesley, Owen Grafham, Richard King, Neil Morisetti, James Nixey, and Patrick Schröder, "The Ukraine war and threats to food and energy security," *Chatham House* (April 13, 2022): <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/04/ukraine-war-and-threats-food-and-energy-security>.

<sup>7</sup> Ashish Kumar Sen, "Russia's War in Ukraine Is Taking a Toll on Africa," *U.S. Institute of Peace* (June 15, 2022): [www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/russias-war-ukraine-taking-toll-africa](http://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/russias-war-ukraine-taking-toll-africa).

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, "With Invasion of Ukraine, Security Council's 2022 Efforts to Maintain International Peace, Stability Mired by Widening Rifts between Veto-Wielding Members" (January 12, 2023): [press.un.org/en/2023/sc15172.doc.htm](http://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15172.doc.htm).



However, this view does not accurately represent the reality. The entire process of state-building aims to address persistent violence and instability. It starts with dealing with these issues and strives to establish stability and peace.<sup>9</sup> Looking through a constructivist lens, the concept of a “state” is a product of its citizens. Citizens establish the state to provide essential services, mainly security and public services. If these public services are not provided, then the state’s legitimacy is questioned. A state is considered functional when it can ensure security. However, this becomes challenging in Sub-Saharan African countries where the state’s full realization is lacking.

### *The Westphalian Model and Its Impact*

The Westphalian model, which was introduced into the region through colonialism, has in many cases carried a debilitating legacy, weakening the trust in any European or Western aid and assistance for countries within Sub-Saharan Africa. This model imposed artificial boundaries and governance structures that did not align with African societies’ pre-existing cultural and social realities.<sup>10</sup> As a result, many African states have struggled with internal conflicts, governance issues, and a lack of national cohesion. The negative impacts of this imposed model have been exacerbated by the often exploitative and paternalistic nature of colonial rule, which prioritized the interest of colonial powers over the development and well-being of local populations.

Compared to the Peace of Westphalia, the problem of instability and violence was not adequately addressed within Sub-Saharan Africa. The issue of violence was not abolished; instead, Westphalia helped export European peace along with their model of violence that was associated with it to Sub-Saharan Africa. This exportation suggests that the foundation of the Westphalian states of Africa was rooted in violence, a situation exacerbated by colonization. While violence existed within the region before colonization, its nature changed, and the state-building process became more complex, introducing new dynamics of violence and new players, particularly through wealth extraction from the region.

One of the advantages of the Westphalian model was consolidation, which helped mitigate violence within borders, as seen in France and Britain. However, unlike in Europe, where processes like those in Italy and Germany were possible under conditions of stability, such stability is not present in African states due to the superimposition of models and realities. This superimposition prevents nations from evolving naturally from individuals to states. For instance, Nigeria does not fall under a conventional nation-state definition as it lacks unity in “language, religion, culture or common national story.”<sup>11</sup> A similar situation exists in South Africa, where various tribes were overlooked and oversimplified by the Westphalian model to the detriment of state stability. Since gaining independence in the 1960s, many African nations have searched for the most suitable model to organize and consolidate their societies within their unique context. While the Western model has been familiar, it has not proven effective for many of them. The

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<sup>9</sup> Assis Malaquias, “Peace Operations in Africa: Preserving the Brittle State?” *Journal of International Affairs* 55, no. 2 (2002): 415–40.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> John Campbell, “Nigeria and the Nation-State,” *Council on Foreign Relations* (November 16, 2020): [www.cfr.org/teaching-notes/nigeria-and-nation-state](http://www.cfr.org/teaching-notes/nigeria-and-nation-state).

preference for certain African states is not driven by religious beliefs but rather by a quest for power.<sup>12</sup>

The introduction of Westphalian principles through colonialism has resulted in deep-rooted skepticism and distrust towards European and Western interventions. Numerous Sub-Saharan African states perceive these efforts as a form of ongoing colonial exploitation rather than genuine attempts to aid their development. This has created a significant barrier to international cooperation within the region and presents a major challenge to expanding NATO's partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### *African Migration to Europe*

Another important challenge that needs to be addressed is the issue of African migration into Europe and its implications. Europe's departure from Africa approximately 60 years ago lacked strategic foresight, leaving behind a vacuum and unfulfilled promises of civilization and development. The repercussions of this absence are now evident, as the southern flank of Europe, specifically the Mediterranean, faces significant destabilization due to African migration concentrated in certain countries.<sup>13</sup> The African migration phenomenon presents a different kind of challenge that NATO cannot ignore, given its potential to compromise European stability through population movements that strain the meager public services the host nations can provide. Recognizing that this is not a traditional invasion but a complex socio-political issue that demands attention is crucial.

Importantly, European powers like France have encountered challenges in their African relations due to their colonial history and perceptions of arrogance within Africa, which has soured relations between them. In contrast, countries like Italy, Portugal, and Spain have succeeded in fostering better relationships by projecting humility and respecting African cultures and leadership. This highlights the importance of relating to others equally and understanding their perspectives and conditions, as no one likes to feel patronized or dominated. Therefore, addressing the African migration challenge requires a nuanced approach that acknowledges historical context, cultural sensitivity, and mutual respect.<sup>14</sup>

### **Recommendations**

Considering the numerous challenges faced by Sub-Saharan Africa, such as climate threats, the presence of external actors in the region, limited access to basic services and infrastructure, the spread of misinformation, economic inequality, disruption caused by crises like COVID-19, poverty, instability, and migration, it is evident that these factors will continue having an impact

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<sup>12</sup> Patrick Chabal, *Power in Africa: An Essay in Political Interpretation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Judith Sunderland, "The Mediterranean Migration Crisis: Why People Flee, What the EU Should Do," *Human Rights Watch* (June 19, 2015): [www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/19/mediterranean-migration-crisis/why-people-flee-what-eu-should-do](http://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/19/mediterranean-migration-crisis/why-people-flee-what-eu-should-do).

<sup>14</sup> Komlan Avoulete, "Why France's Arrogance Is Pushing Africa Further Away," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (October 27, 2021): [www.fpri.org/article/2021/10/why-frances-arrogance-is-pushing-africa-further-away/](http://www.fpri.org/article/2021/10/why-frances-arrogance-is-pushing-africa-further-away/).

on stability not only in Europe but globally as well. Therefore, the peace and stability of Sub-Saharan Africa is of strategic interest to NATO, and it is crucial to prevent state collapses in the region. Waiting until a crisis is at the doorstep is seen as a failed strategy; hence, proactive measures are recommended.

Many states within Sub-Saharan Africa face a significant risk of state collapse arising from a complex combination of poor governance, secular exclusion, the rule of law, weak institutions, ethnic conflicts, and climate challenges, with examples such as Somalia already experiencing instability through militant extremism as seen with Al-Shabaab, piracy, humanitarian concerns, and climate-related issues to name a few.<sup>15</sup> Other states like South Sudan and the Central African Republic are teetering on the brink of instability and collapse.

This prompts the adoption of alternative governance models, with some nations turning away from Western governance ideals and embracing alternatives like those offered by China and Russia. Therefore, it is suggested that NATO should strategically invest in partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa, laying the groundwork to mitigate future risks and ensure regional stability. Below are some recommendations and ways that NATO can help foster more intentional and strategic partnerships with countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### *Engaging with Africa*

Engaging with Sub-Saharan Africa is important and can be achieved by pursuing the cultivation of the “3 i’s” framework:

- *Ideas*: This involves the formation and contemplation of the vision of a collaborative world where Africa and Europe stand as partners. However, the concept of partnering between African and European institutions lacks a solid foundation, with no current framework or ideational structure present to support this notion outside of colonialism. The liberal order that once encompassed such partnerships has diminished in relevance. Epistemologically, there is a need to identify a foundation that can accommodate both regions and foster effective cooperation.
- *Institutions*: Certain critical institutions still operate in Sub-Saharan Africa despite challenges. It is essential to identify these institutions and support their growth. For instance, African-led initiatives like the Yaoundé Maritime Security Architecture, established with Western assistance, aim to enhance maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, protecting it from illegal fishing, piracy, and robbery.<sup>16</sup> They emphasize collective security over individual country interests, benefiting the entire region.

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<sup>15</sup> United Nations, “Amid Devastating Drought, Ongoing Rights Violations, Somalia Pushes Forward in Fight against Al-Shabaab Terror Group, Security Council Hears” (February 22, 2023): [press.un.org/en/2023/sc15208.doc.htm](https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15208.doc.htm).

<sup>16</sup> United Nations, “Ongoing Decline in Gulf of Guinea’s Piracy, Armed Robbery Encouraging, but Support Needed to Fully Implement Yaoundé Architecture, Briefers Tell Security Council” (June 21, 2023): [press.un.org/en/2023/sc15331.doc.htm](https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15331.doc.htm).

- *Individuals*: Building partnerships starts with identifying individuals who can serve as reliable counterparts. The concept of “interoperability”<sup>17</sup> starts at the individual level, where personal relationships are nurtured, and each partner must understand the other’s perspective and needs. By establishing connections at the individual level and nurturing these relationships, broader partnerships can develop over time.

This framework can help provide a good starting point for rebuilding relationships that were broken through colonial legacies between NATO partners and Sub-Saharan Africa, and for fostering development and sustainability throughout the region.

### *Reframing Perspectives and Solutions*

Another proposed strategy involves adjusting the trajectory of state objectives to tackle the instability challenges mentioned earlier. This approach advocates transitioning from a focus on violence to prioritizing stability within the state, then shifting towards fostering prosperity and ultimately maintaining peace. It considers peace and stability as overarching goals, with intermediate steps necessary for their attainment. For instance, it acknowledges that development is a prerequisite for peace, security is a prerequisite for development, and stability is a prerequisite for security.

Moving forward, it is imperative to prioritize addressing the development challenges and leveraging the economic potential of sub-Saharan Africa on a global scale. This proactive stance could contribute significantly to long-term stability and prosperity in the region.

Considering the resolution of consolidation in Sub-Saharan Africa could potentially involve blending different influences into a hybrid model that includes elements from various sources. This may result in Sub-Saharan African countries integrating different external influences and models to suit their unique contexts or revitalizing local models that may be more relevant within those contexts. This selective process could also involve countries like Turkey, Russia, and China, which are increasingly present in the region and offer alternative models beyond the existing status quo.<sup>18</sup>

While NATO’s role can be one of support and understanding, it is important to recognize that consolidation is complex and long-term and to appreciate that Sub-Saharan Africa will never replicate Europe. Instead, the goal should be to encourage African nations’ development along a nonviolent path, ensuring that their security concerns do not threaten the broader international community. By guiding Sub-Saharan Africa towards stability, prosperity, and peace, the focus can shift to other global challenges.

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<sup>17</sup> Terry Moon, Suzanne Fewell, and Hayley Reynolds, “The What, Why, When and How of Interoperability,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 24, no. 1 (2008): 5-17.

<sup>18</sup> Mahamat K. Dodo, “Understanding New Turkey-Africa Relations: Rationale and Challenges,” *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 7, no. 4 (2016): 612-42.

### *Potential Implementation Tools*

The success of NATO partnerships, particularly with African nations, hinges on adopting a mindset of mutual benefit and equality rather than the prevailing win-lose mindset, which prioritizes NATO interests rather than cultivating mutual benefits. To shift this paradigm, a significant investment in education, training, and capacity building to enhance professional military education, pre-deployment preparation, and skills will create a space for respectful and collaborative engagement with Sub-Saharan African allies.

There is a pressing need to bridge the gap in critical thinking and educational opportunities when engaging African counterparts. While initiatives like critical thinking training for border guards and police officers are underway in the EU and US, a significant gap exists in empowering implementers and planners to engage with African partners effectively. This empowerment requires addressing the stark differences in worldview and understanding between parties. Skills such as humility, understanding partner perspectives, and problem-solving are essential but often lacking among those tasked with engagement efforts. Transitioning warfighters into roles involving security cooperation without adequate training exacerbates this issue. Incorporating existing good practices into policy and plans is crucial, as is providing comprehensive training beyond mere doctrine instruction.

It is essential to equip individuals with the skills to listen, ask strategic questions, and create safe spaces for collaboration. Additionally, there is a need to reconsider the application of Western thinking models, recognizing the extensive warfighting experience present in African contexts. External assistance must be carefully tailored to avoid perpetuating the cycle of using inappropriate tools for the wrong wars. A concerted effort must address these factors without repeating past mistakes to effect meaningful change. When competing against rival actors like Russia and China within the region, NATO's ability to leverage their contrasting strategies—for example, how China utilizes technology in exchange for resource access as seen in the Democratic Republic of Congo,<sup>19</sup> and how Russia employs a strategy of horizontal escalation, fueling instability and violence abroad. To combat these competing influences within the region, NATO's ability to adopt a flexible and culturally attuned approach that prioritizes engagement at all levels to nurture reciprocal relationships with African partners genuinely can make a big difference.

### *Military Readiness and the Knowledge Gap*

How do we constructively frame NATO's military readiness to address Sub-Saharan African challenges? Addressing these challenges requires focusing on areas of chaos and dealing with public health concerns, military readiness, and the need for strategic planning and partnerships. While chaos and public health seem distinct, they are interconnected when viewed through the lens of security. The military's role in dealing with internal chaos can be questioned, emphasizing

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<sup>19</sup> Makhura B. Rapanyane and Kgothatso B. Shai, "China's multinational corporations in the Democratic Republic of Congo's mining industry: An Afrocentric critique," *Journal of Public Affairs* 20, no. 2 (2019), e2046. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2046>.

the need for appropriate institutional structures to handle such challenges. Misallocating resources, with funds diverted to the military instead of health and infrastructure, exacerbates the problem.

Based on classical approaches, the traditional security model does not always apply to Africa's unconventional challenges, necessitating critical analysis and adaptation. External influence issues, such as in the security sector where there is a lot of outside assistance by the EU, NATO, US, and other bilateral assistance to empower the military to maintain internal security, can undermine state legitimacy and civilian institutions.<sup>20</sup> Efforts by external actors to mitigate civilian harm in conflict zones inadvertently strengthen military capabilities for internal security, posing challenges to governance and civilian-police relations. Balancing the need for the security apparatus with the imperative to respect state sovereignty and strengthen state legitimacy and civilian institutions requires careful consideration and collaboration among various stakeholders, including foreign governments and legislative actors.

Our knowledge is often shaped by our personal experiences and viewpoints, which may not fully capture the complexities of different regions like Africa. Bridging this gap requires stepping into the shoes of Africans and viewing Africa, Europe, and the world from their unique viewpoints, which can significantly differ from ours. Doing so gives us a more comprehensive understanding of African perspectives and the world. Moreover, recognizing the existence of this gap is crucial not only for understanding African perspectives but also for identifying what information we lack and need to acquire. Therefore, efforts to bridge the knowledge gap involve understanding the African viewpoint and discerning the essential knowledge required to foster a more inclusive and informed worldview.

### *The Role of Culture*

On the topic of culture and its relevance to understanding Sub-Saharan Africa's challenges and possible solutions.<sup>21</sup> Culture plays an important role in navigating security challenges, the primary concern lies not only in understanding different cultures but rather in respecting them, highlighting a deficit of mutual respect as a key challenge. While understanding culture is crucial, respecting and working within existing cultural structures is equally important. Culture can be viewed as part of a broader developmental tool kit, complementing knowledge and skills. Ultimately, it can be a potent tool for shaping national power, emphasizing the need for respectful engagement and thorough immersion to achieve successful outcomes.

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<sup>20</sup> Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, D. Elie Tenenbaum, Isabelle Werenfels, Thanos Dokos, Alessio Nardi, Aleksandra Bukowska-McCabe, Ana Santos Pinto, Carlos Carnero González, Refik Ali Onaner, Jane Kinninmont, and Richard B. Norland, "Independent Expert Group Supporting NATO's Comprehensive and Deep Reflection Process on the Southern Neighborhood," *NATO* (May 2024): [www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/5/pdf/240507-NATO-South-Report.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/5/pdf/240507-NATO-South-Report.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Peter Van Ham, "Security and Culture, or, Why NATO Won't Last," *Security Dialogue* 32, no. 4 (December 2001): 393-406.

