

GLOBAL SECURITY IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC

edited by Artur Gruszczak



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Introduction

“Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change”¹ wrote Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, a 19th-century English author, in her famous Gothic novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Today’s world has been hit suddenly and severely by the COVID-19 pandemic. The consequences for the development of human civilization in the stage of the late Anthropocene are deep, numerous, and largely unpredictable. The economic crisis, lockdown rules in the public sphere, uncertainty and fear of the prolonged effects of the pandemic, as well as the disturbing criminal landscape and persistence of the existing zones of instability and armed conflict, have added up to a worrisome state of the world. The global security system has suffered terribly in the pandemic. Institutional efforts at de-escalating conflicts, managing crises, stabilizing post-conflict situations, and coping with emerging traditional threats have been considerably limited or even halted by the spreading coronavirus. Emergency measures undertaken by global and regional organizations have been prioritized, which has overwhelmed the previous security-related activities.

Imperatives of the COVID-19 pandemic affected the cooperative efforts of the transatlantic community with NATO at the forefront. The North Atlantic Alliance has not remained immune to the effects of the pandemic. It has had to reshuffle planned activities, including mili-

¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2011), p. 223.

tary exercises in Europe, and shift the center of gravity to readiness to help Allies and partners in their efforts against COVID-19. According to NATO's official position, "Across the Alliance, almost half a million troops supported the civilian response, constructing almost 100 field hospitals, securing borders, and helping with testing and transport."² Delivery of critical medical supplies (masks, disposable suits, medicines, ventilators), as well as transport of medical personnel, experts, and patients have become a daily experience of Allies. Against that pandemic backdrop, NATO's core tasks: collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security had to remain unimpaired. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, speaking at the Riga Conference in November 2020, said: "[...] we remain vigilant and ready, because NATO's main responsibility is to make sure this health crisis does not become a security crisis."³

For these reasons, the security matters that nurtured the Alliance prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 health crisis have to be dealt with and adjusted to the changing strategic landscape. The major concerns, such as the war in Syria, instability in Afghanistan and Iraq, Islamic extremism in the Middle East and beyond, Russia's increasingly assertive and aggressive posture, amassing cyber threats⁴ and—last but not least—cracks within NATO and a rift between the United States and its European allies, had to be addressed properly and remain high on the Alliance's agenda.

A rugged landscape of NATO's activities prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic dominated the 29th International Security Conference in Cracow organized by the Foundation Institute for Strategic Studies in cooperation with NATO Headquarters and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Poland, and held on October 19, 2020. The conference was focused on three main topics: 1) the current state of transatlantic relations and the potential impact that tensions between NATO members may have on NATO's cohesive defense capabilities; 2) NATO's strategic approach

² "NATO responds to the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2020, helping Allies and partners", December 22, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_180548.htm.

³ "Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Riga Conference 2020", November 13, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_179489.htm.

⁴ See: "The Secretary General's Annual Report 2019", https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/3/pdf_publications/sgar19-en.pdf.

to countering the threat of Russia on its eastern flank; 3) NATO's reaction to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalation of the health-related global security crisis.

The conference hosted eminent scholars and outstanding international experts who shared their views and reflections on topical matters. This publication contains papers authored by some of the conference participants and external contributors who address key aspects of NATO's security in European and transatlantic contexts.

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Transatlantic Relations After the Pandemic: Time for Europe to Step Up¹

The coronavirus pandemic has delivered a shock to the global system on a scale not seen since World War II. It has exposed multiple cracks in the liberal international order that has underpinned our security and prosperity since 1945. It has accelerated many of the main international trends already underway before the pandemic: the rise of China and intensified US-China competition; a declining but aggressive Russia that seeks to subjugate its neighbors and destabilize Western democracies; the retreat from globalization and the rise of nationalism, protectionism, and xenophobia in our societies; and an erosion of public support for multilateral cooperation (just to name a few!).

¹ This chapter is compiled from Ambassador Vershbow's Remarks for Kraków Institute of Security Studies Conference held on October 19, 2020 and his paper "Ramp Up on Russia" published by the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security in October 2020 (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/nato20-2020/ramp-up-on-russia/>). The publisher gratefully acknowledges the Author's kind permission to reproduce that paper.

Beyond this, the pandemic has given the international community a preview of what a world without US leadership looks like. It has highlighted the difficulty of rebuilding and sustaining multilateral cooperation when the US chair is empty and there is no clear alternative to fill the leadership vacuum.

China is trying to take advantage by asserting a stronger role in global governance and by promoting the alleged superiority of its authoritarian system, but its heavy-handed bullying is antagonizing other powers who are reluctant to follow Beijing's lead.

Europe has improved its internal cooperation in responding to the pandemic and has taken historic decisions to mitigate its economic impact, but the European Union—despite its talk of becoming more geopolitical—is still a political and military lightweight not capable of filling the United States' shoes.

The world needs the combined strength of the United States and Europe to protect and strengthen the international order. It is only with renewed US-European leadership, working together with the leading democracies outside of Europe, that we can hope to reinvigorate multinational cooperation to deal with the effects of the pandemic and the multiple future challenges the world will face in the coming years.

Revitalizing the transatlantic community

While the transatlantic community came together in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the two sides of the Atlantic have been growing apart on a long list of issues—trade, climate change, the Iran nuclear deal and other arms control agreements—even before the pandemic. President Trump threatened to pull out of NATO and declared the European Union an enemy of the United States. He withdrew troops from coalition operations in Afghanistan and Syria without consulting allies with troops on the ground—prompting French President Macron to question whether NATO was “brain dead.”

