



CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING NATO'S ADAPTATION TO CURRENT THREATS

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The alliance faces the most complex and unpredictable security environment since the end of the Cold War, with growing geo-political challenges, more sophisticated and disruptive cyber and hybrid threats, and exponential technological changes that are rapidly transforming the way wars are fought and won. NATO continues to adapt and prepare for the future, strengthening its position of deterrence and defence, projecting stability and combating terrorism, investing more in defence and modernizing the Alliance's structures.

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„NATO is the most important military alliance in world history”.
Mitch McConnell

NATO is entering the eighth decade of its existence, both with a semi-success aimed at terrorism and with a wider range of imminent challenges than its founders could have foreseen when they signed the Washington Treaty in April 1949. In the thirty years since the fall of the USSR, the Western Alliance has defied countless predictions of its imminent loss. It ended two wars and an ethnic conflict in the Western Balkans, expanded its partnership with countries close to Russia and other former adversaries, reduced the threat of terrorism against NATO territory, and engaged in international conflicts, including in Afghanistan and responded with clarity, unity and speed in resolving the threat posed by Russian aggression in the Euro-Atlantic region. Today, NATO is the most successful alliance in history, comprising nearly a billion people and a half of global GDP in an area stretching from the Pacific coast of North America to the Black Sea.

However, future uncertainties call for NATO to develop further. The world of the next ten years will be very different from the world that the Alliance lived in both during the Cold War and in the decades that immediately followed. It will be a world of great competing powers, in which assertive authoritarian states with revisionist foreign policy agendas seek to expand their power and influence,

and in which NATO allies will once again face a systemic challenge that crosses security and the economy. Known threats such as terrorism, in all its forms and manifestations, will persist, even as new risks arise due to pandemics and climate change, and emerging and disruptive technologies (EDT) present both dangers and opportunities for the Alliance¹.

In this ever-changing context, NATO has experienced internal turmoil. In recent years, the Allies have engaged in disputes that partly reflect concerns about their long-term strategic future. Some Europeans are worried that the United States is reorganizing its strategy and that its commitment to their continent will diminish as it focuses more on the Indo-Pacific. Some Americans worry that Europeans will shirk their responsibilities for common defense or even pursue a path of autonomy in a way that divides the Alliance. Within NATO, differences have emerged regarding the political and social development of member states, which has led to doubts about democracy within the alliance. In many ways, it can be said that the Alliance is formidable in terms of military force, but it is far from invulnerable to such political turmoil.

Despite these challenges, NATO remains indispensable. In fact, NATO's fundamental goal is more clearly demonstrable today than it has been for decades. NATO has withstood stormy times, surviving the Soviet threat, the Suez crisis, Allied divisions during the Vietnam War, dictatorships in its own right, or disagreements over enlargement

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and the Iraq war, to name a few. Now, as then, the Allies have remained bound together by a combination of common principles, democratic institutions and the benefit that all Allies derive from collective security. Looking to the future, the need for a collective defense alliance to protect Europe and North America from threats to their physical security and democratic way of life is as strong as ever.

However, NATO will have to continue to adapt. In a world of systemic challenges and proliferating threats, the Alliance, in complementarity with the comprehensive military adaptation it has undergone, must strengthen its capacity to act as the main political forum for the strategic and geopolitical challenges facing the transatlantic community. Fulfilling this role will require even greater cohesion than NATO has had in recent years. As it has happened since the establishment of NATO, cohesion lies in the ability and willingness to act collectively against common threats. This is the way to ensure the vitality, credibility and sustainability of the Alliance.

In recent years, the Allies have strengthened NATO's military component and should continue to do so. But at the same time, it must focus on strengthening NATO's political dimension, including its foundations based on common democratic principles, consultation mechanisms, decision-making processes and political tools to respond to current and emerging threats. If it does so, NATO will be in a strong position to protect the freedom and security of its members and will act as an essential pillar of an open and stable international order.

To produce this article, I conducted extensive consultations using documents related to issues both inside and outside NATO-specific sites, including papers by scientists, business and technology leaders, parliamentarians, military officials, and government officials from most states partners of NATO and non-Alliance countries. During the study, I briefed myself daily on news related to the Alliance's progress and relations with countries inside and outside it.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire study process was conducted exclusively from online sources, giving the article a "virtual" character.

During this process, I acted independently, all the information provided on the adaptation of

NATO, respectively on the future of this Alliance are a reflection of my own thinking, having a greater or lesser probability of taking place in the future.