Operationalizing cultural adaptation involves leveraging partnerships within NATO's existing collaboration paradigm, which can be done through emphasizing values of shared humanity and fostering curiosity and respect toward each other's cultures. However, translating such ideals into practical application presents challenges in such a diverse environment as the vast Sub-Saharan Africa. The complexity of cultural behavior learned from colonial roots makes cultural competency challenging for soldiers. It is important to equip individuals to navigate cultures effectively, despite potential resistance from the status quo, and for a unified vision and purpose when working with NATO. Ultimately, emphasizing civil society and the rule of law as crucial steps towards effective nation-state building, fostering respect for cultural diversity, and embracing common humanity are essential for successful partnerships and engagement strategies.

### **Conclusion**

Sub-Saharan Africa confronts many challenges, including political instability, the risk of state collapse, climate change threats, inadequate infrastructure, poverty, and demographic pressures. These pressing issues underscore the growing imperative to enhance regional security and stability. To effectively address these concerns, NATO's approach to Africa must evolve from a mere interest-based strategy to one rooted in investment, emphasizing consistent and credible engagement.

During the 2024 NATO Academic Conference at Old Dominion University, several key recommendations emerged. These include fostering engagement by cultivating ideas, institutions, and individuals to construct cooperative frameworks. Doing so involves reframing perspectives to prioritize stability, peace, and prosperity within the region, and aiming for mutually beneficial outcomes. Additionally, bridging gaps in critical thinking, education, and training is essential to better equip stakeholders for effective engagement and trust-building. This effort must be accompanied by a concerted endeavor to deepen understanding of African perspectives and contexts to facilitate more tailored solutions. Leveraging cultural competency also emerged as another crucial tool for effective engagement.

The future presents abundant opportunities in Africa. It is imperative to harness these opportunities effectively and respectfully, mindful of the region's painful colonial history, to safeguard global security in an increasingly interconnected world. Every choice and decision reverberates beyond traditional spheres of influence, highlighting the interconnectedness of global security concerns.

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## **Section 4: Out-Partnering**

# Improving NATO's Out-Partnering Function: Covering Letter

Placido Torresi

NATO celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> year against the backdrop of a challenging geopolitical environment. 2024 is a year when around half of the global population will be involved in elections involving some of the wealthiest, most powerful and most populous countries, as well as some of the most authoritarian and more fragile nations. There are conflicts on NATO's borders having global consequences that are being witnessed by a digitally connected population through a cyber landscape where it is increasingly difficult to judge fact from fiction. But throughout its history, the NATO Alliance has remained a strength and a constant—it can reflect on its countless achievements, its influence and how it has successfully looked ahead and adapted to maintain strategic superiority and deal with contemporary challenges.

The NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC) is the latest iteration in considering the future requirements of NATO, citing the future operating environment as multi-region, multi-dimensional and multi-domain, with increasingly complex strategic shocks and continued challenge to the rules-based international order. To meet these challenges, NATO's Military Instrument of Power (MloP) must adapt. The NWCC outlines six functions around which the MloP will be designed in order to out-perform future adversaries; out-think, out-excel, out-fight, out-pace, out-partner and out-last.

The existence of the out-partner function formally recognizes the importance of partnerships in maintaining the strategic advantage. However, whilst NATO has engaged in partnering for many years, and has developed deep and productive relationships, its multilateral and reactionary approach can be slow to realize the benefits as a partnership formalizes through the NATO process. This is in comparison to more agile and opportunistic adversaries, who have may have more freedom to engage, less formality and fewer resource constraints to achieve short- or long-term objectives.

To ensure the MloP can continue to out-partner into the future, it is important for NATO to understand where its approach to partnering differs from that of its current and potential future adversaries and the associated risks, and seek to address any shortcomings now.

This essay explores some of the themes briefly considered here, with comparison between the differing approaches, broader considerations for NATO and how NATO might approach partnering in the future to achieve out-partnering.

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# Improving NATO's Out-Partnering Function

Dominic Andrews

As an Alliance comprising 32 sovereign nations, NATO's Center of Gravity is its unity.<sup>1</sup> Built on respect for the rules-based international world order, shared values and mutual interests, NATO is able to reach consensus and speak with one voice when reacting to events that have consequences for its area of interest. With a further network of partner nations developed over time, NATO's global reach, knowledge base and breadth of capability are unparalleled.

However, in comparison to the approach by strategic competitors, these same strengths—need for unanimous decision making, the alignment to Western-oriented values and the reactionary approach to events and partnering—can also be perceived as hindrances. Adversaries with a more exploitative or opportunistic approach might seek to gain advantage through speed of action, engagement in geographical areas that are not yet of consideration to NATO, or where they can present a better offer over NATO, or with nations who might not meet the necessary NATO criteria.

As NATO celebrates its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it can reflect on its successes in missions, in deterring aggression and projecting stability, but as NATO achieves this significant milestone, the character of conflict continues to change dramatically, played out in real time through omni-present journalism and social media. Asymmetry is the norm, technological advancements out-pace the procurement mechanisms of state defence infrastructure and adversaries seek to capitalize on time, resource and financial advantages in an attempt to achieve their aim.

NATO's recent Strategic Review and publication of the 2018 NATO Military Strategy led to the creation of the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC), in which are described six 'out' functions that together define how the future military instrument of power (MloP) will be shaped in order to out-perform future adversaries; out-fight, out-think, out-pace, out-last, out-excel and out-partner.

This essay explores the 'out-partner' function, comparing NATO's current approach to partnering to that of strategic competitors and the implications. It discusses broader considerations for NATO and how NATO might identify future partners and conduct future partnering in order to maintain the strategic advantage. It considers what opportunities out-partnering can deliver to the Military Instrument of Power (MloP) and includes the outcomes of panel and syndicate discussions from NATO's 2024 Academic Conference at Old Dominion University (AC24), where the out-partner function was considered at length.

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<sup>1</sup> NATO, "Opening remarks by Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Curtis M. Scaparrotti at the joint press conference with the Chairman of the Military Committee, General Petr Pavel and the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, General Denis Mercier," (January 18, 2017): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_140187.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_140187.htm?selectedLocale=en).

## Status Quo

NATO is unique and unequalled as a political-military alliance, comprising 32 developed nations aligned in values, with common interests and shared knowledge, experience and technology. The alliance is augmented by partner nations who have much to offer NATO such as in-depth regional or cultural understanding, specific expertise or capability, or staging areas and access. In return, there is much for the partners to gain from NATO. Partnership is achieved through agreements, defining areas of cooperation, collaboration and sharing, as unanimously agreed by the Alliance members.

Since 2021, all aspects of a partner relationship are negotiated and reflected in an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP).<sup>2</sup> formalizing and bounding the partnering relationship. The effectiveness of the cooperation will then be subject to the availability and allocation of resources, which can vary. It is conceivable that this might result in a mismatch between the expectations of partners and NATO and the level of interest from partners. NATO is also constrained on the scale and type of interaction with partners, meaning it is unable to compete in a number of ways in vying to be the partner of choice. It was determined at AC24 that NATO will not be able to react fast enough or match the pace of decision making that an independent nation has the freedom to do, and this must be considered in developing the out-partnering function to be forward looking.

The Partnership for Peace programme demonstrated that one size does not fit all. Despite these changes, as NATO's approach to partnering has hitherto been driven by contemporary needs rather than a long-term vision or plan, NATO remains reactionary in response to world events. Further, as NATO engages partners as a multilateral organization, the need for unanimous approval can result in a complex and time-consuming decision making process, compounded by potentially contrary perspectives among members regarding which partnerships may add the most value. Put succinctly, NATO has a limited forward projection capability in identifying potential partners, and it is slow to formalize a relationship and so gain benefits from it.

In contrast, strategic competitors may have the flexibility to engage on a unilateral basis and with little requirement for transparency as to their wider objectives. They may partner to address a short-term need or develop a longer-term relationship for other purposes, but in either case expectation management of resourcing will be subtly different compared to NATO. Sanctions, an absence of organic capabilities or a need to augment existing capabilities can lead adversaries to unilaterally turn to sympathetic or willing nations to support their objectives, benefiting from agile and opportunistic partnering, potentially ignorant or indifferent toward moral ambiguity or respect for a rules-based society. Examples of such partnering include Russia purchasing North

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<sup>2</sup> NATO, "Individually Tailored Partnership Programs."

[https://www.nato.int/cps/ru/natohq/topics\\_225037.htm?selectedLocale=en#:~:text=Individually%20Tailored%20Partnership%20Programmes%20%28ITPPs%29%20are%20the%20main,main%20objectives%20of%20each%20partner%E2%80%99s%20cooperation%20with%20NATO.](https://www.nato.int/cps/ru/natohq/topics_225037.htm?selectedLocale=en#:~:text=Individually%20Tailored%20Partnership%20Programmes%20%28ITPPs%29%20are%20the%20main,main%20objectives%20of%20each%20partner%E2%80%99s%20cooperation%20with%20NATO.)

Korean munitions and the proliferation of Iranian drone technology, both of which have been widely reported in open media.<sup>3</sup>

Adversaries may also be able to offer significant financial reward or incentives to encourage or expedite, which could make their partnership a more attractive offer than other alliances in more restrictive financial positions. Other nations may engage in a longer-term strategy, investing in a number of states or regions that may offer an advantage later, building a relationship or partnership over time that can be exploited should the need arise. In either example, a further benefit of these relationships is that they may deny others seeking to partner with the same state when a need is identified or, by proxy, surrounding states through regional influence. Evidence of this approach to partnering can be found in some African states where China has provided significant investment, especially in resource-rich states or where there are opportunities for strategic basing. Numerous reports and open source media articles highlight the scale of investment by China.<sup>4</sup>

### Implications

It is evident that NATO exclusively occupies one end of a hypothetical partnering spectrum, with an approach that may be characterized as formulaic, bounded, transparent, formalized, conditional, deep, long-term and demanding mutual benefit, while its adversaries will operate with greater freedom and agility along the spectrum as suits their needs. Adversaries also have the freedom to seek partnerships quickly and with whomever they consider appropriate to meet their current or future intent, in contrast to the NATO multilateral approach.

However, there is no defined balance of characteristics that affords success in partnering, and so enabling out-partnering is subjective and situation dependent. Quantity of partnerships will be a factor, but the quality of partnerships will have more relevance. Nonetheless, with the shifting global dynamics it is self-evident that a more agile approach to partnering vice NATO's long-established status quo would help maintain strategic advantage through out-partnering. The adversary's perspective will also be a crucial factor in out-partnering; in order for NATO to shape

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<sup>3</sup> The White House, "On-the-Record Press Gaggle by White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby" (February 22, 2024): <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2024/02/22/on-the-record-press-gaggle-by-white-house-national-security-communications-advisor-john-kirby-2/>; Adela Suliman, John Hudson, Karoun Demirjian, and Alex Horton, "Russia buying weapons from North Korea for Ukraine war, U.S. intelligence says," *Washington Post* (September 6, 2022): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/06/north-korea-russia-weapons-ukraine/>; Garrett Nada, "Explainer: Iran's Drone Exports Worldwide," *U.S. Institute of Peace* (April 11, 2024): <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/nov/16/explainer-iran%E2%80%99s-drone-exports-worldwide>.

<sup>4</sup> Alex Vines and Jon Wallace, "China-Africa relations," *Chatham House* (January 18, 2023): <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/01/china-africa-relations>; Yike Fu, "The Quiet China-Africa Revolution: Chinese Investment," *The Diplomat* (November 22, 2021): <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/the-quiet-china-africa-revolution-chinese-investment/#:~:text=Over%20the%20same%20period%2C%20Chinese%20FDI%20stocks%20in,investor%2C%20ahead%20of%20the%20United%20States%20since%202014>.

and contest the future environment, it needs to understand, but not be bound by, strategic competitors' efforts, trends, and visions for partnerships.

### **Considerations**

In reviewing alternative attitudes to partnering, aside from the divergent approaches, there are a number of broader considerations beyond the partnering mechanics that NATO must factor into the out-partnering discussion.

In an increasingly contested global environment, it is natural that there will be prospective partners that are of mutual interest to both NATO and strategic competitors, albeit not necessarily for the same purpose. This creates obvious potential conflict, and it will be necessary for NATO to consider the purpose of the relationship, to assess the risks and benefits, and to determine whether to accept a beneficial but non-exclusive partnership in the pursuit of out-partnering or to insist on exclusivity that might also serve to deny potential adversaries.

Similarly, NATO must also consider the partnership activities of adversaries and what actions it may need to take in response. This might be where NATO has not yet engaged, does not have an immediate interest, either geographically or criteria-based, or where NATO is discounted due to a more attractive competing offer. Each scenario will have different implications for NATO, based on resources or strategic basing for example, but this understanding will be an important factor in out-partnering. The reciprocal of this is also relevant; the adversary's understanding of NATO's partnering intent and what actions it may take in response.

Partnerships of individual alliance members are pertinent in the NATO out-partnering context, whether there is scope to leverage existing relationships or the creation of new ones that would benefit NATO. This arrangement may suit some prospective partners who have reservations in partnering with NATO itself, and it may also afford some flexibility along the partnering spectrum where individual nations may have more freedom. Such arrangements may also overcome the question regarding exclusivity.

### **Out-Partnering**

In order to maintain the strategic advantage in future conflict, it is clear that NATO needs to review how it conducts partnering and how to out-partner. This concept features as one of the core functions identified within the NWCC in shaping the future MIOp. The next step is for NATO to consider how to achieve and implement it.

To out-partner implies fostering mutually supportive relationships for security and building advantages in the security environment. It is built on three foundational principles:

- *Quality.* More strategically valuable and mutually beneficial partnerships, in order to maintain the advantage over adversaries and remain the partner of choice with whom to cooperate and manage contested issues.



- *Mutual Benefit*. Partnerships relevant and beneficial for both parties, emphasizing the interest driven approach and reflecting NATO's and partners' motivation. This echoes the NATO Strategic Concept's characterization of "political dialogue and practical cooperation with partners, based on mutual respect and benefit."<sup>5</sup>
- *Interoperability*. Between NATO and partners across the operational contexts of shaping, contesting and fighting, affording better integration and data sharing. NATO needs to consider potential implications and the scope of interoperability for partners not seeking deeper military integration.

Importantly, out-partnering does not necessarily mean more, it means better. Success may be a mixture of partnerships along the hypothetical partnering spectrum.

Discussions at AC24 highlighted that, in order to better understand geopolitics and pursue out-partnering, NATO must understand cultural differences, priorities, and motivations between different regions and nations. Not all nations behave or think the same way as Western nations. Further to that, where NATO might consider future engagement with nations not fully aligned to Western-oriented moral values, NATO must communicate with and educate the general population as to why.

All three of NATO's core tasks require cooperation with partners and non-NATO entities,<sup>6</sup> so the role of partnerships must be considered in the context of out-partnering:

- *Cooperative Security*. In maintaining and improving their own security and stability, partner nations contribute to the cooperative security of the Alliance, offering an obvious advantage through scale. A broader and deeper collective understanding is also achieved through regional situational awareness and analysis from organizations, with scope to identify potential challenges or threats before they emerge.
- *Crisis Prevention and Management*. The limited capacity for some nations to resolve internal issues, potentially caused by malign interference, can lead to destabilization and disorder that might be exploited by strategic competitors. By partnering with such nations to develop their capabilities, build resilience, and ensure preparedness, NATO can prevent crises, build regional stability, and possibly benefit from additional interoperable partner units.
- *Deterrence and Defence*. Through cooperation in fields such as energy security, cyber, and counter-terrorism, NATO can develop a global awareness and collectively benefit from capabilities across the partner network.

In addition to national-level relationships, partnerships with academia, industry and international organizations are key. NATO needs to be able to leverage innovation at the speed of operational relevance, with industry and academia in particular offering advantages where national defence infrastructure often lacks.

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<sup>5</sup> NATO, "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept" (June 29, 2022): [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

- Industry has a significant advantage in capability development, providing an understanding of current and future developments and assimilating changes into legacy capabilities. Small and medium enterprises may also have additional innovation and freedom in researching and developing new capabilities. Engagement with industry can also highlight technological advancement beyond the defence industry that could be useful in the future operating environment, noting additionally that industry is a key enabler of interoperability.
- Academia can also be at the forefront of technological advancement in the theoretical space or in proving concepts. In helping to better understand the environment and broadening perspectives, this builds on an extensive and deep knowledge base, provides methodological expertise, and research opportunities, and it aids in identifying and understanding future challenges and trends. Academia also has freedom and global connections to explore more abstract ideas that would not ordinarily gain traction in more bureaucratic organizations.

### **Partner Requirements**

In order to out-partner, it is important to understand the needs and wants of existing and potential partners in order to remain or become the partner of choice. Each partner will have independent goals and strategies aside from those shared publicly, and those may exist without impact to NATO, but they can also lead to confusion and misalignment. Therefore, clear communication is critical to avoid duplication of effort and conflicting messaging.