Joe Biden's decisive victory in the US election in November 2020 will bring the restoration of a more traditional US approach to the world and a recommitment to NATO and to multilateralism more generally. But Eu-

Europeans would be naïve to assume a simple return to the good old days. Even though Biden is a committed Atlanticist in his bones, his administration will be under pressure to give priority to economic recovery from the pandemic and healing the many domestic wounds Trump has left in his wake. This could mean a further scaling back of US international commitments, continuing the retrenchment begun under both Obama and Trump.

In fact, with Americans of both US political parties in agreement on the need to prioritize competition with China, the Biden administration will look to the European allies to not only help in managing the Beijing challenge, but to assume a greater defense burden in Europe's immediate neighborhood—whether they are ready or not. This should be seen not as a threat but as an opportunity by the European allies—a chance to agree on a renewed, more balanced transatlantic partnership for the post-pandemic era.

Revitalizing NATO is only one part of this effort. The transatlantic community will need to join forces in other institutions and in the US-EU framework to address economic and other transnational challenges, such as climate change and coping with future pandemics. But NATO is the right place to begin. NATO has weathered the Trump storm better than other transatlantic institutions and has already conducted a “reflection process” aimed at strengthening the political dimension of the Alliance over the next ten years.

Secretary General Stoltenberg signaled in October 2020 that this might be broadened into a full-fledged review of NATO's Strategic Concept. The current one has not been changed since 2010—when Russia was still a partner and China barely mentioned in Alliance debates. An update is long overdue. The reflection process and possible rewrite of the Strategic Concept represent an opportunity for the United States and its European allies to define a new transatlantic security agenda for the post-pandemic era.

There is a long to-do list on the military side, but it is NATO's political role where new thinking is most needed. Here are the top three priorities as I see them.

First, NATO needs a new transatlantic bargain on burden-sharing. We need to move beyond today's narrow focus on defense spending and

aim for a more balanced partnership. Specifically, by 2030 the European allies should aim to contribute 50% of the critical capabilities and enablers now provided mainly by the United States—things like heavy lift, aerial refueling tankers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. This would equip them to serve as “first responder” to most crises in Europe’s neighborhood without depending so much on direct US support. Operations could be carried out under the NATO or EU flag, but in either case drawing on NATO planning and command structures (reviving the “Berlin Plus” arrangements of the late 1990s). The European allies could also take the lead on NATO’s partnership- and capacity-building programs with Middle Eastern neighbors that are now woefully under-funded, perhaps merging these efforts with those of the EU.

Europe taking the lead in its own neighborhood would be a demonstration of strategic responsibility—far more important than “strategic autonomy.” It would allow the United States to focus mainly on its Article 5 responsibilities in Europe and shift some of its military assets from Europe to the Asia-Pacific theater without any weakening of deterrence against Russia.

Second, allies need to work with the United States to develop a transatlantic strategy for dealing with China. This would not mean that NATO is going global. The Alliance’s focus could be principally on the risks posed by China to European security. While many allies are wary of getting in the middle of the global confrontation between Beijing and Washington, they should recognize that there are many aspects of China’s behavior that affect Europe and can best be dealt in a transatlantic framework. NATO is the natural forum to share intelligence on China and set policy on immediate security issues, such as protecting 5G networks, transport infrastructure and medical supply chains. NATO is also the right forum in which to discuss how to engage with China on the inclusion of its forces in future arms control negotiations.

NATO’s China agenda could grow over time, working in tandem with the European Union, to address China’s activism in the Arctic and the Belt and Road initiative. As part of a more strategic NATO approach to China, NATO could invite the major Asian democracies—Japan, Australia, South Korea, India and perhaps Taiwan—to join a Euro-Pacific Partnership Council. Their participation could help increase the allies’ leverage for

influencing Chinese behavior and encouraging Beijing to pursue cooperation rather than competition on transnational threats.

Third, NATO needs a more dynamic approach to Russia. The Alliance has done a lot to bolster deterrence since 2014, but it has been less effective in countering Moscow's political warfare against our societies and values. Six years after suspending "business as usual" with Moscow, the Alliance's Russia policy is largely static and reactive, with little meaningful dialogue in the NATO-Russia Council, provocative military activities in NATO air and sea space, aggressive disinformation and propaganda, and unchecked adventurism in the Middle East and Africa.

Russian-led forces in the occupied Donbas continue their attacks on Ukrainian forces and civilians despite numerous ceasefires, a daily reminder of Moscow's rejection of the Helsinki principles of respect for the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all European states. Belarus also faces sustained Russian pressure and possible military intervention to suppress the mass protests triggered by the falsified elections in August 2020. And Russia has once again thumbed its nose at the international community by using an illegal chemical weapon to poison opposition leader Alexei Navalny. NATO's failure to halt Russia's aggressive behavior puts the future of the liberal international order at risk. And NATO's mantra about dealing with Russia on two tracks—deterrence and dialogue—rings increasingly hollow.

What is needed is not another "reset," which would be divisive among allies and only embolden Putin. On the contrary: to break the stalemate and change Putin's calculus, NATO needs a **more robust two-track strategy**:

- On the one hand, NATO should do more to raise the costs for Moscow's disruptive activities; push back more forcefully on disinformation and cyber-attacks and increase the pressure on Russia to end its efforts to subjugate its neighbors.
- At the same time, NATO needs to be less fearful about dialogue with Moscow; allies should take the diplomatic offensive to limit nuclear and conventional arms and negotiate measures to reduce the risks of military incidents. They should also be ready to help when Russia finally decides to end its aggression against Ukraine and other neighbors.

The question of strategy toward Russia is admittedly a sensitive subject within the Alliance. Allies have considered it “too hot to handle” since they papered over their differences at the 2016 Warsaw Summit and settled on the current dual-track policy of deterrence and dialogue. This decision was a lowest-common-denominator approach, meant to assuage German, Italian, and other allies’ concerns that NATO was focusing too heavily on military deterrence at the expense of other priorities.