NATO's adaptability to the current security and political environment

NATO's external security environment has changed dramatically since the advent of NATO's latest strategic concept. This concept recommended the adoption of a strategic partnership with Russia, making only limited references to the fight against terrorism and made no mention of China's economic and political development. Since then, there have been fundamental changes in NATO's security environment, which are likely to increase over the next decade and require greater efforts, both in terms of political cohesion and adaptations to NATO's strategy.

Transnational threats and risks continue to be a major challenge for the Alliance, from terrorism to the security challenges posed by the pandemic, climate change and migration flows. Changing instruments of state power – such as cyber and space capabilities – will continue to shape the nature of conflict. However, the main feature of the current security environment is the resurgence of geopolitical competition – that is, the abundance and escalation of state rivalries and disputes over territory, resources and values. In the Euro-Atlantic area, Russia faces the deepest geopolitical challenge. While Russia is, through economic and social measures, a declining power, it has proven capable of territorial aggression and is likely to remain a major threat to NATO over the next decade. Russia maintains a strong military arsenal, which poses a threat to NATO. The Alliance has made progress in addressing gaps in deterrence and defense on this side, and this must continue to be a priority for partner countries. Russia is also threatening NATO in non-kinetic areas in ways that blur the lines between war and peace. NATO's attempts to build a significant partnership and involve Russia in creating post-war Euro-Atlantic security architecture were rejected. In 2014, Russia illegally annexed Crimea and invaded and occupied parts of Eastern Ukraine.

The Russian government seeks hegemony over its former Soviet states and undermines their sovereignty and territorial integrity, trying



to block the path of nations wishing to turn to NATO. As Russia's aggression in Ukraine and Georgia continues, Russia's assertive behavior has intensified in the North Atlantic, with air and naval accumulations in and around the key points of the Barents Sea, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. In the last three, Russia has placed anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities, extended hybrid warfare and threatened critical energy and infrastructure. In parallel, it tried to create satellite states near NATO territory, including the so-called frozen conflicts, and violated arms control regimes, which led to the end of the INF Treaty. Russia has also sought to establish a foothold in the Mediterranean basin and in Africa, including through the use of Russian private military companies. In addition to the conventional military threat, Russia is obviously making use of a set of hybrid tools, including cybernetics, assassinations and poisonings, using chemical weapons, political constraints and other methods to violate Allied sovereignty.

The return of geostrategic competition has also led to a proliferation of hybrid attacks. This gray area activity has eroded the traditional boundaries of the conflict. Domestic and international security is under threat. The line between civilians and combatants is ambiguous, through the use of private military companies, misinformation and subversion. All this and the hybrid activity of terrorist organizations seek to weaken and divide the allies from within, undermining the social cohesion and way of life of the Alliance countries. Thus, NATO has had to spend an increasing amount of time developing political and non-political tools to counter hybrid activities, such as new allocation approaches, hybrid deterrence and the disinformation approach.

China's growing power and assertiveness is the other major geopolitical development that is changing the Alliance's strategic calculation. At their London meeting in December 2019, NATO leaders said that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that need to be addressed as an alliance. China presents a different kind of challenge to NATO than Russia; unlike the latter, China is not currently a direct military threat to the euro area. However, China has an increasingly global strategic agenda, backed by its economic and

military strength. It has shown its willingness to use force against its neighbors, as well as intimidating economic coercion and diplomacy beyond the Indo-Pacific region. Over the next decade, China is likely to challenge NATO's ability to build collective resilience, protect critical infrastructure, address new and emerging technologies such as 5G, and protect sensitive sectors of the economy, including supply chains. In the longer term, China is increasingly likely to project global military power, including potential in the Euro-Atlantic area.

China's industrial policy and the military-civilian merger strategy (MCF) are central components of this systemic challenge. Its military modernization in all areas, including nuclear, naval and missile capabilities, introduces new risks and potential threats to the Alliance and strategic stability. Its approach to human rights and international law challenges the fundamental premise of a rules-based international order. China poses serious risks in some critical sectors such as telecommunications, space, cyber defense and IT, as well as disinformation campaigns. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, China has carried out a disinformation campaign in many allied states. It has also committed widespread intellectual property thefts, with implications for Allied security and prosperity, as well as cyber-attacks on NATO governments and societies that have been attributed by the Allies as originating in China.

At the same time, due to its size and economic trajectory, China is a driver of global growth, trade and investment and a significant investor in many NATO countries. It has begun to develop a strategic trade presence in the Euro-Atlantic area through the Ring Roads and Motorways Initiative, numerous bilateral agreements and its MCF strategy. The Allies will continue to seek relations with China, build economic and trade ties, and seek to work with China on issues such as climate change and biodiversity. China's actions are keys to the prospects of addressing global challenges, such as green development goals, as it produces one-third of global emissions and nearly half of global investment in green technology.