Membership interests of partners play a particular role. There is a robust framework and trajectory for those partners aspiring to membership or very close cooperation with NATO. However, those who are not remain of paramount importance for out-partnering. Equally, non-partner nations and other actors remain crucial stakeholders to shape future NATO needs. For NATO, remaining the partner of choice constitutes the main challenge with regards to these actors, notably due to the cooperation and partnership opportunities provided by strategic competitors.

Most partners broadly understand and share NATO's vision on shaping and contesting, however there is a notable difference with regards to fighting. Some will embrace the collective defence pledge, others will see NATO as a force to fight with them and for them beyond NATO's borders. It is important, then, to clarify the extent of the relationship and the offer with prospective partners.

It was noted at AC24 that communication is key, both in developing successful partnerships (for example, goals and values, and an evidence-driven narrative of NATO reaching its goals) and also in articulating successes both internally and externally. The general population is a critical component to the NATO model of partnering, and NATO's activity needs to be 'sold' to the public. A diet of negativity will drive people away.

AC24 also highlighted that activity with partners needs to be faster and soft diplomacy plays a significant part in building and maintaining relationships. It was suggested that smaller nations are often not at the forefront as they have limited scope to offer hardware and personnel, however they can provide a significant contribution by way of such as intellectual capacity or specialist skills.

### **Military Approach to Out-Partnering and Next Steps**

Partnerships need to adapt for the future persistent, simultaneous and boundless environments,<sup>7</sup> therefore it is necessary to identify where NATO and partners' interests and ambitions align. It is also necessary to identify the conditions, resources, or situations where future adversaries will need support and seek to isolate them and limit their external options that might be used against NATO.

The military approach to achieving the desired, mutually-beneficial effects of out-partnering can be categorized under the three operational contexts of shaping, contesting, and fighting. In terms of next steps, it is necessary to develop a clear understanding of why, who, where, and how to effectively partner in the future.

- *Why.* It is important to form a common understanding of NATO's strategic objectives, opportunities and risks for the future, in order to shape, contest, and fight together with partners. This should include an analysis of the risks and costs resulting from the security vacuums that are, and are not, filled by the Alliance. NATO must also retain the ability to initiate, terminate, suspend, and resume partnerships to ensure relevance and to allow effort to be expended and limited resources to be allocated where there is most need. NATO must also consider the 'why' from the partner perspective, recognizing that protecting values and the rules-based international order are a core of the Alliance but might less of a consideration to potential partners.
- *Whom and Where.* NATO must seek to understand where NATO needs the interlocutors of today and the partners of tomorrow, regardless of the current geopolitical and operational context, and to identify where there are overlaps between NATO and its strategic competitors. It can achieve this somewhat by enhancing situational and regional awareness and assessing the long-term implications of trends. NATO can start to build future partnerships through reinforced dialogue and targeted cooperation with non-NATO entities and by engaging where there is relevance to emerging challenges.
- *How.* NATO can achieve its aims through investing in partnerships against a proactive, long-term vision with committed resources, presence, and endurance. Flexibility, responsiveness, and reactivity must be integral to its partnerships, and there should be measurable activities against defined benefits and metrics. For relevance and agility, NATO could consider reviewing the legacy offers, looking to build on ongoing cooperation and to establish baselines for long-term partnerships, potentially with higher levels of autonomy for

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<sup>7</sup> NATO, "NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept" (2021): <https://www.act.nato.int/our-work/nato-warfighting-capstone-concept/>.

NATO authorities to cooperate with partners and non-NATO entities. AC24 noted also that NATO needs to admit its weaknesses, where it has gotten things wrong, and to learn from the past. NATO should also not be afraid of innovation.

Comments from AC24 also drew parallels to other global partnerships, notably that NATO needs to maintain a presence in front of current and potential partners - further improved with continuity of individuals. This helps to build relationships and trust, whereby at other fora, even the most arcane, strategic competitors maintain a persistent presence.

It was also suggested that through NATO's activities, in its broader communication and through engagement with the general population, it must understand the perspective of the next generation - it needs to understand how to communicate with them, how to develop an environment palatable to them, and what legacy it will leave them.

### **Conclusion**

The success of NATO over 75 years is evident, however there are ever increasing challenges to the current world order. NATO must adapt to ensure it maintains the strategic advantage, not least in developing its partnership network, including how and with whom it partners, both to build on NATO's capability and also to deny adversaries the same access. In doing so, it must consider the interest, needs, and intent of its strategic competitors and the implications of adversaries partnering where NATO has not. NATO needs to develop a long-term plan and must be proactive in identifying where it should develop national or regional relationships and make firm commitments, including beyond its existing area of interest. NATO must also understand where western-oriented values are less relevant and where behaviours and motivations do not fully align with NATO and consider if and how to engage in these regions. NATO must look at agility in partnering and consider the merits and risks in different approaches along the hypothetical partnering spectrum, including increased autonomy for NATO authorities to engage regionally within agreed frameworks. NATO must also communicate effectively, both internally and externally and it must understand the next generation to whom NATO will leave its legacy.

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## **(Out-) Partnering for a Great Power Competition: Revitalizing NATO's Approach to Partnerships**

**Anna Dowd**

In his 1963 Foreign Affairs essay “The Practice of Partnership,” Dean Acheson emphasized “the great accretion of strength which membership in our alliances in this hemisphere and in Europe brings to a confrontation of power.”<sup>1</sup> As NATO prepares for the Washington Summit in July 2024 to commemorate its 75th anniversary, Acheson’s words resonate, highlighting the enduring importance of the Alliance. His insight into the collective strength brought about by alliances and partnerships has a profound relevance in a new era of great power competition. In today’s context, the impact of the Alliance extends well beyond the traditional Euro-Atlantic sphere, touching upon a global scale of strategic interests and security concerns. The resurgence of Russia, the rise of China, and transnational threats are challenges that increasingly require a cooperative approach involving a robust network of alliances and partnerships.

The upcoming summit, akin to the NATO summits held in Washington in 1978 and 1999, comes at a pivotal time for the Alliance. The first Washington Summit in 1978 convened 15 Heads of State and Government from allied nations to address the delicate balance between maintaining security in the Euro-Atlantic area and promoting East-West détente during a period of easing tensions between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries. In April 1999, leaders from 18 nations, including for the first time representatives from Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—former Warsaw Pact members—came together for the second Washington Summit, marking NATO’s 50th anniversary. This summit aimed to redefine NATO’s mission for the post-Cold War era. As NATO approaches the third Washington Summit that will bring together 32 allies as well as partners including the EU, Ukraine, and the Indo-Pacific 4,<sup>2</sup> the Alliance finds itself at a critical juncture yet again, facing a fundamentally altered security environment amid the resurgence of direct threats to its territorial integrity and the return of great power competition.

The evolving nature of NATO’s role and the formidable challenges it faces underscore the necessity for constant adaptation and transformation within the Alliance. At a time when geopolitical dynamics shift, NATO must remain agile and responsive to confront threats and challenges that are becoming more complex, global, and interconnected.<sup>3</sup> And to do so, the Alliance must enhance dialogue and practical collaboration with a vast network of partners, including non-member countries and international organizations, as well as industry and academia.

Partnerships are thus a cornerstone of NATO's strategy that underpins its transformation and adaptation to the evolving security landscape. Within NATO’s core task of cooperative security,

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Acheson, *The Practice of Partnership*, Foreign Affairs, January 1963. As of May 7, 2024: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/acheson-practice-partnership-nato>

<sup>2</sup> Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand

<sup>3</sup> NATO 2022 Strategic Concept

partnerships are also a force-multiplier that can enhance the Alliance's capabilities, extend its reach, and provide the necessary political, military, diplomatic and economic tools to shape the broader strategic environment. While adversaries and strategic competitors strengthen their partnerships, NATO must fortify its own network of partners to enhance deterrence and resilience. Reinforcing NATO's out-partnering function in the context of great power competition offers an opportunity to revitalize NATO's approach to partnerships.

### **Evolution of NATO's Approach to Partnerships**

NATO began to develop its approach to partnerships in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which had a profound impact on security in Europe leading to significant changes. As early as July 1990, NATO leaders addressed its implications at the London Summit and put forth proposals to enhance cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This shift from "confrontation to co-operation"<sup>4</sup> marked a crucial moment in the evolution of NATO's outlook on partnerships and regional security. In 1991, NATO established The North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), which brought together NATO allies and 11 former Soviet Union republics.<sup>5</sup> NACC, succeeded by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1997, was groundbreaking in fostering multilateral political consultation and cooperation, which played a crucial role in building confidence in the early 1990s.

The Allies' aspiration to build a security forum that included partners was driven by the need for a structure that could accommodate the complex and evolving relationships they had developed with non-member countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. This forum was intended to deepen cooperation, particularly in areas such as defense reform and the transition to democracy. These efforts laid the foundation for the establishment of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in 1994 to facilitate engagement with a broader range of actors to project stability beyond NATO's borders. The PfP program enabled development of bilateral, military-to-military partnerships with former Warsaw Pact and European neutral and nonaligned countries. These partnerships focused on interoperability, defense capacity building and defense reform to enable NATO and its partners to undertake combined peacekeeping and other missions to address regional instability. The program aimed to support training and exercises with partners to facilitate combined operations and assist countries aspiring for NATO membership in meeting the Alliance's standards. By participating in PfP activities, partner nations were given an opportunity to enhance their capabilities, align with NATO practices, and contribute to overall Alliance security, thus bolstering their credibility as candidates for NATO membership. NATO's enlargement to include "new democracies from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea" was a historic accomplishment and regarded as "a centerpiece of the Alliance's reinvention in the 1990s."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Opening remarks by Secretary General Manfred Wörner

<sup>5</sup> Georgia and Azerbaijan joined the NACC in 1992 along with Albania, and the Central Asian republics soon followed suit.

<sup>6</sup> President George W. Bush speech in Warsaw, Poland, June 15, 2001 <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-110publ17/html/PLAW-110publ17.htm>.

One of the key issues facing NATO in 2000s was the debate over whether the Alliance should take on more global responsibilities and missions, given that threats to North America and Europe were originating from beyond the European continent.<sup>7</sup> In response to this evolving security landscape, NATO has begun to consider how to establish new relationships with potential partners in order to effectively defend its members against emerging global threats. NATO's mission in Afghanistan underscored the importance of its role as a facilitator of multinational collaboration. The Alliance's established doctrine, standards, and training opportunities played a crucial role in facilitating military interoperability among allies and non-member partners involved in the coalition efforts.<sup>8</sup>

However, since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has shifted its strategic attention away from partnerships around the world.<sup>9</sup> Instead, NATO has prioritized a return to territorial defense, reassuring vulnerable allies on the Eastern Flank and enhancing its collective defense capabilities. This shift in focus has led to a decreased emphasis on partnerships, and together with the scaling back of out-of-area operations and the rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan in April 2021, it has brought into question the Alliance's effectiveness as a platform for security cooperation. Moreover, the emergence of alternative security formats such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the Australia-UK-U.S. (AUKUS) trilateral security pact highlight the need for NATO to reinvent its partnership approach. These initiatives suggest that some allies, including the United States and the United Kingdom, are seeking more tailored approaches to address specific security challenges and achieve specific policy objectives outside of the NATO framework.<sup>10</sup> While NATO remains a cornerstone of transatlantic security cooperation, these alternative formats reflect a growing trend towards building partnerships that can adapt quickly to changing security dynamics. To mitigate a risk that such partnerships could sideline the alliance if they lead to conflicting strategies or divide the members' commitments, NATO should strengthen regular political consultations and policy coordination necessary to sustain allied cohesion. Better understanding of the diverse geopolitical interests and regional priorities of individual allies is critical to ensuring they complement the alliance's overall strategic goals.

NATO members have long consulted one another on global security issues, reflecting the recognition that these issues can have direct implications for the security of the alliance.<sup>11</sup> Recent events put into sharper relief that allies' security, including economic security,<sup>12</sup> cannot be insulated from the developments beyond the NATO treaty area. Moreover, common interests

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald D. Asmus, Richard C. Holbrooke, *Re-Reinventing NATO*, Riga Papers

<sup>8</sup> Seth Johnston, *NATO's Lessons from Afghanistan*, The US Army War College Quarterly Parameter, Autumn 2019: <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/natos-lessons-afghanistan>

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Aronsson, Brett Swaney, *Priorities for NATO Partnerships in an Era of Strategic Competition*, Center for Strategic Research Institute for National Strategic Studies National Defense University, December 2022, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/strategic-perspectives-40.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Aronsson, Swaney.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, *The out-of-area debate: the Atlantic alliance and challenges beyond Europe*. RAND Corporation, 1985. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/notes/N2268.html>

<sup>12</sup> Annd M. Dowd, Dominik Jankowski, *Developing and Economic Security Agenda for NATO*, War on the Rocks, May 28, 2024. <https://warontherocks.com/2024/05/developing-an-economic-security-agenda-for-nato/>.



outside the traditional geographic boundaries of the alliance as well as NATO's ability to project power and influence far beyond the Euro-Atlantic area require improved inter-allied political consultations and policy coordination. Steering the alliance response to challenges beyond Europe, while balancing national interests with collective goals, is not a peripheral issue for NATO but a crucial aspect of its strategic cohesion as well as its overall strategic posture.

To ensure continued relevance and effectiveness, NATO should consider adapting its partnership framework to be more proactive, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse security challenges facing its members and the broader international community. This may involve exploring new formats, such as enhanced dialogue with non-traditional partners, increased cooperation with regional organizations, and greater emphasis on interoperability and operational requirements, as well as capacity-building initiatives. By reinventing its partnership approach, NATO can better leverage the strengths and capabilities of a wider range of actors, enhancing its ability to address complex security threats and maintain its position as a key player in the international security landscape.

### **Out-partnering for a Great Power Competition**

The NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC) endorsed by the Allies in 2021 provides a vision for maintaining and enhancing NATO's military advantage and adapting the military instrument of power through 2040, with a focus on addressing the evolving dynamics of great power competition.<sup>13</sup> The concept of "the 6 outs" introduced in NWCC highlights key functions that the Alliance's warfare development approach should embody to effectively address emerging threats, safeguard against vulnerabilities, and stay ahead of the adversary. These functions include out-thinking, out-excelling, out-fighting, out-pacing, out-lasting and out-partnering strategic competitors and adversaries.

Building on the concept of out-partnering outlined in NWCC<sup>14</sup> is particularly significant as it emphasizes the strategic importance of robust partnerships to NATO's overall military effectiveness. This involves two critical dimensions: enhancing and expanding external partnerships with key partners from non-NATO countries and international organizations; and deepening internal partnerships within the Alliance, particularly with defense industry, research institutes, think tanks, and academia.

Investing significant efforts in out-partnering during peacetime is a sound strategic approach that can yield significant benefits for NATO. By actively seeking out and fostering partnerships with a

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<sup>13</sup> NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept, <https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/NWCC-Glossy-18-MAY.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> The NWCC "Out-Partner" function underscores that "the future Alliance Military Instrument of Power must be able to foster mutually supportive and habitual relationships and partnership opportunities." <https://www.act.nato.int/article/nato-partnerships/#:~:text=The%20%22Out%2DPartner%22,function,which%20provides%20NATO%20Allies%2C%20its>

diverse range of actors, including partner nations, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, civilian actors, and industry, NATO can build trust, understanding, and coordination that lay the foundation for more effective collaboration in times of crisis, instability or conflict. The evolving strategic landscape, characterized by “interlocking partnerships” among Russia, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Iran, and North Korea,<sup>15</sup> underscores the importance of bolstering NATO’s out-partnering function. These partnerships, particularly the deepening collaboration between Russia and the PRC, pose significant challenges to Euro-Atlantic security and require a proactive and coordinated response from the Alliance.<sup>16</sup> The strategic alignment between Russia and the PRC, as exemplified by their “No-Limits” partnership, extends beyond diplomatic relations to encompass cooperation in informational, economic, and military domains.<sup>17</sup> This partnership enhances the capabilities and influence of both countries and enables them to support nations that exhibit hostility and aggression towards allied interests. The increasing support provided by the PRC to Russia highlights the commitment of the Chinese Communist Party to partnerships that may undermine NATO collective security efforts.<sup>18</sup>

In light of these developments, reinforcing NATO’s out-partnering function becomes crucial in countering the strategic challenges posed by the collaborative efforts of Russia, the PRC, Iran, and North Korea. While these efforts are not new, Russia’s war in Ukraine has led to the deepening of their economic, military, political, and technological ties, creating an “axis of upheaval” to reshape the geopolitical landscape”.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, fortifying partnerships with like-minded nations and organizations is an essential component of fulfilling NATO’s core task of cooperative security to contribute to enhancing resilience and upholding the rules-based international order in the face of the changing security environment.<sup>20</sup>

By investing in partnerships that promote shared values and the rules-based international order, enhance security cooperation, and foster trust and coordination, NATO can better address the complex and multifaceted challenges posed by the strategic partnerships among adversarial actors. Proactive engagement with partners can help the Alliance to mitigate risks, enhance

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<sup>15</sup> Statement of General Christopher G. Cavoli, United States European Command, April 10, 2024. [https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/USEUCOM%20GEN%20Cavoli%20CPS\\_HASC\\_2024.pdf](https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/USEUCOM%20GEN%20Cavoli%20CPS_HASC_2024.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> See *The Secretary General’s Annual Report 2023*, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/sgar23-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/sgar23-en.pdf), and *America’s Strategic Posture, The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Patricia M. Kim, *The Limits of the No-Limits Partnership China and Russia Can’t Be Split, but They Can Be Thwarted*, Foreign Affairs, March/April 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/limits-of-a-no-limits-partnership-china-russia>.