Increased dialogue is a noble goal, but it was a strategy without a defined end point. NATO never agreed on what the dialogue was meant to achieve. This is a debate the Alliance can no longer afford to postpone. Indeed, encouraging difficult debates on issues where NATO strategy is not working will more likely strengthen Alliance solidarity in the long run.

Accordingly, launching a review of NATO’s Russia policy should be a priority for 2021. While NATO must also do more to address rising threats from China and Europe’s southern neighborhood, Russia remains the most immediate threat to transatlantic security and deserves top billing on NATO’s agenda in the coming year.

Elements of a more dynamic Russia policy

Raising the Costs

If NATO is to turn Putin away from confrontation, the first requirement is to increase the costs to Russia for its aggressive actions. Sanctions imposed since 2014 have not been tough enough to force a real change in Russian behavior. Moscow continues to probe for divisions among allies in the hope that the transatlantic community will grow weary of confrontation and normalize relations. The Kremlin’s latest gambit has been to cite the battle against the coronavirus pandemic as justification for an end to Western sanctions against Russia. To convince Russia that the Alliance will not tolerate aggression and that wedge-driving will not succeed in breaking NATO resolve, allies must push back more aggressively on Russian political warfare.

Key to raising the costs to Russia is a more proactive transatlantic strategy for sanctions against the Russian economy and Putin’s power base,

together with other steps to reduce Russian energy leverage and export revenue. A new NATO Russia policy should be pursued in tandem with the European Union (EU), which sets European sanctions policy and faces the same threats from Russian cyberattacks and disinformation. At a minimum, EU sanctions resulting from hostilities in Ukraine should be extended, like the Crimea sanctions, for one year rather than every six months. Better yet, allies and EU members should tighten sanctions further and extend them on an indefinite basis until Russia ends its aggression and takes concrete steps toward de-escalation.

In this regard, allies should consider using sanctions as a deterrent, for example, by spelling out the specific sanctions that would be imposed if Moscow steps up its aggression by attacking the port of Mariupol or illegally seizing Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait or Sea of Azov. Allies should be equally specific on what sanctions would be eased if Moscow ends the aggressive activities that led to their imposition.

With respect to defending its own societies, NATO should require that every allied member state strengthen its resilience against cyberattacks, disinformation, and election interference, extending NATO's traditional remit to these gray-zone threats. While NATO allies may never convince Russia to stop these activities, there is much nations can do to reduce their vulnerabilities, curb the misuse of social media, debunk Russian propaganda in real time, and expose Russian techniques for maintaining plausible deniability. Some of these activities are ongoing, but dedicated resources and a coherent effort with respect to strategic communication from NATO are lacking. In particular, allies should strengthen efforts to engage with the increasingly restive younger generations of Russians—who could someday become advocates of renewed partnership with the West—via radio, television, and social media, as well as traditional exchange programs.

Denying Spheres of Influence

A more dynamic NATO strategy for Russia should go hand in hand with a more proactive policy toward Ukraine and Georgia in the framework of an enhanced Black Sea strategy. The goal should be to boost both partners' deterrence capacity and reduce Moscow's ability to undermine their sovereignty, even as NATO membership remains on the back burner for the time being.

As part of this expanded effort, European allies should do more to bolster Ukraine and Georgia's ground, air, and naval capabilities, complementing the United States' and Canada's efforts that began in 2014. NATO should also step up its support for domestic defense reforms and efforts to meet NATO interoperability standards, together with programs to reinforce their resilience against cyberattacks. To underscore the durability of NATO's commitment, the Alliance should establish a permanent military presence at Ukrainian and Georgian training centers close to Russian occupied territories. At a minimum, NATO should hold more frequent exercises on both countries' respective territories and in the Black Sea to counter Russia's military build-up since the illegal annexation of Crimea.

On the information front, Putin has been increasingly successful in suppressing information about combat casualties among Russian "volunteers" fighting in Donbas and the economic costs of propping up the occupation regimes in Donbas and Crimea. To raise the domestic political costs to Putin and increase the pressure for a negotiated end to the war, NATO should use open-source and declassified intelligence more strategically to refocus the spotlight on Russia's brutality and reign of terror in Donbas. NATO should also work more closely with Ukraine to debunk Russian propaganda that falsely portrays Ukraine as a right-wing failed state, and to connect with Russian-speaking audiences in the occupied territories and Russia itself through social media, online media, and other channels.

In Belarus, where the opposition does not seek NATO or EU integration, the Alliance needs to walk a fine line: opposing violence and encouraging political dialogue — perhaps mediated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) — that could lead to early new elections and a change in government without giving Moscow a pretext for military intervention. If Moscow does use force, however, allies will need to consider new sanctions as well as consider adjustments to NATO's force posture in the Baltic region.

Beyond Europe, under renewed US leadership, NATO should work to forge a unified response to Russian adventurism in the Middle East and North Africa. Libya is the place to start. A new effort by allies to broker a political compromise between the United Nations (UN)-recognized government in Tripoli and General Khalifa Haftar's forces in the East could deny Russia a new strategic foothold in the Eastern

Mediterranean and open the way to a negotiated end to Libya's civil war. It would also offer a way to get Turkey back on the same page with the rest of the Alliance and curtail Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rapprochement with Putin.

Using Dialogue to Reduce Risks

There are several steps that the United States and its allies could take toward reducing risks posed by Russia and building a more stable relationship with Moscow, despite the underlying strategic competition. In the realm of security, allies could look at the Cold War toolbox—namely arms control and confidence-building measures—for ways to increase transparency and predictability while lowering the risk of unintended conflict. The aim should be to give substance to the dialogue part of NATO's two-track strategy of defense and dialogue.