Terrorism has been and remains one of the most important asymmetric threats facing the Alliance, repeatedly hitting inside NATO and causing deep concern among Allied populations.



While acts of terrorism in the Euro-Atlantic area have diminished in recent years, following military failures by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Daesh due to the coalition's efforts, the attacks of non-state terrorist actors motivated by religious or political causes remain a major source of danger in both Europe and North America and are manifesting with dramatic results. There are other risks to consider, including illegal mass migration, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the geopolitical race for resources. Illicit trade of weapons and narcotics, transnational organized crime and piracy also have implications for the Alliance's security.

Against the background of geopolitical competition, other threats and challenges persist, and some become more intense. Such challenges are posed by NATO's „Southern Zone”, a term that refers to the extended geographical area of the southern part of the globe, including North Africa and large parts of the Middle East, extending to sub-Saharan Africa and Afghanistan. Although there is great diversity in this region, large parts of the southern neighborhood are characterized by fragility, instability and insecurity. Instability in Libya, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan continues to generate illegal migration, which is acutely felt throughout Europe, but especially by those allies bordering the Mediterranean.

In the south, the challenge includes the presence of Russia and to a lesser extent China, exploiting regional fragility. Russia has reintroduced itself to the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. In 2015, it intervened in the Syrian civil war and remained there. Russia's policy in the Middle East is likely to exacerbate political tensions and conflicts across the region, as it expands a growing number of political, financial, operational and logistical assets to its partners. China's influence in the Middle East is also growing. It has signed a strategic partnership with Iran, the largest importer of crude oil in Iraq, has been involved in the peace process in Afghanistan and is the largest foreign investor in the region.

Over the next decade, the development of new emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) will play an increasing role in the security environment, both in systemic competition and in exacerbating cross-border security threats. Since the founding of NATO, the West has been at the forefront of research

and development in critical innovations for stability and security. But China and, to a lesser extent, Russia are now devoting significant and growing resources to this area in an effort to transcend the West, including illicit technology transfer and intellectual property theft, to improve already powerful unconventional tools. New technologies will change the nature of war and allow new forms of hypersonic missile attack and hybrid operations. New technologies play a significant role in space, which has become an operational area for NATO, which will continue to evolve as Russia and China increase their capabilities there. NATO populations expect to be protected from new threats, such as cybernetics and misinformation, and expect their NATO-backed governments to develop tools for attribution and deterrence. Resilience must be found in both society and the state itself.

Climate change is becoming a threat multiplier. It is possible to accelerate the lack of resources and food and water insecurity worldwide. With rising ocean levels and declining landfall in various parts of the globe, migration flows could accelerate to NATO territories. New areas of competition will emerge as glaciers melt and new transport corridors open, such as the North Sea Route, which geopolitical rivals are trying to control and exploit. While some allies seek to reduce carbon emissions, NATO policy needs to continue to adapt, including through the adoption of green technologies.

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated, in a dramatic and unexpected way, the detrimental effects that pandemics can have, not only on the public health of NATO citizens, but also on resilience and social security, both by reorienting political attention and limited resources. This crisis has accelerated the digitalization of NATO companies and could reduce defense spending in the coming years.

In this beginning of an emerging decade of renewed systemic rivalry and growing cross-border threats and risks, a functioning and robust NATO will be more important to the security and prosperity of those within the Alliance. No Ally can address all these threats alone. The Alliance needs a common understanding of threats – along with adaptability, creativity, strategy and a desire to share the burden and risk, in order to prepare for future challenges.

In order to adapt to this changing security environment, NATO will need to maintain its



unity and address potential obstacles to collective action. NATO's unity derives from the allies' unwavering common commitment to the common values enshrined in the North Atlantic Treaty: "democracy, individual freedom and the rule of law". The fact that the Allies remain committed to these core values is the most important factor in ensuring the sustainability of the Alliance. A common democratic identity is what distinguishes the Alliance from the main threats and challenges it faces.

As befits a community of sovereign democratic states, NATO has never been able to achieve complete harmony and has gone through periods of tension and divergence. In the past, the Allies have disagreed on interests and values, and there are sometimes tensions within the Alliance. Another key to NATO's success is that it has been resilient to many challenges, as the Allies do not deviate, even under tense conditions, from an inviolable commitment to defend their mutual security. Therefore, alongside a basic platform of common values, there is also the willingness to take collective action.