<sup>18</sup> Cavoli.

<sup>19</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Richard Fontaine, *The Axis of Upheaval, How America’s Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order*, Foreign Affairs, May-June 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>

<sup>20</sup> NATO 2022 Strategic Concept

situational awareness, build resilience against gray-zone tactics and coercion and strengthen deterrence capabilities in the face of evolving security threats.

Furthermore, the development of comprehensive methodologies to assess the impact and future trajectories of cooperation among strategic competitors and adversaries is essential for NATO's strategic planning and security posture.<sup>21</sup> Enhancing engagement and collaborative efforts with research institutions, think tanks, and academia is vital in providing the analytical depth and breadth required to understand and mitigate these challenges. Expanding research partnerships is also essential in exploring emerging issues that transcend national boundaries—like artificial intelligence in warfare, the impact of climate change on security, biosecurity, the future of space, and cyber operations—and require a global, coordinated response. By leveraging the vast potential of research institutions across the Alliance to systematically analyze threats and risks in order to develop informed strategies, NATO can significantly enhance its analytical and operational capacities to better safeguard its interests and maintain its strategic advantage.

Finally, establishing strong partnerships during peacetime allows NATO to leverage the expertise, resources, and capabilities of its partners to enhance its own operational effectiveness and resilience, while advancing broader strategic objectives. By working closely with partners, the Alliance can improve interoperability, information sharing, and joint planning, which are critical elements for successful multinational operations.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, building partnerships based on trust and understanding can facilitate more efficient decision-making processes and enable rapid coordination during crises or conflicts. Therefore, NATO's out-partnering function must be reinforced to effectively address these challenges and safeguard the Alliance's strategic position in the global security landscape.

### **Reframing NATO's Partnerships Strategy through a Resilience-based Approach**

The recent overhauling of NATO's resilience agenda provides a timely opportunity for the alliance to rejuvenate and reframe its approach to partnerships and bolster its relevance and effectiveness in addressing the growing array of security challenges. Placing a renewed emphasis on resilience can enhance the ability of NATO member states and partners to prepare for, withstand and recover from various security threats. Emphasizing resilience in its partnership strategy can further enable NATO to work with partners more effectively in mutually beneficial ways. The systemic challenges, including pandemics, intensified geostrategic competition, the rapid pace of technological advancement, supply chain vulnerabilities, energy insecurity, growing dependencies, and climate change surpass the capacity of any single nation or organization to tackle independently and encompass interests crucial to the security and well-being of all allies and partners. As highlighted by Ganesh Sitaraman in his 2020 *Foreign Affairs* essay, the common

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance, Andrew Radin, Andrew Scobell, Elina Treyger, J.D. Williams, Logan Ma, Howard J. Shatz, Sean M. Zeigler, Eugeniu Han, Clint Reach, *China-Russia Cooperation. Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States*, RAND Corporation, 2021. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3067.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3067.html).

<sup>22</sup> Christopher G. Pernin, Angela O'Mahony, Gene Germanovich, Matthew Lane, *Chasing Multinational Interoperability. Benefits, Objectives, and Strategies*, RAND Corporation, April 8, 2020, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3068.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3068.html)

thread among these diverse threats is that they are not merely battles to be won but challenges to be weathered collectively.<sup>23</sup>

During the Cold War, resilience rooted in Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty was a critical component of NATO's deterrence and defensive strategy against the Soviet Union, encompassing military capacity, civil preparedness, and emergency planning.<sup>24</sup> With the end of the Cold War, however, the emphasis on resilience waned as NATO's priorities changed. But in today's complex and interconnected global landscape, resilience—characterized as the individual and collective capacity to withstand, manage, and rapidly recover from a wide array of disruptions—has regained importance.<sup>25</sup> Thus, enhancing the combined capacity of NATO allies and partners is crucial for addressing shared challenges effectively.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine underscores a critical aspect of modern warfare and national security: the convergence of military resilience with broader societal resilience. This alignment is essential not only for defense against military aggression but also for ensuring the stability and continuity of society and the economy in times of crisis. By adopting a whole-of-society approach, nations can not only enhance their defensive capabilities but also ensure the stability and rapid recovery of their societies in the face of diverse challenges. The experiences of nations that developed robust resilience strategies—including Finland and Sweden (former partner nations who joined NATO recently) as well as Japan, Singapore, Switzerland, and Israel—provide valuable lessons in the effective implementation of such strategies. During the Cold War, Finland's total defense doctrine was a prime example of civil preparedness and deterrence through resilience. The Finnish strategy places a strong emphasis on psychological resilience, preparing the population to maintain a strong will to defend the nation during crises. Developing a mechanism to share best practices with partner nations can play an instrumental role in strengthening resilience to common threats and challenges.

NATO's resilience agenda can also help improve collaboration with the European Union (EU). In January 2023, NATO and the EU established the NATO-EU Task Force on the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure focused on energy, transport, digital infrastructure, and space.<sup>26</sup> This initiative can further leverage NATO-EU cooperation in order to build up the resilience of critical infrastructure to guide future efforts, while also improving the sharing of best practices and situational awareness.

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<sup>23</sup> Ganesh Sitaraman, *A Grand Strategy of Resilience. American Power in the Age of Fragility*, Foreign Affairs, September/October 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-08-11/grand-strategy-resilience>.

<sup>24</sup> Anna M. Dowd, Cynthia R. Cook, *Bolstering Collective Resilience in Europe*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/bolstering-collective-resilience-europe>.

<sup>25</sup> Dowd, Cook.

<sup>26</sup> NATO website, *NATO and European Union Launch Task Force on Resilience of Critical Infrastructure*, March 16, 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_212874.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_212874.htm).

In addition, two strategic initiatives can significantly contribute to reframing NATO's partnerships strategy through a resilience-based approach. The establishment of an advisory group to the NATO Resilience Committee and the creation of a NATO and partner-wide Security Risk Assessment. The Advisory Group could play a vital role in integrating diverse perspectives and expertise from partner nations, think tanks, academia, research institutions, and the private sector into NATO's resilience planning and strategy formulation. Leveraging specialized knowledge and insights from various stakeholders and involving partner nations can provide a more comprehensive understanding of resilience challenges and solutions and promote broader cooperation while enhancing NATO's adaptive capacity. Finally, the creation of a NATO and partner-wide Security Risk Assessment to systematically assess and address persistent vulnerabilities and emerging challenges that NATO and partners face due to strategic shifts, systemic competition, rapid technological change, and transnational issues like climate change would enable proactive risk management, strategic alignment, and adaptive response mechanisms to swiftly address and mitigate emerging threats.

### **Deepening Partnerships within the Alliance: Closer Collaboration with the Defense Industry**

Russia's war in Ukraine has not only reshaped the geopolitical landscape but also underscored the critical need for robust defense capabilities. This situation has brought to the forefront the importance of deepening partnerships with the defense industry, highlighting its role as a pivotal mission partner in ensuring wartime preparedness. Historically, the defense industry has been viewed primarily as a supplier of military equipment and technology. However, in the current security environment the industry's potential contributions are increasingly seen as integral to strategic defense planning and operations. The capacity of the defense industrial base across the Alliance to support NATO's ability to rapidly mobilize and sustain advanced military operations can considerably contribute to deterring potential adversaries through the demonstration of robust manufacturing capabilities and technological advancements.

Depleted stockpiles, limited production capacity, and the lack of adequate defense industrial base preparedness for a wartime environment can have adverse implications for NATO's ability to effectively counter the threat posed by a reconstituted Russia in the future. A robust and resilient defense industrial base is essential for ensuring the timely production and delivery of critical defense capabilities during times of conflict or heightened security threats.

To address this challenge, NATO member states, in close cooperation with industry leaders, should prioritize investments in enhancing the readiness and capacity of their defense industrial base to rapidly scale up production, repair, and maintenance of military equipment in a crisis situation. This may involve improving supply chain resilience, increasing domestic production capabilities, and fostering innovation in defense technologies. Furthermore, fostering closer collaboration and coordination among NATO allies in defense industrial base planning and resource sharing can help mitigate vulnerabilities and strengthen collective defense capabilities. By proactively addressing the readiness of the defense industrial base, NATO can better position itself to respond effectively to potential security challenges, including those posed by a resurgent Russia and rising China.

Moreover, partnership with industry is essential to integrating rapidly changing military technology into NATO operations.<sup>27</sup> As military technology evolves at an unprecedented rate, the ability of NATO to adapt and integrate these innovations into its operational framework is crucial for maintaining strategic advantage. Industry partnerships, including with innovative small businesses and startups, as well as nontraditional defense suppliers play a pivotal role in this process, bridging the gap between technological advancements and their tactical implementation. By fostering joint development initiatives with industry partners, emphasizing continuous training, and establishing robust feedback mechanisms, NATO can effectively enhance its tactical capabilities and readiness to respond to emerging threats.

The conflict in Ukraine serves as a stark reminder of the necessity for preparedness in the face of emerging threats. The defense industry's role has evolved from a supplier to a mission-critical partner and a key contributor to NATO's out-partnering function. Leveraging this partnership effectively means not only enhancing the Alliance's deterrent and defense posture and military readiness but also ensuring a strategic advantage in future conflicts.<sup>28</sup>

### Conclusion

As the security environment continues to evolve with the complexities of great power competition, NATO's adaptation is imperative to maintain its relevance and effectiveness. By embracing flexibility, enhancing global partnerships, deepening collaboration with industry and academia, and improving its out-partnering function, the Alliance can continue to serve as a cornerstone of global stability. This proactive approach will not only help in deterring aggression but also in managing the multifaceted security challenges of the modern world.

To better shape future partnerships NATO should:

- Enhance political consultation and policy coordination among allies on global challenges to allow for a cohesive approach to global issues, enhancing the alliance's ability to act swiftly and effectively;
- Outline an overhauled partnership strategy with clearly stated objectives;
- Prioritize adaptability in its approach to partnerships, recognizing that the needs and priorities of partners may evolve over time;
- Prioritize partnerships that align with NATO's strategic objectives and priorities;
- Establish a framework for regular, strategic dialogues with the Indo-Pacific 4;
- Ensure that partnerships are mutually beneficial, with clear objectives and outcomes for both NATO and its partners;

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<sup>27</sup> Cynthia Cook, Anna M. Dowd, *How to Get NATO Forces the Technology They Need*, War on the Rocks, May 13, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/how-to-get-nato-forces-the-technology-they-need/>.

<sup>28</sup> Cynthia Cook, *Friends Over Factories. Why Ukraine's Alliances Are Worth More Than Russia's Industries*, Foreign Affairs, March 27, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/friends-over-factories>.

- Improve communication, coordination, and consultation mechanisms to facilitate regular updates and feedback between NATO and its partners, enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation.
- Identify and mitigate risks to future partnerships, such as diverging interests, changing geopolitical dynamics, and potential conflicts;
- Foster trust, maintain open lines of communication, and conduct regular assessments of partnership effectiveness;
- Develop a clear engagement strategy with industry and academia, outlining objectives, expectations, and areas of collaboration;
- Streamline processes and reduce bureaucratic barriers to facilitate smoother engagement with partners;
- Build trust through transparent communication, consistent engagement, and demonstrating the value of partnerships;
- Ensure that partnerships are given appropriate priority and resources within NATO's broader agenda to attract and retain partners.

NATO's ability to develop and implement a compelling partnership strategy is crucial for its adaptation to the evolving security environment. By making itself a partner of choice, offering tailored and mutually beneficial relationships, and carefully managing the inherent challenges, NATO can significantly enhance its capabilities and global standing. This strategic approach will not only strengthen NATO but also contribute to global security and stability.

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## NATO's Partnerships: Enlargement, Cooperative Security, and the Indo-Pacific

Valbona Zeneli

Seventy-five years ago, on April 4, 1949, leaders from twelve nations<sup>1</sup> gathered in Washington, DC, to sign the North Atlantic Treaty, known as the Washington Treaty, with a vision to foster peace and stability in the transatlantic community. In the wake of two devastating world wars that had ravaged Europe economically and socially, and against the backdrop of mounting fears of conflict with the Soviet Union, U.S. President Harry Truman envisioned the newly-established Alliance as a “shield against aggression and the pervasive fear of aggression.”<sup>2</sup> Following the success of the European Recovery Program, commonly referred to as the Marshall Plan,<sup>3</sup> which supported European countries in rebuilding their war-torn economies and fostered European economic integration, the idea of shared interests and security cooperation between the United States and Western Europe gained more prominence.

Today, NATO is bigger, more powerful, and more diverse than its creators could have ever imagined.<sup>4</sup> Enlargement stands out as one of NATO's most successful policies. It has grown from twelve to thirty-two allies,<sup>5</sup> while still upholding its original mission as the foundation of our common security and economic prosperity. The Alliance's three-fold purpose remains: to collectively defend its members, institutionalize the transatlantic alliance for security and strategic discussions, and offer a reassurance umbrella allowing European nations to address shared security challenges rather than internal divisions.<sup>6</sup>

The rapidly changing global landscape requires the Alliance to reevaluate the paradigm of conventional alliances, highlighting the importance of adaptability and cooperation to tackle modern security challenges. NATO's three fundamental tasks—collective defense and deterrence, crisis prevention management, and cooperative security—remain the cornerstone of the Alliance. The concept of partnerships at NATO started as part of the broader strategy of a “Europe whole and free,”<sup>7</sup> evolving over time globally, and it is integral to its mission of promoting security and

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<sup>1</sup> NATO's founding member countries: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas A. Shannon, “Remarks at the Ceremony for Montenegro's Accession to the North Atlantic Treaty” (June 5, 2017): <https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-and-releases-under-secretary-for-political-affairs/remarks-at-the-ceremony-for-montenegros-accession-to-the-north-atlantic-treaty/>.

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Historian, “Marshall Plan, 1948.” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/marshall-plan>.

<sup>4</sup> NATO, “NATO 2022 Strategic Concept” (June 29, 2022):

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<sup>5</sup> NATO, “NATO member countries.”

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<sup>6</sup> NATO, “NATO's purpose.” [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_68144.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_68144.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Jason Blessing, Katherin Kjellström Elgin, Nele Marianne Ewers-Peters, and Rakel Tiderman, ed., *NATO 2030: Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021): <https://sais.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/NATO2030AndBeyondAccessibleVersion.pdf>.

stability. In the future, partnerships with like-minded nations will be vital for the Alliance's continued success.

NATO's strategic focus has evolved over time reflecting new global challenges and security developments. This article will focus on the juxtaposing of two dimensions: the enlargement of NATO within the Euro-Atlantic community and its growing area of global partnerships, especially those out-of-area in the Indo-Pacific. NATO's enlargement within Europe has been crucial to enhancing security and stability in Europe, reinforcing the core mission of collective defense by integrating more countries in the Alliance's collective defense framework, serving as a deterrent against potential aggressors, and promoting democratic values and good governance in the Euro-Atlantic space. NATO's global partnerships in the Indo-Pacific are important to address transnational security challenges and also to establish a strategic presence to counterbalance China's influence, strengthening cooperation with key regional players to enhance security cooperation and extending NATO's influence beyond its traditional boundaries as transatlantic and Indo-Pacific security are more connected. In the future, NATO and its member states need to prioritize threats and challenges and choose its geographical focus, externally.<sup>8</sup> Internally, unity and cohesion are among the most important strategic imperatives, especially finding a balance between solidarity and member states' autonomy, between interests and values, and more equitable burden sharing between the United States and European NATO members.