Though Moscow has so far rebuffed the idea, NATO should challenge Russia to adopt the allies' proposals for strengthening the OSCE Vienna Document. These include lower thresholds for notifications and inspections of exercises, a cap on the aggregate size of exercises in proximity to the NATO-Russia border, and a ban or low quota on no-notice "snap" exercises, to name a few. These steps could be accompanied by reciprocal political commitments to reduce the frequency of aggressive air operations close to each other's airspace. Allies and Russia could also agree to multilateralize bilateral US-Russian agreements on the prevention of incidents at sea and dangerous military activities—both of which could ensure real-time, military-to-military communications amid a crisis.

NATO could go further and offer to renew the military-to-military dialogue in the OSCE and NATO-Russia Council. The Alliance could make clear that this measure does not constitute a full return to business as usual, but rather a move needed to minimize misperceptions about each side's military activities and promote agreement on new risk-reduction measures. It would also offer a way to increase both sides' understanding of the implications of new weapons technologies and artificial intelligence before they have fundamentally changed the nature of war.

On the nuclear side, NATO allies have welcomed President Biden's decision in his first week in office to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) for five years. This provides plenty of time to

negotiate a new, broader agreement encompassing non-strategic nuclear weapons and the forces of other nuclear powers. While the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty cannot be brought back from the dead, allies should work with Russia on a new agreement that neither side will introduce nuclear-armed cruise or ballistic missiles in Europe, so long as Russia agrees to remove from Europe any nuclear-armed versions of its 9M729 missile that precipitated the demise of the INF Treaty. The intrusive measures needed to verify these commitments could be part of the follow-on agreement to New START.

At the same time, the United States and Russia should continue strategic stability talks and try to work more closely together on non-proliferation (in particular, denuclearization of North Korea) and the fight against terrorism—both are areas where Moscow's and Washington's interests still overlap.

To Restore Partnership, Ukraine Is the Litmus Test

Raising the costs for Russian aggression and reducing the risks of military conflict may be the most that the United States and its allies can achieve in the short term. NATO allies should make clear, however, that their longer-term vision remains a return to the path of cooperation and partnership that NATO and Russia pursued—to mutual benefit—in the immediate post-Cold War decades. However, this can only happen when Russia is willing to recommit—in deed as well as word—to the basic principles of Euro-Atlantic security that have guided all NATO nations in the past, and which Moscow previously pledged to uphold as well.

The essential first step and litmus test would be for Moscow to work with Ukraine and its international partners to find a durable solution to the conflict in Donbas, based on full implementation of the Minsk agreements. While NATO has not been directly engaged in Minsk diplomacy thus far, it could support the process by assisting non-NATO countries in setting up an international peacekeeping force (potentially under the authority of the UN Security Council or OSCE) to establish and oversee the implementation of the Minsk accords. This would include creating the secure conditions needed for free and fair local elections under Ukrainian law in the now-occupied Donbas. Although NATO and Russia would not be part of the peacekeeping force, the NATO-Russia Council could be the

venue for discussing the parameters of the force and lining up troop contributors from among NATO's partners.

To encourage Moscow to get serious about ending its undeclared war in Eastern Ukraine, allies could signal a readiness to negotiate a new Code of Conduct for European security in tandem with the lifting of sanctions that would follow the implementation of Minsk. That agreement could take the form of an update to the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and would enter into force when Russia had fully withdrawn its forces and proxies from Donbas. While returning Crimea to Ukraine would remain a long-term challenge, a just settlement in Donbas would enable the sides to turn the page and begin to rebuild NATO-Russia cooperation.

The Need for Patience

Putin's hostility to the West may, in fact, be difficult to diffuse. Relations between the West and Moscow had begun to deteriorate even before Russia's watershed invasion of Ukraine, driven principally by Moscow's fear of the encroachment of Western values and their potential to undermine the Putin regime. With the possibility of a further sixteen years of Putin's rule, most experts believe relations are likely to remain confrontational for years to come. They argue that the best the United States and its allies can do is manage this competition and discourage aggressive actions from Moscow.

Strategic patience will clearly be needed, but by pushing back against Russia more forcefully in the near and medium term and raising the costs for its aggression, allies are more likely to eventually convince Moscow to return to compliance with the rules of the liberal international order and to mutually beneficial cooperation as envisaged under the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act.

Conclusion

A new transatlantic bargain on burden-sharing, a transatlantic strategy for China, and a more dynamic NATO Russia strategy should be among the top priorities the United States and Europe in 2021 and beyond. Some of the proposals I have laid out may seem overly ambitious, but in the spirit of never wasting a crisis, it is time for the European allies to step up in forg-

ing a more equal transatlantic partnership with the United States, and for the US to welcome this without any ambivalence. The United States needs a stronger Europe that can take on more responsibility in its “near abroad” while continuing to work with the United States to address the challenges from China and Russia.

Reuniting NATO around this sort of agenda could demonstrate to NATO citizens that the Alliance remains relevant in addressing their most pressing security concerns. Working with like-minded democracies in other parts of the world, the United States and its European partners could show the way in ensuring that the pandemic is the catalyst for renewed international cooperation in meeting the full range of global challenges.

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How the West should deal with Russia?¹

At a news conference in July 2016 Donald Trump said: “Wouldn’t it be nice if we got along with Russia?”². Getting along with Russia, as then-candidate Donald J. Trump suggested, would indeed be a good thing. But, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama tried and failed; US-Russian relations were not much better under Trump, and Russia is not on especially good terms with Europe either.