The last few years have been marked by a number of political challenges faced by NATO allies and periods of unusual turmoil in Western societies. Part of this is the result of the actions caused by the global financial crisis of 2008, which led to a questioning of aspects of the international order. Confidence and trust in democratic and international institutions have declined, along with increased tensions over trade and competition for resources, exacerbated by EDT developments and the spread of misinformation.

Broadly speaking, the confidence of the post-Cold War era – in which it was believed that the spread of democracy and free markets would continue inexorably – was greatly diminished, with the so-called "democratic recession", global erosion of norms and increasing authoritarianism. In some ways, NATO's political role is more like the period before 1989, when it was a bastion of democracy against a provocative, authoritarian environment. Therefore, it is vital that the Allies, even if they are more cautious about the export of democracy, do not allow it to be eroded (intentionally or unintentionally) and change their own policies. While the Alliance is stronger, to reflect a plurality of views and different political structures, any

withdrawal from the democratic core of the North Atlantic Treaty will have a corrosive effect on unity, collective defense and security.

The reflection process identified a strong common understanding between national governments, stakeholders and experts on the nature of the strategic environment and threat assessment². However, the way in which those allies assess different threats – and the different emphasis they place on them – is likely to lead to divergences in certain circumstances. As the future security environment becomes increasingly challenging and unpredictable, NATO will need to be even more deliberate and determined than it has been in the past to establish common ground on prioritizing threats. Without a full and honest discussion of these challenges, there is a danger that the difficulties of the security environment will create an opportunity for NATO opponents to encourage division and prevent collective action. However, as seen in the response to the 9/11 attack, the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the adaptation to hybrid and cyber threats, NATO has a strong track record of strategic adaptation. This tradition must be continued in the coming years³.

Another potential strain on the Alliance's unity is the extent to which the Allies are prepared to invest their national resources in maintaining defense capabilities, which make NATO an effective guarantor of their security. This political commitment of the Allies to each other is partly symbolized by the commitment agreed at the 2014 Wales Summit for the Allies, with the aim of reaching by 2024 two percent of GDP for defense spending and twenty percent of their annual spending on major new equipment. The promise is an unwavering commitment by each ally to collective defense, and the Allies have made substantial efforts for a more equitable division of tasks since these goals were set. COVID-19 has created serious economic problems that are likely to impact the budget of all allies. However, the security threats that led the Allies to decide to increase defense spending have not disappeared.

In addition to specific national interests or disputes between allies, another development that NATO needs to manage is given by changes in the strategic approach of allies that could lead to divisions. The last ten years have been marked by questions about the United States' commitment to



defending the European continent, the impact of the European Union's development as a security actor on NATO's future, the commitment of European allies to share common defense tasks and the development of deeper political incursions of NATO rivals on Alliance territory.

In order to maintain unity and further strengthen collective action, the Allies must constantly reaffirm and demonstrate, both through action and verbally, their commitment to the political identity and strategic objectives of the Alliance. NATO must remain robust enough to provide a strong platform and withstand a plurality of views and perspectives. The ultimate responsibility for this lies with the allies themselves and their willingness to take advantage of the opportunities for consultation and discussion offered by the Alliance. NATO's political consolidation will leave the Alliance ready for the next decade.

In conclusion to this subchapter, we can say that one of the secrets of the longevity of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was its ability to continuously adapt to the ever-changing external security environment and the needs of its members. This is all the more necessary today in a world that is both more complex and more interconnected. Over the next decade, NATO's ability to adapt and remain relevant for the future will depend on both external and internal factors of cohesion and division. External reasons include the threats and opportunities faced by the alliance and its individual members, the availability of other competent security and defense partners and the degree of compensatory influence of competitors. NATO's internal motives include identity and common values, political cohesion around common interests, the presence or absence of US leadership, the degree of sharing of responsibilities in NATO; and the orientation and cohesion of national governments. Taken together, these factors create centrifugal and centripetal forces that can alternately lead NATO countries to common sense or separate them⁴.

NATO's political goal in the 21st century

Managing current and future challenges requires strong cohesion within the North Atlantic Alliance. In order to fulfill its mission, NATO must continue to intentionally update its political paths, means and goals. This reassessment must be in line

with past NATO policies; its outlines generally correspond to the two main political dimensions of the Alliance, as identified in the Harmel report⁵: maintaining political solidarity and pursuing long-term stability of the external environment.

NATO will benefit from continuing this effort proactively, rather than expecting a reactive approach to political deficits in times of crisis or even greater uncertainty. In this task, the Alliance would benefit from adopting a long-term perspective and re-embracing NATO's vision of previous decades as a preventive tool for shaping its environment, rather than a tool for crisis management once they have already erupted. This proactive mindset should be seen in the way allies think about strengthening NATO's political role, cohesion and unity, as well as future consultation and decision-making.