### **NATO's Open Door Policy: Critical for Its Success**

Over ten rounds of enlargement, the Alliance has grown from its twelve founding members to thirty-two, contributing to a process of integration that has played a pivotal role in stabilizing Europe and cultivating robust new allies. Commonly referred to as NATO's "open door policy," enlargement is based on Article 10 of the Washington Treaty, which states that membership is open to "any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to its twelve founding members, four other European countries joined NATO during the Cold War, in three rounds of enlargement: Greece and Türkiye (1952), the Federal Republic of Germany (1955) and Spain (1982). Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the democratic transitions, the focus of enlargement shifted towards Eastern Europe. Formerly on the opposite side of the Iron Curtain and members of the Warsaw Pact, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became the first former communist countries to join the Alliance in 1999 at the Washington Summit. In addition, other countries started to prepare for potential membership through their Membership Action Plans. Seven other European countries (Bulgaria, Estonia,

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<sup>8</sup> Matthias Dembinski and Caroline Fehl, "Comparison of Country Cases and Conclusion," in *Three Visions for NATO – Mapping National Debates on the Future of the Atlantic Alliance*, ed. Matthias Dembinski and Caroline Fehl, 99-106 (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, June 2021):

<https://www.fes.de/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=65726&token=3c140b1e378955196e3088cdc360945aef6bd826>.

<sup>9</sup> NATO, "The North Atlantic Treaty" (April 4, 1949): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm).

Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) joined NATO in 2004, during the “Big Bang” enlargement (simultaneously with their EU membership process).

The vision of a united Europe, first articulated by U.S. President George H. W. Bush in 1989 with the idea of a “Europe whole and free,”<sup>10</sup> laid the foundation for the enlargement process, which was furthered by U.S. President Bill Clinton’s call for an “undivided, democratic Europe for the 21st century.”<sup>11</sup> The U.S. has been the “indispensable nation” when it comes to building or maintaining Western-oriented alliances and has played an instrumental role in making enlargement successful, viewing it as a strategic priority. In a strong bipartisan fashion, U.S. administrations have prioritized a value-based foreign policy coupled with a robust pragmatic security strategy, as articulated by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee in 1997: “A larger NATO will enhance America’s security, strengthen NATO, and promote a more peaceful and united Europe.”<sup>12</sup>

The vision has been that a strong and united Europe enhances the transatlantic partnership, with enlargement viewed as an integral component of the organic process of fortifying security and democracy on both sides of the Atlantic. First, NATO (and EU) integration of Eastern Europe has increased stability in the region, fostered good neighborly relations, and reshaped the strategic and security landscape of Europe. Eastern Europe, a region situated for centuries at the crossroads between East and West and marred by conflicts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, needed a robust security framework to advance democratic and economic development. Second, beyond geopolitical implications, enlargement in Europe has entailed institutional capacity-building efforts in the new member states, with the prospect of Euro-Atlantic integration serving as a strong driver for the candidate countries to accelerate good governance reform efforts. Third, each enlargement round has strengthened the Alliance and has increased the capacities and capabilities of the new member states, enabling them to become active contributors to the Alliance. Fourth, membership in NATO has provided new members with a security umbrella that has been crucial to enhance economic growth and prosperity in the region, facilitated by increased trade opportunities, sustainable foreign direct investment, and access to the large transatlantic market.

The first three Eastern European countries to join NATO (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland) witnessed remarkable economic development, with their economies expanding more than fivefold in 25 years from a market worth \$282 billion in 1999 to \$1.4 trillion by 2024. As a result, their average GDP per capita increased fivefold from \$5,000 to more than \$25,000, bolstering the wellbeing and the quality of life of citizens in the new member states. Similarly, the seven countries that joined NATO in 2004 saw their economies grow fourfold in 20 years, from a

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<sup>10</sup> George H.W. Bush, “A Europe Whole and Free” (May 31, 1989): <http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga6-890531.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> William J. Clinton, “Letter to Congressional Leaders Transmitting a Report on the Enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization” (February 24, 1997) in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton* (1997, Book I): <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/granule/PPP-1997-book1/PPP-1997-book1-doc-pg195-2/content-detail.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Madeleine K. Albright, “Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee” (October 7, 1997): <http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/statements/971007.html>.

regional market of \$226 billion to \$891 billion in 2024. Their average GDP per capita went from \$7,729 to \$27,178 during that span, an increase of more than 3.5 times.

NATO enlargement has significantly bolstered the alliance's military capabilities and financial resources, expanding its pool of military personnel both in numbers and in expertise. NATO member states spent \$1.3 trillion on their defense budgets in 2023, compared to \$943 billion in 2014.<sup>13</sup> The total gross domestic product (GDP) of the thirty-two NATO member states is around \$52 trillion,<sup>14</sup> more than 25 times Russia's GDP of \$2.2 trillion.<sup>15</sup>

For each new member country, the process of integration into NATO has also led to higher defense spending, modernization efforts, enhanced interoperability, and specialized skills. Higher defense spending of member states should have led to more efficient and equitable burden-sharing, although this has not always been the case as the United States has shouldered the largest burden of the Alliance's spending.

The success of Central and Eastern European countries encouraged countries in the Western Balkans to aspire to NATO membership. NATO played a pivotal role in restoring peace and stability in the region after the eruption of violence and aggression in the 1990s. Allies recognized the importance of integrating a region marked by many pockets of instability, where NATO has been extensively involved in peace-support operations since the mid-1990s, into Euro-Atlantic institutions to ensure security and stability. Over three rounds, four countries from the region joined NATO (Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020 following the resolution of the name issue with Greece), transforming from security consumers into security providers for the Alliance.

With all its benefits, enlargement has also been a contentious issue, especially in the late 1990s, with doubts about how the integration of new countries with distinct economic and political contexts would impact the cohesion of the Alliance, the potential benefits it would bring to NATO and its member states, and how these changes would influence future relations with Russia. Even today, 25 years after the initial enlargement following the end of the Cold War, some critics persist in accusing NATO enlargement of alienating Russia or encroaching upon its perceived natural "sphere of influence."<sup>16</sup>

However, the best response to criticism of enlargement is Finland and Sweden's desire to join the Alliance, an unintended consequence of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. They became NATO's newest members, with Finland joining in April 2023 and Sweden in March 2024. Three

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<sup>13</sup> NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2023)."

[https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/240314-def-exp-2023-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/240314-def-exp-2023-en.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> World Bank, "GDP (current US\$) – Russian Federation."

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=RU>

<sup>16</sup> AL.com, "Tommy Tuberville says Putin 'doesn't want' Ukraine: 'He's got enough land of his own'" (June 6, 2024):

<https://www.al.com/news/2024/06/tommy-tuberville-says-putin-doesnt-want-ukraine-hes-got-enough-land-of-his-own.html>.

other partner countries have also declared their aspirations to NATO membership: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine.

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has reshaped the Euro-Atlantic security landscape, positioning a more assertive Russia nearer to NATO's boundaries as the "most significant and direct threat to Allies' security,"<sup>17</sup> and challenging the principles of the rules based international law, human rights, and democratic values that bond the alliance. This has prompted a reassessment of strategic priorities and has served as a catalyst for renewed commitment for defense measures.

NATO members have showed strong solidarity and cohesion condemning the aggressive violations of Ukraine's sovereignty, exerting tough sanctions against Russia, and also calling for a diplomatic resolution to a conflict that has caused tremendous suffering. The Allies' support for Ukraine has come through political, diplomatic, economic, and military means, including technical expertise and training. In reality, NATO support started following the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, when NATO Foreign Ministers agreed on measures to enhance Ukraine's ability to provide for its own security, developing practical support programs.<sup>18</sup> At the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, Ukraine was offered a Comprehensive Assistance Package, integrating various initiatives in a structured package to enhance Ukraine's capacities and implement reforms to increase alignment with NATO standards and practices.<sup>19</sup>

At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, the Allies agreed that Ukraine will join NATO in the future and took three historic decisions to speed up the process and bring Ukraine "closer to NATO than ever before."<sup>20</sup> Those decisions related to: shortening the path for NATO membership by removing the requirement for a Membership Action Plan, a special program to increase the interoperability of the Armed Forces of Ukraine with the Alliance, and establishing the NATO-Ukraine Council to strengthen political consultations.<sup>21</sup>

Given the new geopolitical landscape, the disruption of peace in Europe, the challenges to the rules-based international order, and the resurgence of strategic competition, NATO enlargement takes on even more importance in retrospect. NATO's presence in Eastern Europe is a visible symbol of reassurance and solidarity in the face of Russia's aggressive behavior and regional instability.<sup>22</sup> NATO's presence in these areas acts as a deterrent against potential aggression from adversarial states. The deployment of NATO troops in the Baltic states and Poland as part of the

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<sup>17</sup> NATO, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué" (July 11, 2023): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_217320.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm).

<sup>18</sup> NATO, "Relations with Ukraine" (May 10, 2024): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_37750.htm#:~:text=In%20parallel%20to%20its%20political,provide%20for%20its%20own%20security](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37750.htm#:~:text=In%20parallel%20to%20its%20political,provide%20for%20its%20own%20security).

<sup>19</sup> NATO, "Warsaw Summit Communiqué" (July 9, 2016): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm).

<sup>20</sup> NATO, "Secretary General in Kyiv: Ukraine is closer to NATO than ever before" (September 28, 2023): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_218847.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_218847.htm).

<sup>21</sup> NATO, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué."

<sup>22</sup> Jerzy Koźmiński and Daniel Fried, "NATO enlargement at twenty-five: How we got there and what it achieved" (March 6, 2024): <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-enlargement-at-twenty-five/>.

Enhanced Forward Presence demonstrates the alliance's commitment to collective defense and deterrence, contributing to the security and resilience of Europe.

The biggest advantage of NATO enlargement is the establishment of a broader coalition of like-minded nations sharing common values, based on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law, thus fortifying the collective commitment to peace and security. Each round of enlargement has broadened the geographic reach of the alliance, strategically positioning it to address emerging threats and deter aggression, not only enhancing the security of its member states but also fostering stability and cooperation beyond its borders.

### **Cooperative Security: A Cornerstone of the Alliance**

Today, the transatlantic alliance finds itself at a pivotal juncture in history, navigating from a period of relative stability into an increasingly volatile and precarious phase that Daniel S. Hamilton and Hans Binnendijk term the "Age of Disruption," in their NATO Task Force Report, "One Plus Four: Charting NATO's Future in an Age of Disruption."<sup>23</sup> The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept characterizes the strategic landscape as "contested and unpredictable," highlighting that "strategic competition, pervasive instability and recurrent shocks define our broader security environment."<sup>24</sup>

In the current global landscape, partnerships are crucial to the Alliance's broader strategy. Authoritarian regimes face NATO with new challenges emerging from renewed great power competition, which the transatlantic community can confront using a single pool of shared resources. In doing so, NATO members should cooperate with their global partners to apply the significant resources at their disposal deliberately, systematically, and effectively. Partnerships can be used by NATO to actively shape the security environment. NATO's forty partners can be classified into those aspiring to NATO membership, partners located along NATO's periphery that are likely candidates, and like-minded partners globally.<sup>25</sup>

NATO's primary mission has been the collective defense of its member states. From an internal perspective, the Alliance is committed to enhancing the cohesion and readiness of its forces, streamlining its command structures, and ensuring that member states are adequately equipped and prepared to respond to traditional and emerging security threats. In this framework, there has been considerable debate over the extent to which NATO should focus only within its members and its territory versus out-of-area operations. These discourses are shaped by different geographical locations, history, economic interests, threats perceptions, and bilateral relations of NATO members with global actors.

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel S. Hamilton and Hans Binnendijk, ed., *One Plus Four: Charting NATO's Future in an Age of Disruption* (NATO Task Force Report, 2022): <https://www.transatlantic.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/NATO-TF-SC-final-feb-16-2022.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> NATO, "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept" (June 29, 2022): [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton and Binnendijk, *One Plus Four*.

The “NATO 2030: United for a New Era” Reflection Group Report incorporated the agenda of the “pivot to Asia,” noting that NATO “must devote much more time, political resources, and action to the security challenges posed by China,”<sup>26</sup> as it will affect NATO’s architecture. The internal challenge is that this focus on China might create some new divisions between the United States and European member states as they have different perspectives on security challenges posed by China.<sup>27</sup> The 138 proposals for reform recommended in the Reflection Group Report point out that the Alliance has to have a more global outlook considering the new transnational challenges that affect transatlantic security.

The cornerstone of NATO’s partnership initiatives is the Partnership for Peace Program, established in 1994, which offers a structured framework for collaboration and dialogue with non-member states across Europe and beyond.<sup>28</sup> Through this program of capacity building and trainings, collective military exercises, and information exchange, NATO has supported its partners in fostering interoperability and supported the process of NATO membership for new member states.

### **NATO’s Global Partnerships and the Indo-Pacific**

NATO should utilize partnerships in a strategic manner, giving precedence to partnerships that most effectively serve the Alliance’s interests, and develop an approach that focuses on converging interests where the strategic interests of the Alliance are matched with partners’ national security interests. The NATO 2030 Reflection Group Report proposed transitioning NATO’s partnership framework from one centered on partners’ desires to one driven by NATO’s own interests, but also their demands must be matched with a clear strategic response from the Alliance. It is important to place a strong emphasis on fostering democratic resilience within partnerships and to increase focus on development and institution building. Cooperative security efforts need to be expanded to encompass initiatives addressing the security implications arising from new challenges, such as climate change and disruptive technologies, as well as challenges related to the global commons, including safeguarding freedom of the seas, upholding the global information commons, ensuring security and adherence to peaceful norms in space, and protecting Allies’ interests in the Arctic.

Clearly, NATO’s role in the rules-based world order is strongly enhanced through partnership. Partners also benefit from a more stable international order, and at the national level they gain other advantages as well. The most important areas in which NATO should seek to cooperate with global partners for the Alliance—to continue to play its critical role in fulfilling the promises of the UN Charter by building global security one nation at a time—are:

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<sup>26</sup> NATO, *NATO 2030: United for a New Era* (November 25, 2020):

[https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-reflection-group-final-report-uni.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-reflection-group-final-report-uni.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, “Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security If the United States Pulls Back,” *International Security* 45, no. 4 (2021): 7–43.

<sup>28</sup> NATO, “Partnership for Peace programme” (March 8, 2024):

[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50349.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50349.htm).



- Enhancing regional stability through collective resilience (infrastructure, supply chains, cybersecurity), especially regarding the actions of China and Russia.
- Safeguarding the global commons, which are fundamental to economic stability (a key element of political stability).
- Leading together in driving emerging and disruptive technologies to peaceful and productive purposes.
- Mitigating the security implications of climate change.
- Supporting the rules-based international order for peaceful conflict resolution.
- Developing a broader vision of security inclusive of gender security and good governance.

The benefits of NATO's partnerships with Indo-Pacific nations are manifold, especially when considering recent lessons from Ukraine and increased strategic competition with Russia and China. These new partnerships reflect a strategic adaptation to the globalized nature of current security threats. Working together with countries like Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand enables NATO to tackle challenges that extend beyond regional limits, such as cybersecurity, counterterrorism, and the emergence of strategic rivals like China.

First, regional security in the Indo-Pacific contributes to international stability and thereby supports NATO's core tasks by enhancing security and prosperity in the transatlantic community. The Indo-Pacific region is the epicenter of global maritime trade, with 60% of global trade sailing through this area. In the next two decades, two-thirds of global wealth will be concentrated there. The region will be shaped by technological innovations and emerging and disrupting technologies (both civil and military), but it will also face environmental and resource challenges. As such, the Indo-Pacific is expected to become an increasingly competitive area regarding sovereign territory claims, resource exploitation, infrastructure development, and free access. According to the Strategic Foresight Regional Perspectives Report on the Indo-Pacific published by NATO Allied Command Transformation, the Alliance is primarily concerned about the growing militarization of the region, which raises the possibility of direct confrontation with significant economic and geopolitical repercussions.<sup>29</sup> Developing strong partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific would also serve as a bulwark against aggressive activities by China, Russia, and other actors across the global commons, especially at sea, in the global information commons, in space, and in the Arctic.