Dealing with Russia “as it is,” as some capable Russia experts (including the authors’ former colleagues) recommend in their “open letter” urging that the United States rethink its Russia policy, sounds unarguably real-

¹ This chapter is a slightly abbreviated version of the report written by Amb. Daniel Fried and Amb. Alexander Vershbow and published by the Atlantic Council in November 2020 (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/russia-in-the-world/#citation-5-top>). The publisher gratefully acknowledges the Authors’ kind permission to reproduce that report.

² “Trump: Wouldn’t it be nice if we got along with Russia?”, Fox News, July 27, 2016, <https://video.foxnews.com/v/5054581914001#sp=show-clips>; “What Donald Trump Said About Russian Hacking and Hillary Clinton’s Emails”, *The New York Times*, July 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/us/politics/trump-conference-highlights.html>.

istic.³ But, Russia “as it is” is a stagnating authoritarian kleptocracy led by a president-for-life who has started wars against its neighbors, assassinates opponents inside and outside of Russia, interferes in US and European elections, and generally seems to act as an anti-US spoiler at every opportunity. Its leadership expects the West to grant Russia a free hand in “its” half of Europe, and to look the other way when it seeks to deprive its former neighbors—and its own citizens—of the right to chart their own futures. That’s not a great basis for better relations, or for arguing that the United States or the West must take principal responsibility in reaching out to or accommodating Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

The authors prefer, however, to think in more hopeful terms about the longer-term potential of Russia’s relations with the world, the West, and the United States. They are realistic about the obstacles, especially in the short run, but do not think that Russia’s relations with the West are permanently stuck in the bad place they are in now, or that “as it is” is Russia’s only possible end state. Current US-Russian relations are about as bad as they were during the final years of Leonid Brezhnev’s Soviet Union and the first term of the Ronald Reagan administration, a time when many in the United States and Europe believed that the danger of further deterioration—or even war—was real. But, things turned out otherwise—and better. Mikhail Gorbachev followed Brezhnev. His “new thinking” on foreign policy, and Reagan’s constructive response to it, generated a turnabout in US-Soviet relations, and helped create conditions for breakthroughs that ended the Cold War peacefully.

US assumptions, Russia’s dilemma

The hopes of the United States were, in the end, not realized, partly because both the Bush and Clinton administrations were mistaken in some basic assumptions about post-Soviet Russia. Washington did not fully appreciate the profound difference between post-communist transformation in Central Europe and simultaneous post-communist and post-Soviet

³ Rose Gottemoeller, et al., “Opinion: It’s Time to Rethink Our Russia Policy,” *Politico*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/05/open-letter-russia-policy-391434>.

transformation in Russia. For Central Europe and the Baltics, the end of communism and Soviet domination meant national liberation and escape from a socioeconomic system imposed from outside. But, for Russia, the end of the Soviet Union was more imperial collapse. While it kept Siberia and the Far East, Russia otherwise found itself reduced to something like its mid-seventeenth-century borders. That produced a political shockwave. It meant, in particular, that the political capital of national liberation that was available to the early post-communist leaders in Central Europe and the Baltics did not exist in the same way for Yeltsin and his team.

The Central Europeans, Poles, and Balts, in particular, could—and did—use the political capital of liberation to carry their countries through the most difficult periods of economic transformation to a free-market system. It proved sufficient, albeit just barely, to keep publics on board despite the inevitable hardships. Yeltsin and his team of both economic reformers and those seeking to lead Russia to a more productive place in an undivided Europe, by contrast, did not have that degree of political capital at their disposal.

Looking back, pro-Kremlin Russians (and some in the West) sometimes argue that the United States sabotaged the Russian economy by imposing neo-liberal formulas foreign to the Russian tradition, and did so deliberately to weaken Russia. That is nonsense: the same advisors provided much the same advice to the Russians, the Poles, and the Balts, but the results were vastly different. But, the Russians were operating under less favorable political conditions and Yeltsin himself, who might have provided the political cover for sustaining reforms, suffered declining health by the mid-1990s. This made him ill-equipped to prevent the rampant corruption and looting that put the economic wealth of the country in the hands of a new class of “oligarchs,” and fueled public disillusionment with capitalism and democracy.

Pro-Kremlin Russians (and some in the West) also argue that by leading NATO’s enlargement to Central European countries, the United States sabotaged Russia’s attempts to join with an undivided Europe. That is also not true. The United States, with the full support of its European allies, insisted from the start that NATO enlargement should move in parallel with building a NATO-Russia relationship, an “alliance with the Alliance,” with ultimate Russian membership in NATO—as Yeltsin had suggested—

never ruled out⁴. NATO enlargement was intended to provide the security underpinnings for a Europe whole and free; no enlargement, no matter how it was rhetorically dressed up, would have meant extending the line of the Iron Curtain, of “Yalta Europe,” into the future.

Russian authorities make much of threats they have historically faced from the West, often citing Napoleon Bonaparte’s and Adolf Hitler’s invasions (such Kremlin rhetoric even goes back to Russia’s wars with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; Russia’s current national day celebrates the expulsion of the Poles from Moscow in 1612). But, NATO’s existence eliminated the chances of such threats arising again, and its enlargement extended that stability to Central Europe. Thanks to NATO and NATO enlargement, Russia enjoys the greatest degree of security to its west in its history. As noted, this was reflected in the steady drawing down of conventional forces in western Russia up until Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014, when twelve Central and East European nations joined NATO⁵.

The first “reset”

The most ambitious hopes for a new Russian relationship with the United States and Europe had faded by the end of Yeltsin’s presidency in 2000, but when he entered office in January 2001, President George W. Bush tried with Yeltsin’s successor what his administration considered a more realistic policy toward Russia. Bush’s Russia team, led by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, believed that Russia’s new President Vladimir Putin might be a leader in Russia’s tradition of authoritarian modernizers, who could restore state structures and the rule of law after the chaotic 1990s,

⁴ Both authors were active in designing the Clinton administration’s policy toward NATO, Central Europe, and Russia. “Moving Toward NATO Expansion,” Clinton Presidential Library, March 5, 2018, <https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/isca/p/2016-140-doc05.pdf>.