The ever-changing strategic environment requires NATO to re-evaluate the way it conceives of its political mission and the tools it needs to sustain its overall goal: ensuring collective defense. The key to NATO's political and strategic credibility is to keep up with a dramatic and fundamentally changing strategic environment. This is all the more important in the context of a paradigm shift in the way allies think about their security. To do this, the Allies will need to continue to adopt a truly strategic mindset that goes beyond risk and crisis management. NATO must maintain a geopolitical perspective and a common vision for NATO's strategy, while improving its ability to understand and manage long-term cross-border threats. Only with this clarifying strategic framework will NATO be able to make full use of its available resources to shape its external environment.

Conclusions

The Reflection Process concludes at an important inflection point in world affairs and Euro-Atlantic relations, in which the future role of NATO is of growing importance to a stable and open international order. The effects of COVID-19 will echo through the decade ahead, exacerbating existing trends, potentially heightening international competition, and causing long-term scarring to the global economy.

While the historical record suggests room for optimism about NATO's long-term future, it also cautions against complacency and self-congratulation. Political adaptation is in the lifeblood

of NATO but it is also a baseline requirement of its survival. In 1949, twelve countries established the Alliance: binding post-War Europe to a Western trajectory and cementing the transatlantic bond. Seventy-one years later, twelve have become thirty, standing together to defend the security and prosperity of a billion people.

Throughout this time, NATO has gone through phases of renewal and reorientation, while always delivering its central mission and never deviating from its founding principles. The Alliance has remained strong and resolute at each turn, always challenging itself to be the best it can be. This ability to respond, adapt, and renew its internal bonds has been NATO's hallmark over the last seven decades.

The urgency of this effort is driven by an evolving security environment which has become more challenging and complex in recent years. Alongside the potent threat from Russia, China requires particular attention as its influence and presence grows. Terrorism in all its forms and manifestations remains an immediate threat. More space is being contested physically, as the line between peace and war continues to blur, with disinformation and subversion posing serious challenges to our democracies. Hybrid attacks need new thinking about deterrence and defence, driven in part by new and emerging technologies. Agreeing a shared response to these challenges has at times tested NATO unity, with Allies taking positions that reflect anxieties about their long-term strategic futures.

No single Ally can address these challenges alone. So it is essential that all Allies recommit to the spirit as well as the letter of the Washington Treaty, reaffirm their political commitment to one another, sustain their commitment to democratic values, and glean the benefits that come from the projection of collective strength. As our report describes, NATO needs to enhance its ability to respond to both existing and new threats, from both state and non-state actors, increase its range of political tools to deter adversaries and defend the Alliance in the modern threat environment. The Alliance will maintain the capacity for continual adaptation to reflect changing strategic circumstances.

In our recommendations, we have set out ways in which NATO could respond to emerging technology and hybrid attacks, including by working more effectively with partners. A balance

also needs to be found between the vital contribution North America continues to make to the security of Europe, and the increasing share of the burden which European Allies themselves will be taking in the years ahead. This should come together under a new Strategic Concept, which recognizes the progress made and the new challenges since 2010⁶ and equips the Alliance to deal with those to come.

In the face of attempts to divide, competing priorities, criticism and intense scrutiny, Allies need to retain their confidence in the durability and vitality of the Alliance, manage differences, rise above disagreements and close their ranks against threats affecting them, as they have for more than seventy years. The peace that most of Europe has enjoyed for the last seven decades is a historical exception, not the rule. NATO remains the guardian of that precious asset. As we submit our recommendations, we have every confidence that NATO will move from reflection to further action, so that it can continue to be the cornerstone of Allies' collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security for decades to come.

NOTES:

1 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-futures-three-trajectories>, accessed on 12.10.2021.

2 *** *Statement made after the NATO Summit in Brussels*, 14 June 2021, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/politica-externa/comunicatul-summitului-nato-de-la-bruxelles-14-iunie-2021>, accessed on 20.10.2021.

3 Horațiu Bontea, *NATO – Necesitate sau gloria trecutului*, 17 decembrie 2020, thenewfederalist.eu, accessed on 20.10.2021.

4 <https://cepa.org/an-agenda-for-natos-next-generation/>, accessed on 15.10.2021.

5 <https://monitorulapararii.ro/daca-nato-nu-ar-fi-existat-ar-fi-trebuie-inventat-perioada-razboiului-rece-la-aniversarea-a-70-de-ani-de-la-crearea-aliantei-nord-atlantice-1-12756>, accessed on 18.10.2021.

6 NATO, *Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon, 19-20 November 2010, http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf.

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