Second, partnering illuminates force structure considerations and interoperability requirements between NATO and partner countries across a wide spectrum of weapon systems and sophisticated technologies. Thus, it informs decisions that shape long-term strategy, especially related to employment, procurement, and acquisition. Robust interoperability and improved capabilities are deterrents against adventurous states with nefarious intentions. Third, strengthening information sharing with Indo-Pacific partners supports NATO's ability to anticipate challenges globally, prioritize actions, allocate resources, and manage risks. In this way, effective

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<sup>29</sup> NATO, "Strategic Foresight Regional Perspectives Report on the Indo-Pacific" (August 2, 2022): <https://www.act.nato.int/article/strategic-foresight-regional-perspectives-report-on-the-indo-pacific/>.

partnering offers economies of scale for employing limited resources in strategic competition as we collectively uphold the rules-based international order.

On the other side, there are several benefits for partner countries as a result of stronger cooperation with NATO. First, partnering with NATO would offer Indo-Pacific nations a strategic counterbalance to China's military strength and technological advancements, whose methods challenge regional security, human rights, and the current rules-based world order. Second, partners benefit from NATO's extensive expertise in capacity-building efforts for addressing regional challenges and increasing resilience in areas such as conflict prevention, civil emergency planning, climate change, countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and a number of other portfolios. Third, partners benefit from NATO's status as a multilateral forum able to convene a wide range of stakeholders to promote cooperation across the global commons. A partnership with NATO enhances a nation's relations not only with each member of NATO, but also with all of NATO's other partners—both nations and organizations.

### **NATO's Institutional Partnerships**

NATO also engages with a wide range of other partners, including non-member states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations, to address shared security concerns and promote stability in regions of strategic importance. NATO's cooperation with the European Union, the United Nations, and other international actors enables coordinated responses to complex security challenges, such as peacekeeping operations, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and conflict prevention. The strategic partnership between NATO and the EU is crucial to leverage synergies and resources to better integrate partners into the transatlantic community and to better align our national and multinational engagements. For such multilateralism to be effective in allocating resources to solve the root causes of problems, leaders need to collectively set clear priorities, apply the requisite and appropriate resources to those priorities, understand and manage the risks involved in those choices, and commit to making good collective decisions quickly to execute our comprehensive security agenda effectively.<sup>30</sup>

Public communication about NATO's values-based approach is a critical enabler promoting awareness and improving political cohesion, working together with civil society and business communities. Communicating to inform a broad audience, especially our younger generation, is therefore a strategic imperative and central to any strategic communication effort. Public support for NATO remains strong, with 72% of respondents expressing support for their country's NATO membership, according to the 2023 NATO Annual Tracking Survey.<sup>31</sup> 73% of those polled across the alliance agreed that their nation should be defended by other NATO states if attacked. However, support slightly declined to 61% when respondents were asked if they endorsed their

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Ryan and Valbona Zeneli, "America is Back. Is Europe Back Too?" *Orbis* 66, no. 1 (2022): 14-25.

<sup>31</sup> NATO, "Allied perceptions on security, defence and NATO in 2023" (March 14, 2024): [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_222209.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_222209.htm).

own country's intervention to defend another member. Nevertheless, a majority of Allied respondents approve of their country's ongoing support for Ukraine, with 63% in favor.

For the long term, NATO must cultivate future advocates and educate younger generations. Currently, there are generational gaps in perceptions about NATO, with younger generations more focused on issues of climate change, sustainability, human security, and technological interconnectedness. Societal resilience determines the success or failure of a people in crisis or war. At the same time, a resilient and knowledgeable society can prevent crises. The Scandinavian model is one to emulate here.

### **The Way Forward**

In an era of evolving threats and global uncertainties, the questions of how to defend our security and prosperity become increasingly pertinent. NATO and the transatlantic community should adopt a multifaceted approach centered on resilience, unity, and autonomy. First and foremost, demonstrating resilience is key. This entails not only bolstering physical infrastructure but also cultivating societal resilience and fortifying democratic processes. NATO and its allies must embrace a comprehensive approach to resilience, encompassing forward-thinking strategies that anticipate and mitigate potential challenges and threats. This resilience framework needs to be extended to all facets of collaboration with partners, to proactively address emerging challenges and safeguard our prosperity.

Second, NATO's unity of purpose and effort is essential in upholding the rules-based world order. By fostering unity within the transatlantic community, we can strengthen our collective influence and uphold the principles of democracy and free-market economies. Continuous efforts to integrate partners into our community of democracies will not only enhance global security but also ensure that these partners become net contributors to prosperity. By maintaining unity and cohesion, we can sustain the viability of the rules-based world order and protect our shared values.

Lastly, asserting autonomy across the global commons is imperative. From ensuring freedom of navigation to safeguarding cybersecurity and space exploration, NATO and its allies must actively exercise autonomy in key domains. By asserting control within the information environment, we can counter disinformation and preserve the integrity of democratic processes. Embracing collective autonomy allows us to navigate the complexities of the modern world and defend our prosperity against emerging threats.

NATO needs a coherently integrated approach to evenly develop partnerships across all sectors and bring partners closer to our community. The focus should be on understanding and setting our priorities, then allocating resources to those priorities. Where resources are insufficient, there is need to collectively manage risk, measure progress, understand the limits of the "absorptive capacities" of NATO partners, and master speed of decision as a community of democratic nations.

Within a resilient transatlantic alliance, political leadership and security forces can respond successfully to any crisis. Without resilience, the alliance will remain vulnerable to malign influences that seek to divide, sap physical and societal strength, and undermine the ability to respond to challenges—politically, economically, and militarily. Unity and resilience are critical for defending against authoritarian regimes that aim to “divide and conquer.”

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# Out-Partnering and NATO

Adam Mosseri

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) looks to increase coalition and non-coalition participation. Out-partnering focuses on the global cooperation between organizations. With NATO at the forefront, the development of lasting partnerships is essential. To *out-partner* adversarial entities and to maintain international relevance, NATO must continue to be an innovative force. Through out-partnering, NATO positions itself as an effective partner to entities both inside and outside of the alliance. Throughout the 2024 NATO Academic Conference at Old Dominion University, a common sentiment held that NATO must do better at out-partnering its adversaries in order to ensure that other nations and organizations want to remain partnered with the alliance. Out-partnering should be embraced as a fundamental goal of the alliance in order to ensure its sustainability—vital for sustained global partnerships and a necessity for international cooperation.

## War, Politics and Leadership

The topic of out-partnering begins with a single question: what is war? This sets a particular tone, especially when war is defined as a “thing” of violence and a test of wills. As the alliance prepares for conflicts that it hopes will never transpire, the importance of NATO’s ability to out-partner remains at the forefront. NATO’s efforts are multidimensional; however, discussions during the conference intoned that it lacks adequate versatility for war. The alliance’s military capability is not explicitly challenged. Instead, this determination revolved around NATO’s perceived inexperience with hybrid warfare, generating the sense that the alliance lacks the capacity to engage in modern warfare. War is centered around violence; making it particularly troublesome for an alliance to consider the possibility that it is unprepared as an organization for the most likely forms of violence. Some see NATO as not taking war seriously due to readiness pitfalls both politically and operationally. If NATO is ill-prepared for the future of warfare, then it certainly has important work ahead.

NATO’s troubles begin at the political level as it is both a complex military organization and a bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup> NATO’s strength is in its partners, but it is weakened by political influences that hinder the alliance’s ability to execute its missions and prevent it from being an effective partner. Politicking represents a notable detriment in relation to NATO’s ineffectiveness in supporting its international commitments. Current policy creates a burdensome time-delay in NATO’s ability to resource missions globally. Reinforcing this notion, it was noted that politicking amongst member Nations within the alliance hinders rapid responses to support humanitarian missions in Africa. Due to this inherent time-delay, many nations that want NATO support and would like to strengthen their partnerships with NATO are less inclined to do so than they would otherwise be.

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Mayer, *NATO’s Post-Cold War Politics: The Changing Provision of Security* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

This time-delay creates opportunities for non-NATO aligned Nations to inject themselves into an international situation and offer more timely support. This hampers NATO's ability to show current and potential partners the reasons why the alliance is the best to partner with. Thus, political hindrances create a global perception that NATO is inefficient and a "bad international partner." NATO's strength resides in its ability to foster lasting partnerships, and alliance leadership must work toward reframing this false perception as a "bad partner" through streamlining resource deployment to meet the rapid needs that afflict international communities.

The theme that NATO is not the partner that the world yearns for has continued to permeate. Globally, NATO is recognized as a collective military alliance among its member Nations in an effort to provide a unified collective defense. As a partner for peace, NATO builds security relationships that bring stability.<sup>2</sup> Out-partnering depends on the understanding that NATO must be prepared for conflict and be ready to defend its allies, and it suffers from perceptions that this support alone resides in the United States' military commitment to the alliance. NATO's leadership must focus on dismantling this perception that the United States alone will fill the ranks of its forces. NATO allies must be prepared to defend themselves and alliance members without an expectation of reliance solely on U.S. military commitments.

### **Force Readiness and Training**

Thus, for NATO to be a better partner there needs to be an increase in its military readiness across all member Nations. Ideally, NATO should adopt policies that increasingly move its members' forces toward integration into a unified fighting force, removing the frictions of several military organizations fighting together independently hindering the alliance's warfighting capabilities, with seamless training across the alliance. For the alliance to remain combat ready, NATO forces should exercise equally to when those troops are not assigned to NATO and ensure skills are proficiently maintained.<sup>3</sup> Without this, NATO risks a culture that is lacking in readiness.

Mental health is a component of war and readiness; NATO will need to adopt a training program that is focused on preparing for anything and everything to happen. Force readiness and resiliency are paramount. As suicide rates among service members continue to rise, brazen disregard and disingenuous discussion on the matter will detrimentally impact NATO. Military personnel struggle with mental health complications and it is counterproductive for alliance leadership to disregard this fact. "The operational deployments NATO Forces are conducting often present very high levels of stress for the soldiers."<sup>4</sup> As NATO forces experience these elevated levels of stress, this can have adverse effects on their mental health. This can impact operations, presenting difficult challenges for NATO leadership regarding how mental health should be addressed. The challenge of mental health must be embraced, with alliance partners inventing a more robust

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<sup>2</sup> Joe Kyle, "NATO Partnership for Peace," *Yale Journal of International Affairs* 14, no. 64 (2019): <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/nato-partnership-for-peace>.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer D. P. Moroney, *Building Partner Capabilities for Coalition Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2007), 66.

<sup>4</sup> François J. Lescrève, "Technical Evaluation Report (Mental Health and Well-Being Across the Military Spectrum)," NATO (2011), 1, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA590004.pdf>.



personnel resiliency program designed to create a culture that does not stigmatize personnel for seeking help. A force must be able to address all sides of war, which includes mental preparedness. NATO will not be in a position, especially with a global recruiting crisis, to just ignore the mental health aspects that plague its forces. The loss of any force member due to suicide is a loss in capability and overall readiness, which NATO cannot afford.

NATO leadership must embrace this conversation to ensure sustained partnerships and to better support a more resilient fighting force. “To-date, there has been no international review of mental health resilience training during Basic Training nor an assessment of what service members perceive as useful from their perspective.”<sup>5</sup> Mental health resilience training must be integral throughout a service member’s entire career. Without this training occurring at the earliest stage of a recruit’s career, it immediately creates a weakness in NATO’s overall ability to handle the mental ravages of war. Many nations already have a mental health training regimen; however, NATO should develop an independent program that addresses the stressors of multinational military service.<sup>6</sup> The mental health challenges of force personnel are not identical across all partners within the alliance. Each partner nation’s forces have their own unique mental health components that NATO must address to support a mentally strong fighting force. “It may be that by establishing a culture of resilience skills early during the professional development of a soldier, these skills can help prevent negative outcomes.”<sup>7</sup> NATO will need to take portions of each member nation’s resiliency programs to develop mental health training that sufficiently supports personnel serving in a multinational environment.

Training must also encompass the changing nature of war. For NATO to achieve an integrated fighting force that keeps a level of readiness that can respond to rapidly shifting global threats, an investment in how the military arm of NATO is trained is critical. “One way to fill is to build the appropriate capabilities in allies and partner armies through focused security cooperation in a way that effectively builds capabilities that support Joint requirements.”<sup>8</sup> As technology advances and shifts NATO must be prepared to address the impacts that technological advancements will have on war. NATO is currently too slow to adopt recent technologies, and current policies will not allow for NATO forces to keep pace with adversarial advancements in integrating innovative technologies, such as drones. To become a better partner, NATO must accept that the training programs that currently exist must change to better address how military forces will combat these threats. Otherwise, the consequences could be dire.

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<sup>5</sup> Amy B. Adler, Roos Delahaij, Suzanne M. Bailey, Carlo Van den Berge, Merle Parmak, Barend van Tussenbroek, Jose M. Puente, Sandra Landratova, Pavel Kral, Guenter Kreim, Dipl.-Psych, Deirdre Rietdijk, Dennis McGurk, and Carl Andrew Castro, “NATO Survey of Mental Health Training in Army Recruits,” *Military Medicine* 178, no. 7 (July 2013), 760.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 765.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 766.

<sup>8</sup> Moroney, *Building Partner Capabilities for Coalition Operations*, iii.

## Trial, Error and Adoption

Civilian sector partnerships will be crucial to guarantee that NATO is able to out-partner the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The civilian sector presents an opportunity for NATO in this regard. Another point of emphasis should be trial and error: NATO must become comfortable with accepting that error is part of the process of growth. NATO's comfort with the status quo makes the alliance a less than ideal partner for many non-allied nations facing evolving threats, and this mentality requires eradication. An assertive stance toward technological adoption will accumulate successes and failures. The mentality that all systems must be "perfect" is unrealistic. For the alliance to out-partner, there has to be a willingness among NATO leadership that failure is acceptable. Adoption of modern technologies is an uncomfortable process; however, NATO is well-positioned to take risks and can afford to partner with developing organizations. Risks should be carefully evaluated, but NATO's leaders should not be risk-averse to the point where it drives potential partners away. As the world moves toward a new world order, NATO must move forward with the adoption of modern technologies to outpace and out-partner adversaries and "adopt a focused approach for building the capabilities and capacity of partner armies for coalition operations."<sup>9</sup>

The expedited adoption of current technology is vital for NATO to remain globally relevant. Its importance is correlated against the mass adoption and use of drones by Russia and the PRC. Drone technology, once costly, is now cheap and can be deployed *en masse*. As nations inimical to Western values continue to rapidly acquire and adopt such technologies at scale, NATO must respond. There was no overt advocacy for NATO to adopt such technologies in a manner that conflicted with Western values, however. Instead, it was proposed that the current process of technological adoption is antiquated and in need of alterations. Current and future conflicts will inevitably include drones that are autonomous, and NATO must advance itself to ensure militaristic readiness and lethality. Thus, it is recommended that NATO establish a training regimen where personnel acquire the necessary skillsets to combat the next generation of unmanned vehicles. Otherwise, NATO will be unable to provide its partners with the level of sophisticated protection that they expect from it.

As nations continue to adopt advanced technologies, countering threats posed in cyberspace must become a pivotal aspect of NATO's strategic goals. NATO's ability to address cyberspace threats is exemplified in its mission "to collectively counter the full spectrum of cyber threats at all times."<sup>10</sup> As NATO adversaries' investments in cyber operations has increased over the past decade this ethos will become increasingly important.<sup>11</sup> A preemptive approach to cyberspace is necessary to ensure that alliance partners can counter these persistent multidimensional

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Marios P. Efthymiopoulos, "NATO: Time to Adopt a Pre-emptive Approach to Cyber Security in New Age Security Architecture," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (March 9, 2024): <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2024/03/09/nato-time-to-adopt-a-pre-emptive-approach-to-cyber-security-in-new-age-security-architecture/>.