⁵ See Alexander Vershbow, “Present at the Transformation: An Insider’s Reflection on NATO Enlargement, NATO-Russia Relations, and Where We Go from Here,” [in] Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (eds.), *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Foreign Policy Institute/Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, 2019).

ending state capture by the oligarchs, while still being willing to work with the United States and the West.

A Russian leadership that could restore stability and prosperity at home, so the administration's Russia team believed, would be more confident and steady, and, therefore, more capable of sustaining and advancing constructive relations with its neighbors, Europe, NATO, and the United States. Bush reached out to Putin and had a good initial meeting in Slovenia in June 2001, at the end of Bush's first trip to Europe (which also included a stop in Poland). Bush's remark that he had gained a glimpse into Putin's soul has been criticized, but reflected Bush's determination to build a good personal relationship with Russia's leader.

The early years of Bush-Putin relations made progress, including: counterterrorism cooperation after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, especially Putin's agreement not to object to temporary US bases established in Central Asia in support of the initial Afghanistan operation; and an upgrading of NATO-Russia relations through establishment of the NATO-Russia Council at a NATO-Russia summit outside Rome in May 2002, in advance of NATO's membership invitation in November 2002 to seven Central European states, including the Baltic states. Putin's November 2001 visit to Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, was filled with hope on both sides for sustainable cooperation. "We're just getting to know Putin, too," one senior Russian official said to Daniel Fried at the Crawford dinner. "Putin, Bush: this might work out well for us all."

Relations deteriorated after 2002, though not because of NATO enlargement.

One factor was the US decision to launch the Iraq War. Moscow had not liked the 1999 NATO air campaign against Serbia over its atrocities in Kosovo, especially as it had been launched without an explicit UN Security Council (UNSC) mandate. However, it then accepted the US argument that it was a one-time exception to avert a humanitarian catastrophe. Iraq was a bigger operation against a traditional Russian ally, again taken without UNSC authorization, thus marginalizing Russia's veto power. The Bush administration, while angered by French and German opposition to the Iraq War, took Putin's opposition in stride.

A second factor was the Bush administration's aggressive pursuit of ballistic-missile defense of the US homeland. Putin had calmly accepted

US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002, but US plans in Bush's second term to establish ballistic missile sites in Poland and the Czech Republic convinced him that the United States was seeking to weaken Russia's strategic deterrent. The sites were intended to counter Iranian threats to the US mainland, and did not have the capacity Putin feared, but the Russian security establishment believed otherwise.

A third and larger factor in Putin's growing hostility to the United States was the outbreak of the Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004). These were, in fact, homegrown rebellions against corrupt and ineffective leaders and, in the case of Ukraine, against Russian-backed efforts to steal an election on behalf of Moscow's preferred candidate. But, Putin saw these as US-planned operations seeking to undermine Russia's interests in its post-Soviet sphere of influence. Georgia's and Ukraine's subsequent pursuit of NATO membership and closer relations with the European Union confirmed Putin's view that the United States was seeking to undermine core Russians interests and the basis, as he saw it, for good relations with Washington.

Putin also regarded US criticism of his deepening autocracy and repression – including suppression of independent media (especially television), the killing of independent journalist Anna Politkovskaya, and the arrest of oligarch-turned-political-opponent Mikhail Khodorkovsky – as signs of hostile intent to weaken Russia by supporting anti-regime forces. In a blistering speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin made clear that he regarded the West as an adversary.⁶ In August 2008, emboldened by NATO's open divisions at the April 2008 Bucharest summit over whether to offer Georgia and Ukraine a "Membership Action Plan," for which the United States had failed to achieve a NATO consensus, Putin provoked a war with Georgia.

⁶ Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," President of Russia, February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

The second reset

Putin's arc of relations with President Obama took a similar shape. Obama came to office seeking a "reset" in relations with Russia after a brief suspension of cooperation following the Georgia war. Obama paid an early visit to Moscow for meetings with the new official leader, President Dmitry Medvedev, and the power behind the throne, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Obama and Medvedev agreed to accelerated negotiations on a New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), and to expand bilateral cooperation across the board through a new Bilateral Presidential Commission.

In September 2009, Obama announced significant changes to planned US missile-defense deployments in Europe.⁷ He changed the system intended for Poland to one with less capacity to threaten Russia's strategic deterrent (the SM-3), added a second SM-3 site in Romania even farther from Russia, and dropped the missile-defense radar in the Czech Republic entirely. (The Obama administration was clumsy in the way it rolled out that decision. In so doing, it alienated the Czechs and Poles, who had backed the original deployment, and created the false impression that Obama was willing to burn US friends to reach out to Putin.)

Nevertheless, Obama's reset, like Bush's earlier outreach to Putin, had its achievements. These included President Medvedev's agreement in July 2009 for US forces to use Russian airspace on their way to Afghanistan, the New START treaty signed in April 2010, and the launch of US-Russia and NATO-Russia talks on missile-defense cooperation following Medvedev's attendance at the 2010 NATO Summit in Lisbon. In 2011, Russia abstained on a UN Security Council Resolution on Libya that opened the way for NATO military action to prevent violence against opposition forces rebelling against Muammar al-Qaddafi in the wake of the Arab Spring. The latter decision may have been Medvedev's own call, to which Putin initially acquiesced, but Putin ultimately objected when it led to

⁷ Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on Strengthening Missile Defense in Europe," National Archives and Records Administration, September 17, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-strengthening-missile-defense-europe>.

the overthrow and assassination of Qaddafi, which he saw as the product of US-sponsored regime change.

As with Bush's outreach, the reset stumbled in the face of Putin's anger over what he may have thought was yet another attempt at regime change in Russia itself: US criticism of the Kremlin's suppression of popular protests following flawed parliamentary elections in 2011, and of Putin's return to the presidency in 2012.

Obama's reset died after another Russian attack on a neighbor. This time it was Ukraine, which Putin attacked using special and regular forces after sustained demonstrations, another "color revolution," forced out the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. Obama, like Bush, was unwilling to accept Russia aggression against a neighbor. The Obama administration, in fact, responded even more strongly to Putin's attack on Ukraine than Bush did after the Russo-Georgia War: with individual and broader economic sanctions, negotiated with Europe and other Group of Seven (G7) members; and by reversing years of US military drawdown and leading NATO to rebuild its deterrence posture along its eastern flank, including the stationing of multinational battalions in the Baltic States and Poland, and the deployment of a US combat brigade into Poland on a rotating basis.

Relations hit new lows, from which they have not recovered. The Kremlin has stonewalled on diplomatic efforts to end its invasion of Ukraine, but seems content to maintain the conflict as leverage. Reflecting a general hostile approach to the United States and much of Europe, Kremlin actions since 2014 have included provocative military behavior directed against US forces and NATO allies; a military buildup of Russian forces along its western border; violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (by deploying a treaty-proscribed intermediate-range cruise-missile system) and the Open Skies Treaty (though whether the Trump administration was wise to withdraw from the treaties is another question); launching of intensified disinformation campaigns against the United States and major Western European countries (while continuing earlier campaigns against Central and Eastern European countries); cyberattacks against the United States, United Kingdom (UK), Germany

and others; and continued assassinations and attempted assassinations in the UK, Germany, and Russia itself.⁸

Notwithstanding the record, President Trump's personal approach to Putin has been solicitous and sometimes fawning, on display particularly at the 2018 Helsinki summit, when Trump publicly accepted Putin's denials of interference in the 2016 elections over the conclusions of his own intelligence community.⁹ The Trump administration, however, has continued the basic elements of Obama's post-2014 Russia policy: limited diplomatic relations, though some efforts at arms control and strategic stability talks; continued, though unevenly administered, sanctions; and further strengthening of NATO's European deterrence posture, including an increased US military presence in Poland.

What went wrong: Russia's dilemma

The high hopes of the early 1990s, and the more restrained but positive expectations of the Bush and Obama years, were not fulfilled. The United States made its share of misjudgments, but did not spurn or exploit Russia at its post-Soviet moment of weakness.

These hopes ultimately failed because Putin's terms for good relations with Washington included an expectation that the United States would turn a blind eye to Putin's deepening authoritarianism at home, and would cede the independent states that emerged from the Soviet Union to Kremlin domination.

The United States did not foment the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, or, more recently, in Belarus. The Bush and Obama

⁸ Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Russia's Military Drills Near NATO Border Raise Fears of Aggression," *New York Times*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/31/world/europe/russia-military-exercise-zapad-west.html>; "Statement on Russia's Failure to Comply with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Issued by the North Atlantic Council, Brussels, 1 February 2019," https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_162996.htm?selectedLocale=en

⁹ Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, "Remarks by President Trump and President Putin of the Russian Federation in Joint Press Conference," White House, July 16, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-putin-russian-federation-joint-press-conference/>.

administrations were content to live with the leaders who were in power. The Trump administration even tried to improve relations with Belarus' strongman Aleksandr Lukashenka. Nor was the United States obsessed with bringing Russia's neighbors into NATO. The Obama administration was, if anything, relieved when newly elected President Yanukovich withdrew Ukraine's NATO membership application in 2010 in favor of "non-bloc status." But, when popular uprisings occurred in these countries against incompetent or oppressive local rulers, Washington was unwilling to look away or accept Kremlin military aggression in response. This was anathema to Putin.

These demands by Putin reflected a deeper dilemma that drives Russian foreign policy: its political authoritarianism at home produces economic backwardness and stagnation, which, in turn, generates insecurity, especially a lack of confidence in Russia's ability to attract willing allies (except on a transactional basis). Russia's position in its region and the world, therefore, relies on subversion, corruption, disinformation, and, when necessary, violence to subordinate sovereign states to its will. The trauma of Soviet collapse—and the subsequent failure of post-Soviet Russia's initial attempt at political and economic modernization—left the country with an understandable, if misdirected, sense of bitterness, as well as a tendency to blame the West for Russia's weakness and missteps.

Putin, coming to power on top of that failure, fell back on Russia's reactionary traditions of political authoritarianism, a patrimonial economic system that limited the country's ability to develop modern capitalism, and a bristling defensiveness about Russia's place in the world. This approach, despite initial stability and growth in the early Putin years, left Russia again relatively backward and stagnant, with Russians even using the term "stagnation" (*zastoy*)—once applied to describe the late Brezhnev period—to characterize Russia today. Because of this relative backwardness, Putin's Russia, like the Soviet Union, is inclined to rely on intimidation or force to maintain its interests with its neighbors, and to regard the West (and Western ideas) with suspicion and hostility. That, and not the US and West's mistakes with respect to Russia policy, has been the chief factor that has brought relations to their current state.

Better options

Putin's Russia is not the only possible Russia, any more than Brezhnev's Soviet Union was an immutable culmination of Russian history. The Kremlin's definitions of its interests are not the only option for Russia.