<sup>11</sup> Liselotte Odgaard, "NATO's China Role: Defending Cyber and Outer Space," *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 167–83.

challenges.<sup>12</sup> NATO's partnerships will be critical in the development of an interdisciplinary approach to address the complex nature of cyberspace defense.<sup>13</sup> As the alliance is a multinational organization, success in cyberspace operations will be predicated upon NATO leadership's ability to leverage resources appropriately to counter these threats. The adoption of a standardized cyberspace threat-response program that all partners can utilize would allow for threats to be reported, tracked, and countered in a unified manner, allowing NATO to deploy resources strategically as in Computer-Emergency Response Teams.<sup>14</sup>

### **Industry and Evaluation**

NATO must adopt a better communication strategy—one that regularly highlights to partners (both internal and external) that NATO represents a united fighting force that is focused on its mission. Part of the communication strategy that NATO should embrace is better communication with industry partners. For the alliance to out-partner an adversary, NATO must be a more desirable partner for industries to partner with; there is no defense without industry. NATO must “consider the changing customer relationship and should expect an increased degree of intrusion by industry to help them understand military requirements, particularly if procurement timelines are to be reduced.”<sup>15</sup> One way to better support industry partnerships is through the standardization of acronyms and terminology to reduce miscommunications.<sup>16</sup> Terminology is a necessity in supporting a partnership, especially within the defense industry. The precision of the language used and the development of a standardized use of acronyms will help NATO ensure that all partners know exactly what is being asked of them. Another manner in which the alliance could achieve a more meaningful partnership would be to establish long-term contracts that are compartmentalized and formalized. Without such contracts in place, NATO's long-term capabilities become risky. The establishment of long-term contracts between NATO and industry provides industry an advantageous partnership by giving the sector financial stability, thus enhancing NATO's ability to out-partner others.

The counterpoint to this is that, if a partnership sours, this forces NATO to wait until the contract expires, leaving the alliance unable to partner with the “best” at will. Thus, NATO must use its fiscal leverage to build relationships with industry partners where trust is the driving factor. However, can NATO trust the private sector? Will NATO be able to trust a partner that is driven by profit? Thus, NATO should never be beholden to a single partner for anything and instead should diversify its partnerships. Otherwise, NATO runs the risk that a single partner could hinder its mission at will. NATO must treat industry partnerships as a strategic issue where the establishment of a more robust European defense industrial base is necessary for NATO success. Without a reliable industrial base in Europe, NATO risks a defensive lever that can be used to flex

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<sup>12</sup> Adrian V. Gheorghe, Unal Tatar, and Yasir Gokce, *Strategic Cyber Defense: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: IOS Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Alessandro Armando, Marc Henauer, and Andrea Rigoni, eds., *Next Generation CERTs* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Howell, “NATO and Industry Need Transformation Partnerships,” *Signal* 59, no. 4 (2004), 76.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

against adversaries and rally partners. NATO has to prove that it is not beholden to any single partnership, but that all partners within the alliance offer unique capabilities, and NATO must mobilize the resources of all of its partners based on their unique specialties.

NATO gives all members a measure of power, a unique aspect of NATO that resides in the strength of its diplomatic partnerships.<sup>17</sup> However, to ensure that partnerships are sustainable, NATO members must work together to prevent unnecessary and harmful forms of competition within the alliance and amongst its external partners. Policy changes within NATO are necessary to support a more cooperative environment. NATO policies need to be elastic. A rigid bureaucratic system does not allow partnerships to flourish. NATO must remain continuously transparent to ensure that there is continued trust among its current partners and also to signal to future partners that NATO is an organization where trust is valued. NATO must make determinations if partnership quantity or quality is more important. Should NATO be focused on bringing as many partners as possible into the alliance, or should it focus on bringing in partners who are quality? The notion of quality, in this context, focuses on the need for NATO to more thoroughly consider if certain partners are worth partnering with. Quantity in resources or labor can also be a quality, but NATO has to evaluate if each partnership is a mutually beneficial arrangement that strengthens the alliance as well as the partner. Even though not all partners are equal within NATO, all partners must work together with the same set of unified interests to be successful with the alliance.

### **Communication and Conclusion**

Out-partnering is the idea that NATO must move swiftly to ensure lasting partnerships that are unified under a common set of goals. Partnerships are not a one-size-fits-all system where every partner will be able to neatly fit into a predefined set of parameters. Instead, NATO must adjust expectations based on the partner to ensure that the partnership flourishes. NATO must take the lessons it learns to engage positively with partners globally. Communication will remain a critical factor for NATO in terms of out-partnering adversaries. “Regardless of changing public opinion, one can assume it is correct to claim that, both now and in the future, states will continue to invest in defense, primarily in order to ensure the achievement of their own goals and national—and allied—interests.”<sup>18</sup> For NATO to remain empowered, national interests must be curated in a manner that demonstrates to partners that members’ investments in their defensive apparatus further supports the alliance and strengthens the organization. NATO must take control of its narrative to ensure that partnerships are enticing. Cooperative communication between partners will be essential toward ensuring that the narrative is aligned and no member could misconstrue or misinterpret NATO’s intentions. NATO will need to consider all types of partnerships as it attempts to navigate the modern era with the realization that each partnership will have an intended purpose to achieve a specific object. Even if not all partnerships are created equally, all alliance partnerships will need to be treated as such.

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<sup>17</sup> Kyle, “NATO Partnership for Peace.”

<sup>18</sup> Dabrowka Smolny, “NATO Seasparrow Program: Cooperation Based on Trust,” *Connections* 14, no. 4 (2015), 83.

If NATO is to remain relevant, then it must continually work toward being prepared to rapidly deploy resources to address global phenomena. As a multinational organization, NATO will need to move beyond antiquated policies and politicking to ensure that partners are supported in a manner where none regrets partnering with the alliance. NATO will need to avoid false comparisons when addressing its deficiencies, where the answers are obvious but there are no meaningful solutions. Instead, NATO is better served when it embraces its successes and is transparent about its deficiencies. If NATO wants to out-partner, it should begin by focusing on messaging to the world its successes, addressing its shortfalls, amplifying what NATO brings to the table, and remind the world that NATO is Nations.

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## **Reflections on NATO's Past and Future**



## NATO Past 75: Moving into a Twenty Years' Crisis, 2021-2041

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“A constructive treatment of Europe’s present-day problems calls for historical thinking which is something more than mere historical knowledge,” wrote historian Hajo Holborn about the political collapse of Europe. Historical thinking views the moment as a combination of Saint Augustine’s “three presents”—of things past and things future as well as of things present. Admittedly, it is on all three accounts that current conditions now look bleak on both sides of the Atlantic. At home, the constitutional order is at risk in the United States and other Western democracies, pending the next national election; abroad, the postwar institutional order embraced by at least half the world has collapsed after 30 years of overlapping and failed transitions under four distinct U.S. presidents since George H.W. Bush (1991-2021). What went wrong? And what comes next, on the way to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1941 Atlantic Charter that changed the course of the twentieth century?

It was to keep the past at bay and to cure Europe’s prior suicidal insanity that the “over there” of the Old World and the “over here” of the New World extended the latter’s wartime return to Europe into a more permanent stay with a postwar alliance (NATO). This unprecedented peacetime security commitment was bold, and it conditioned a long peace dubbed the Cold War, during which the United States was locked in to keep the Soviet Union out while half of Germany was gradually allowed to reemerge within an ever-closer and -larger Europe. That the Alliance and the European Community outlived the Cold War should not have been surprising as they were both born out of the two wars that preceded it. And after Mikhail Gorbachev announced that the Kremlin no longer regarded the United States as an adversary, NATO therefore regained its original postwar identity as a “guarantee pact” for a whole and free Continent, including a now reunified and democratic Germany next to a shrunken and hopefully tamed Russia.

To renew and enlarge that guarantee for the post-Cold War era, the Bush-41 administration and the Allies acted no less quickly than the Truman administration had after World War II, redefining (membership), restructuring (governance), and redirecting (out of area) the Alliance. Secretary James Baker’s December 1989 speech in Berlin, the London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance in December 1990, the Rome Declaration on Peace and Cooperation in November 1991, and the Maastricht Treaty signed the following month collectively outlined a security structure that would be multilateral and multidimensional: transatlantic by virtue of the Washington Treaty and NATO, pan-European by virtue of a newly formed North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), inclusive by virtue of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), and *communautaire* by virtue of elevating the European Community into a Union (EU). These interlocking institutions were to combine their respective assets and comparative advantages to pursue reconciliation with former adversaries, promote economic and political reform in the newly liberated post-communist and post-Soviet states, re-balance responsibilities across the Atlantic, and end territorial conflicts whose memories still haunted the continent.

Left behind was Russia, forgotten after it was hijacked by the Soviet Union, but which lost little time questioning its condition as a war amputee. “We’re not Haiti, Russia will rise again,” Boris Yeltsin wanted “his friend” Bill Clinton to know, as he, like Gorbachev before and Putin next, insisted on “a relationship of equals” which would “respect” their country—still *la grande Russie*. History is not a U.S. forte, however; neither punished like post-Imperial Germany in 1919 nor rehabilitated like post-Nazi Germany after 1945, Russia was left to Vladimir Putin—“a man who meant nothing to us” when he replaced Yeltsin—to correct the geopolitical surrender that had “robbed” and “plundered” the “great Russia hegemony.”<sup>1</sup>

With Putin at the helm, the reset of Russian power was not just a self-induced burst of imperial nostalgia, a momentary post-bipolar funk, nor a fit of nationalist resentment toward triumphant neighbors who had closed the door to the “common home” to which Gorbachev had aspired. Framing all such reactions was a haunting idea of Russia as having endured the vicissitudes of history, outlived harsh and inept governance, and embraced a “holy” destiny at the expense but with the approval of its people. Dismissing Russia as “a failed state” lacking “resources for national purpose, at home and abroad” derailed the closing decade of the past century.<sup>2</sup> Putin became who he is because Russia is what it is rather than what the West had hoped it might become.

### **Failed Transitions, 1991-2021**

With a sense of the gathering storm ahead, the historian E. H. Carr planned his classic study of the interwar years in 1937, but it was completed and sent to the publishers only eight weeks before Germany invaded Poland. By then, such phrases as “the War,” “pre-War,” or “post-War” were already dated, as he noted in the book’s second edition (released after the war’s end). After 1919, the then-postwar primacy of “the existing nation-state, large or small” had been accepted “too readily and too speedily.” After World War II but also pre-Cold War, he found those territorial units “obsolete or obsolescent” and dismissed any “workable international organization built on a membership of a multiplicity of nation-states.”<sup>3</sup> Carr anticipated the bipolar structure inherited from the two world wars, and even the unipolar moment that followed the Cold War. Unexpectedly, however, that moment started 30 years of overlapping and failed transitions that produced a contested post-American and post-Western world composed of “a multiplicity” of adversarial and competing states—many large, some small, and all eager.

The transitions since 1991 are known, each proceeding from the previous and worsening its consequences prior to the next. First, the Soviet Union went down “in the blink of an eye,” George H. W. Bush later remembered. The unipolar moment that followed, and its expected peace

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<sup>1</sup> Yeltsin is quoted in Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand, A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 26-27 and 401. Putin is quoted in Ellen Barry, “History Should Guide Its Future, Putin Says,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Zoellick and Philip D. Zelikow, ed., *America and Russia: Memos to a President* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2000), 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1962), vii-viii.

dividends, were short-lived and unsatisfying. They hardly were the “end of History” (the end of ideological conflicts); nationalism remained alive and anxious to be heard again. Only ten years later, 9/11 made America feel more vulnerable than ever before, involving NATO and its partners in unwinnable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Framing the post-9/11 wars as a “clash of civilizations” was a geopolitical simplification that exaggerated the roles of religion and values in foreign policy, understated the scope and depth of conflicts within civilizations, and overlooked the coming “clash of globalizations.” Next came a “colossal failure of common sense” for political and economic liberalism with the great recession of 2007-2008, producing uneven recoveries and divisive populist consequences throughout the 2010s. Soon after, a spontaneous but deceptive Arab Spring stalled the democratic surge announced during the post-Soviet color revolutions in Central Europe: this was to be the end of “the Arab predicament” and its “time for deliverance,” but within months the Syrian and Libyan civil wars introduced the coming turbulence in and near the region.

Each unpredicted post-Cold War shock was misrepresented at the expense of its unintended opportunities: to engage in a long-term relationship with a recast Russia, to relaunch the peace process in a fearful Arab world, to restore fiscal sanity and social equity in the Western democracies, and to promote a closer community of rejuvenated democratic states that could respond to the ever-rising expectations of the Global South. Arrogance of power, intelligence failure, leadership shortcomings, wishful thinking? Guilty on all counts, as a new edition of the “betrayal of the intellectuals” recorded after the First World War one century earlier.<sup>4</sup>

The beginning is when it matters most: the moment when the worst of the past can be rolled back, and the best of the future can still be rolled out. Clinton’s timeout from History was therefore especially significant for his neglect of the defeated state, Russia. Mindful of the retroactive peace signed by Woodrow Wilson in 1919, Truman took 90 days after his second inauguration to sign the North Atlantic Treaty; only another six years were needed for Eisenhower to welcome half of Germany as a steadfast ally in Europe. After Bush-41 there was no such urgency: little credible attempt to accommodate the defeated state, however minimally. There was only the allocation of some pocket money to stay away from Europe while NATO moved closer to Russian territory, until a revanchist Putin resumed centuries of malfeasance with the approval of an angry populace that had concluded that they were better off when they were worse off. After Clinton and with Putin, the time for a new beginning was over: back to being a power in Europe, Russia could not be a European power like any other—it remained geographically too big, historically too dangerous, militarily too strong, and politically too hazardous.

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<sup>4</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Stanley Hoffmann, “Clash of Globalizations,” in *The Clash of Civilizations, The Debate* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations), 87; Lawrence G. McDonald, *A Colossal Failure of Common Sense: The Inside Story of Lehman Brothers* (Deckle Edge, 2009); Fouad Ajami, *In this Arab Time: The Pursuit of Deliverance* (Hoover, 2014); Julien Benda, *Treason of the Intellectuals* (Translated from the French by David Broder London, ERIS, 2022; *Trahison des clercs*, Paris, B. Grasset, 1921).

Nor did unfinished business in the non-Western half of the world receive the attention it needed, beginning with appalling indifference to a 100-day, 800,000-death genocide in Rwanda in spring 1994.<sup>5</sup> “It’s the economy, stupid,” insisted Clinton, in his initial postwar version of an America-First strategy. But History grants no timeout while time itself runs out. An agenda of allegedly-wartime irritants remained too long ignored in postwar time: the 1947 partition in the Indian subcontinent; a Palestinian nation left homeless since 1948; Taiwan, an aging orphan since 1949; North Korea, unforgiven and without a peace treaty; Iran, unforgiving and awaiting its renewal since 1953; Ukraine, separated from Russia’s “gift” of autonomy in 1955; the Middle East, divisive since the 1956 Suez crisis; nuclear proliferation announced since 1963; a new monetary order, sought since 1971. These issues, and many more, should have motivated Clinton and his successors to assert the needed global leadership. Not just the economy, but “the world, stupid.”

As the United States appeared to step aside, and with allies and partners unable to step up—including a Europe overworked with its “euro-ic” focus on enlargement but still short of its long-promised institutional finality—a surging China trended up, a vengeful Russia roared back, a zealous Iran moved center-stage, a nuclear North Korea made itself heard, and more. Bring it on, President George W. Bush urged, as 9/11 took him (and NATO allies and partners) into two wasteful wars. Hindsight is everything, but what was ignored was a known narrative: there is no coming home, winning a war is not the same as ending it, and even the long-term runs out of time. This was soon confirmed with the invasion of Crimea and rise of ISIS in 2014, the civil war in Syria and slow-moving nuclear crisis with Iran in 2015, Brexit and the U.S. presidential election in 2016. That turbulent decade closed with the disruptive influence of uninhibited rogue states and elusive non-state actors, increasingly provocative bids for preponderance by China and other new influentials, and a murderous pandemic that threatened to overwhelm an already fragile Western order, leaving the world astray and the West in search of leadership.

### **The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 2021-2041**

Since 1991, the four essential ingredients of the postwar institutional order have been exhausted: a constructive and largely shared vision of the whole, as Truman framed it; an emotional but sustainable public appeal, shared by nine Cold War presidents; a convincing and even indulgent right of moral judgment, despite recurring public concerns over specific policies or actions; and sufficient and usable instruments to defend the whole and its values. Since an unprecedented assault on the U.S. republic on January 6, 2021, which remains ongoing, a global multi-year crisis has seen the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan in September 2021—“our” Vietnam, circa 1975; the Russian war in Ukraine since February 2022—“our” Spain, circa 1936; and the Gaza war since October 2023—“our” Iraq, circa 2003; striking episodes amid an unmanageable

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<sup>5</sup> “CNN seldom shows pictures of the bodies on television, so few people care,” confided Clinton in his taped diary. Indeed, the 668-page transcript of his reflections “designed to narrate how the U.S. president wrestled with History” includes four references to Rwanda for a total of 11 lines. Taylor Branch, *The Clinton Tapes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 133, 499, 576, 624.

proliferation of conflicts(55 all told in 2023) fueled by a surge of defense spending to unprecedented levels (\$2,443 billion in 2023—nearly 2.5% of world GDP, \$104,476 billion).<sup>6</sup>

Although there is no geopolitical equivalence between the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, both illustrate the spreading de-humanization of the weak by the strong and de-inhibition of the weak relative to the strong, which leaves little room for moral purpose and proportionality for either the strong or the weak. Both also point to the growing risks of limited regional wars anywhere going global, which limits space for strategic and diplomatic flexibility. Each escalatory step is viewed as a plausible Sarajevo moment à la 1914, but each diplomatic initiative is questioned as a shameful Munich sell-out à la 1938, rendering each conflict a potential sleep-walk into world war à la 1939. Vladimir Putin’s nuclear saber-rattling in Ukraine and Benjamin Netanyahu’s war of annihilation against Hamas—the former heard throughout Europe and the latter throughout the Middle East—represent a new round of brinksmanship—the will to push the other side very close to what it fears most (even if it is least likely to occur). Consider Putin’s warnings of a nuclear strike in Ukraine in fall 2022 when he feared imminent defeat, which reportedly led U.S. intelligence to set the odds of a strike at 50%. As noted by Julian Lindley-French, “There is neither much new in the Russian way of war [to put steel and technology ahead of flesh and people] and the West’s lazy response to it.”<sup>7</sup> Hear, too, the periodic warnings from China and North Korea and the self-deterrence they inspire, with consequences among their obvious targets.

When appraising the terms of engagement for the period ahead—deterrence and defense—analogy can be irresistible, but they are not predictive. Trends can be convincing, but they are not destiny. The illusion of China’s ascendancy is that it is perpetually sustainable and thus irresistible, while for the United States, decline is thought to be irreversible and thus final. Yet remember Japan’s rise and U.S. decline during the 1970s, which contrasted to their relative status twenty years earlier or twenty years later. Now, China’s rising power faces unattended weaknesses: vulnerability to global economic fundamentals it does not control, falling economic growth below levels it can afford, demographic trends that cannot be corrected, an unsettled and even hostile region that cannot be regulated, a passively unhappy populace that cannot be satisfied, and more. Since 1949, the Chinese have been unable to stop digging when in holes of their own making: the Long March, the Cultural Revolution, the one-child policy, zero-covid, and the real estate crisis, for example. Is China peaking before its time, like Imperial Germany or even the Soviet Union? Will fear of decline take China to Taiwan before its time runs out, or will the pain inflicted on Russia in Ukraine return it to the path of cooperative normalization with the West? It is too early to tell, even if it looks a bit late to ask. Three decades of “normalization” are over; instead, prepare for the new normal: don’t provoke but don’t indulge.

Russia’s future, too, is fraught with uncertainties. Even before the Ukrainian war, the Russian state was running short of capabilities, resources, people, and security space. With a “win” in Ukraine

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<sup>6</sup> SIPRI, “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2023” (April 2024): [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404\\_fs\\_milex\\_2023.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404_fs_milex_2023.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> David Sanger, “Biden’s Armageddon Moment: When a Nuclear Detonation Seemed Possible,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2024; Julian Lindley-French, “Putin’s Power Protection Racket,” blog (May 21, 2024): <https://lindleyfrench.blogspot.com/2024/05/putins-power-protection-racket.html>.

out of reach so long as Western aid is maintained, Putin, too, is running out of time, notwithstanding his re-election in March 2024: remember Nikita Khrushchev, gone two years after his failed gambit in the Caribbean. With or past Putin, Russia's military and economic recovery from the war will take time, during which Moscow will continue to rely on a subordinate partnership with China, rogue arms suppliers like North Korea and Iran, and make-believe influence in every unstable country in Africa and elsewhere. Remember, though: Russia is most difficult to handle when it proves unable to be the most westerly of Eastern people and tries to become the most easterly of Western people. Clearly, the West will suffer from a close alliance between the two leading revisionist states, but can either of those countries depend on, or afford, a close alliance with the other? This is not about Cold War II, let alone World War III. Just deny Putin and his successor to make Russia great again.

Bringing the Ukrainian war to a close in or past 2025 will be the hole in the doughnut for the NATO Alliance, as well as for the two principal belligerents. Will the war escalate, but how far; inch forward either way, but how much; or stall, but where? As Bismarck reportedly said, Russia is "never as weak as it is believed, and never as strong as it is feared." Thinking of himself as Ivan III "the Great"—a gatherer of lands—Putin was unveiled as Ivan IV "the Terrible" who nearly lost his empire with his catastrophic Livonian war. Thoughts of a restored Soviet era—when, claims Putin, "we lived in a single country" and "were absolutely invincible"—are a fantasy: the war has convincingly shown the limits of Russian power. Warnings of falling dominoes should Ukraine not hold—with Moldova next, through Belarus to Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, thereby ending NATO itself—have lost their credibility. *Basta*. Now, it is Russia's turn to hesitate, after 30 months of steady and ever more-lethal Western arms deliveries.

The new geopolitical map is blurred further by a European Union that is struggling with its own institutional insufficiencies and national complexities. With Britain out, Germany stalled, and France adrift; with new members nearest to Russia and older members nearest to the Mediterranean feeling unevenly protected; and with a European Parliament open to the influence of anti-European parties; has the EU, too, peaked as an ever-closer and ever-bigger union whose promises of democratic peace, stability, openness, and affluence it can no longer meet and may even hinder? Too much Union policy clashes with too much of its members' politics, making less union feel smarter and fewer members sound better to many. Seven years after a newly-elected French president announced the coming of "a sovereign, united, and democratic Europe," and two years after he launched a typically ambitious European Political Community with 49 members, Emmanuel Macron now finds the EU "mortal," warning, "It could die."<sup>8</sup> Europe's collective response to Ukraine broadly matched and even exceeded that of its senior Alliance partner, but the war also confirmed its vulnerability to Russia's bad intentions (at their worst since 1991) and its continued dependence on U.S. goodwill (least convincing since 1941). "It's leadership, stupid"—do not let go of the EU; the alternative is worse.

Past a struggling China, a wartime Russia, and a fragile EU, the United States stands as the decisive X factor. After the Cold War, it was thought to be the irresistible pole of convergence within a

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<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Macron's speeches at the Sorbonne, September 27, 2017, and April 25, 2024.

new postwar order. Instead of drifting toward it, however, Russia and China have moved toward each other, while the United States and Europe have often been looking past each other. Pre- and post-Biden (or will it be post- and pre-Trump?) as well as post-Merkel and soon post-Macron, forget the economy: “it’s the voters, stupid.” Since Bush-41, four U.S. presidents have surprised the allies, each feared for his lack of interest in Europe and limited experience with the world relative to their nine Cold War predecessors. Welcomed by the Allies as the most experienced foreign policy president since the end of the Cold War, Biden temporarily restored a measure of confidence in U.S. leadership, but his presidency has not aged well—his image of competence stained in Afghanistan, his reputation for balance weakened in Gaza, his strategy questioned for its improvisations in Ukraine, and his resolve at the mercy of a hostile electorate. What will come next as U.S. democracy is said to be on the ballot, with nearly three-fourths of Trump voters still questioning Biden’s legitimacy, and two-in-five Biden voters explaining their choice as opposition to Trump? That it could have been and could still be worse is neither satisfying nor reassuring: if half of its people does not stop laying siege to their government, sooner or later a crippled America will have little credibility left with adversaries and allies alike.<sup>9</sup> And then what?

### **An Entangling Alliance**

The history of the Alliance is one of discord and collaboration: for 75 years, a devaluation of the U.S. commitment to Europe has been announced with nearly every new president. With Clinton, who had lived History from a distance and was eager to do “the economy, stupid” while the Allies lived their “hour of Europe.” With an angry post-9/11 Bush-43, engaged in an all-consuming war in Iraq that much of Europe rejected as wasteful and self-defeating. With Obama, warmly applauded at first for who he was but subsequently questioned for what he did (leading the Alliance “from behind” while “pivoting” to Asia). And with Trump, who made of America-First a transactional strategy that downgraded allies to rivals or worse while upgrading adversaries as opportunities or better.

In a demographically transformed New World, a re-founding of the Atlantic idea is overdue, as is a re-founding of the related idea of Europe in a geographically recast Old World. Although widely viewed now as unevenly-shared burdens, NATO and the EU matter to the United States because both matter to Europe, and Europe matters to the United States as the other half of the world’s largest military and economic bloc. NATO’s collective defense spending tops \$1.3 trillion (2023), the EU is the top trading partner of 80 countries, and the United States is for 20 more. Since the 1949 Washington Treaty, no country has ever left the Alliance, its membership growing from 12 at the creation to 32 now. Since the 1956 Rome Treaties, only one country has left the European Community/Union, which grew from six original members to 27 now, with many more applicants queuing up. The record is clear: the benefits of NATO and EU membership exceed or at least justify the costs.

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<sup>9</sup> In April 2024, both Biden and Trump had the lowest approval ratings at this point in their presidency of any postwar president, (38.7% and 46.6% respectively). In 2020, with a record turnout of 149 million voters, only 43,000 votes in three states (Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin) would have produced a tie in the Electoral College and Trump’s election at the House of Representatives, despite Biden’s 7 million votes advantage in the popular vote.

The prospect of a second Trump presidency threatens this legacy. Such concerns have merits given his past references to NATO as “obsolete,” the EU as “a rival,” and more recent assessments of Putin as a forceful leader entitled to a *carte blanche* for attending to his country’s security. But *basta* with such *sauve-qui-peut*: there is more to America than Trump, and there is more to NATO than America. A U.S. withdrawal from the Alliance, which would require an unlikely Senate approval, is doubtful even with Trump. Admittedly, a more likely adversarial distancing from NATO (including spotty attendance at NATO Summits, delayed appointment of high diplomatic and military officials, and reduced budget contributions) would weaken the Article 5 commitment to collective defense, but it would not end it. And, as an unintended consequence, Trump’s potential leave of absence from NATO would give the EU more room to speak and act European.

For Europe to find its voice and be heard, however, the EU and non-EU European members of NATO will have to achieve more unity and develop more relevant capabilities, meaning, forces with sustainable readiness, and credible reliability for quick and sustainable action. As a late geostrategic wakeup call, the war in Ukraine has motivated Europe’s rearmament to an extent unseen since, arguably, the Korean War—the United Kingdom (+7.9% in 2023 over 2022), Germany (+9.0%), and France (+6.5%). That remains far short of U.S. spending (68% of NATO’s total), especially as increases in real costs, above inflation, produce less “bang for the buck.” Yet at \$380 billion in 2023 (+11% over the previous year), European NATO allies’ defense spending is over three times more than Russia’s official \$120 billion budget. Nor do the allies’ traditional defense budgets account for the “broad range of tools” called for by the NATO 2030 agenda—“softer” dimensions of security that show Europe-friendly imbalances in costs for, commitments by, reliability of, and results from all 32 NATO members. These represent a more credible measure of the allies’ burden-sharing than an exclusive focus on traditional defense spending, which should nonetheless fall below 50% of total NATO spending for any of its members, including the United States.

In short, the days of alleged “free riders” are gone, and the European “pillar” envisioned after the Cold War (in a very different strategic landscape) is now emerging. Europe’s total aid to Ukraine during the war’s first two years (including about one-third in military aid) exceeded the four-year Marshall Plan as well as that of its senior partner.<sup>10</sup> For additional synergies and to better align their efforts, the European pillar will need a strategic “Compass” over the next two to three years—if 23 EU members can agree with their nine non-EU NATO partners on a strategic concept, they should be able to agree with their four non-NATO EU partners (Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta) on a common EU strategy. Failing to think strategically raises the risks of acting erratically—at 27 (EU), shown by the setbacks in the Sahel region since 2011; at 32 (NATO), shown during the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and indeed at 36 (NATO and EU members, accounting for

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<sup>10</sup> Since the war started, the EU has contributed, collectively and individually, more than \$101 billion in military (\$35 billion), financial, humanitarian, and refugee assistance to Ukraine, with another \$54 billion on its way. Non-EU members Britain and Norway have contributed an additional \$15.2 and \$5.2 billion respectively. Richard D. Hooker, Jr., “Why NATO Matters,” *New Atlanticist* (May 28, 2024): <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-us-interest-washington-summit/>.



the European countries that are members of both), shown in Western aid to Ukraine—always several months late and calibrated to keep it too weak to win but too strong to lose.

The two-pillar vision for NATO is not new.<sup>11</sup> With a U.S. blessing, it was written into the postwar Western European Union (WEU), whose members were all founding members of NATO and the EU. Under Anglo-French sponsorship, it was part of the European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI) after the Cold War. Past 75, NATO remains the only military organization that can guarantee its members' collective security, but their three separate-but-not-separable strategic dialogues (within NATO and with the United States, within the EU and among its members, and between NATO and the EU) will be made most effective, substantively and procedurally, with a Euro-Atlantic Forum of all 36 NATO and EU members plus the EU (as an entity of sovereign consequence) and NATO (as a participating observer). Such a Forum would help maximize the allies' strength and competencies with less duplication, as well as avoid discrimination against any country that is not a member of both institutions. While respecting the specific identity of each institution and the individual sovereignty of their members, it could address all security, political, and economic dimensions in complementary ways, leading eventually to a shared—neither common nor single—Euro-Atlantic strategy paper combining the NATO strategic concept and the EU strategic compass.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Long Year**

2024 has been a long year. It started early and badly on January 6, 2021, with a shocking constitutional challenge in the United States, and it soon got worse as a contested new president struggled to restore unity at home and order in the world. Even for never-Trumpers, the results have been mixed. Biden has achieved much of what he most wanted to avoid abroad, including a Vietnam-like exit from Afghanistan in 2021, a costly proxy war with Russia since 2022, deeper involvement in the Middle East since 2023, increasingly conflictual and contested relations with China, a strategic build-down in the vital Sahel region, and the neglect of human rights while pursuing allies like Saudi Arabia. At home, the aberrant Trump moment that Biden had pledged to end has turned into the new normal of a post-American America to an extent that the next presidential election will not end. Indeed, whatever its outcome, the November 2024 election will be contested before and long past the inauguration—in Congress, in the Courts, and in the streets.

Unlike his four provincial predecessors, Biden came to office as the most Atlanticist president since, arguably, John F. Kennedy. Welcomed by the allies, he rallied an allegedly “brain-dead” Alliance and a “sleepwalking” Europe to deny Moscow the quick and painless victory it had expected. But—déjà vu all over again?—despite his superior capabilities and the geostrategic

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<sup>11</sup> Antonio Missiroli, “Between Putin and Trump? Defending Europe,” *ISPI Policy Paper* (June 6, 2024): <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/between-putin-and-trump-defending-europe-175737>.

<sup>12</sup> Frank D. Kramer and Simon Serfaty, “Recasting the Euro-Atlantic Partnership,” *CSIS* (February 1, 2007): <https://www.csis.org/analysis/recasting-euro-atlantic-partnership>; Simon Serfaty, “An Opportune Moment for a Shared Euro-Atlantic Strategy,” *CSIS* (May 2009): [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/090506\\_serfaty\\_strategicconsensus\\_0.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/090506_serfaty_strategicconsensus_0.pdf).

advantages of willing and capable allies, Biden could not deter Putin in Ukraine any better than Bush-43 in Georgia (2008) or Obama in Crimea (2014). Nor could repeated pledges of unconditional support (“as long” and “as much” as it takes) intimidate an aggressor into accepting an endgame that would satisfy its victim, any better than a similar commitment to Israel after October 7, 2023 (“the equivalent of 15 9/11s,” claimed Biden) could produce an endgame in Gaza.

Thus, as the long year faces overtime—whether due to Trump obstructing Biden’s re-election or U.S. dejection after Trump’s return—the U.S.-light, post-American, post-Western world first sighted during the three decades after the Cold War continues to preview more brutality, less justice, deeper inequities, no moral certainty, plenty of resentment, less accountability, and much disorder—the jungle, as Robert Kagan called it. Yet it is when the future looks bleak and unsatisfying that leadership matters most; and it is when democracies are tired and fearful that the character of their people is best revealed. “As time goes by” was the title of the tune made famous in the film *Casablanca*: “You must remember this,” sang Sam at Rick’s urging, “Play it, play it again.” Much has changed over the past 75 years, but not the tune. Remember this: America in Europe, Europe as the EU, and the EU with NATO.

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