A Russia less authoritarian at home, more constructive abroad, and less hostile to the West and its values, is by no means inevitable. But, in the authors' view, it is possible. They do not believe that Russia is, as the influential foreign affairs writer Samuel Huntington would have it, civilizationally predetermined to live down to its worst traditions. They also do not believe that Gorbachev's new thinking or Yeltsin's far-reaching hopes for his country's reform and integration with the West were fanciful or mere enthusiasm.

If Ukrainians and Belarusians are ready to risk their lives for the sake of democracy and justice at home, then it seems strange to argue that Russians are, and will always be, content to live under the knout. Recent protests in Khabarovsk are just the latest reminder that there are Russians who yearn for greater freedom and the right to choose their own leaders. As was the case with the Soviet Union during the late Brezhnev period and the reign of Nicholas I, defeat of aggressive designs abroad can trigger a turn to domestic reform. The first attempt to reform post-Soviet Russia failed. The next effort, if it comes, may do better.

The United States needs a policy framework to address both Russia's dismal current realities and its better future potential. The authors offer the following suggestions.

- Don't be in a hurry. The United States and Putin's Russia have fundamentally different values and clashing visions of the international order. No single summit, visit, reset, offer, or threat will turn things around.
- Don't seek a "grand bargain" with Putin. His terms would include the two demands on which previous attempts at better relations have foundered: a Kremlin free hand at home (e.g., no pressure about human rights, democracy, or free elections, and no complaints about repression or assassinations), and a Kremlin free hand in its sphere of privileged interests (i.e., subjugation of Ukraine, Belarus, and other states formerly part of the Soviet Union). No US administration has

been able to, or should, accept such terms. It would not only be a betrayal of US values, but it also wouldn't bring lasting stability. Sooner or later, the people of these countries will demand better, as has been seen in Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus.

- *Don't sacrifice other countries on the altar of better relations with Moscow.* Even when the United States tries to tacitly recognize Moscow's control, as Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did with respect to Warsaw Pact countries, the Kremlin's rule was neither stable nor sustainable. On the contrary, better relations begin with an end to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, especially the eastern Donbas. Russian use of force against Belarus would (and should) be another problem in US-Russian relations, and the cause for additional sanctions or other punitive steps.
- *Don't buy into clichés about Russia,* e.g., that it is civilizationally destined to have autocratic rulers or be inevitably backward or despotic, or that Russians have infinite capacity for suffering or are happy with stagnant stability through tyranny. The Russians suffered, fought, and prevailed during World War II, when they were fighting for their lives. But, Germany defeated Russia in World War I, and the Russians turned against their own rulers for their incompetence and misgovernment.
- *Do resist Kremlin aggression.* That means, among other things: actively supporting the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus; seeking to deter more Kremlin interference in US and European elections, and imposing substantial costs if interference continues; strengthening NATO's deterrence posture along its eastern flank; strengthening the United States' ability to resist and, if necessary, respond to Kremlin cyber and information warfare; and exposing and drying up Kremlin dirty money and hidden investment flowing through Western financial systems.
- *Do try to stabilize the relationship.* The United States and its allies should maintain and, if possible, expand military-to-military talks and regular dialogue with Moscow, even on contentious issues. Doing so would be neither a reward nor a trap, but a way to reduce the risks that minor incidents could escalate into open conflict. As it seeks to do this, the United States should take care not to pay for dialogue through unwarranted concessions to "improve the atmosphere."

- *Do look for areas of potential common ground.* These could include arms control, including preservation of New START, but also dialogue on non-strategic nuclear weapons and emerging weapons technologies, in order to mitigate their potential impact on strategic stability. Dialogue could also include areas on which the United States and Russia, in theory, have similar objectives, such as North Korean denuclearization, counterterrorism, future pandemics, and climate change. There may be value in opening a dialogue about China, since today's Moscow-Beijing entente may give way to renewed competition.
- *Do work with Europe.* The United States' NATO and European Union partners have a range of views on Russia and how to deal with Putin. But, many share the US starting point (as the authors have tried to define it), and there is a strong basis for a common transatlantic policy. Experience shows that the United States can forge a strong consensus on Russia strategy if it listens to its allies, especially the Germans, and does not, like President Trump, pick gratuitous fights with its friends.
- *Do be patient.* The late Putin era in Russia—which could have sixteen more years to run based on recent constitutional amendments—may not be the best time to launch ambitious new initiatives with the Kremlin. It may be that the best the United States and its allies can do is to manage the competition, impose meaningful costs on Russia for its aggressive behavior, and reduce its own vulnerabilities to disinformation, subversion, and cyberattacks. That may be enough for the present.
- *Do reach out to Russian society.* Exchanges, support for free media, and contact with a broad range of Russians—including, but not limited to, the opposition—sounds pedestrian, but the United States learned during the Cold War that such efforts can have a significant cumulative impact. Putin's regime will not like that, and will continue to stigmatize Russians who engage with the West as foreign agents. The United States needs to persevere despite the obstacles.
- *Do fight back in the information space.* In addition to people-to-people contacts, the United States should develop more active, well-funded information efforts—not just to debunk Kremlin disinformation, but to provide a more accurate image of US society and policies. Russians, especially the restive younger generation, need to hear that Americans remain hopeful about and interested in a strong, dem-

ocratic Russia that, once again, seeks to live in peace with its neighbors and with the West, contrary to Putin's rhetoric about alleged Russophobia. The Trump administration's abrupt replacement of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's and Voice of America's leadership, and weakening of Voice of America (including by forcing foreign-citizen reporters to leave the United States by not renewing visas) weakens one of its tools in such an effort, and serves no US interest that the authors can identify.

- *Do invest in, and prepare for, a better future with Russia.* The authors have argued in this paper that there is potential for positive change in Russia. The United States should now consider how to respond to it. New leadership in the Kremlin, when it finally arrives, will seek to advance its own agenda, not that of the United States, and for its own reasons. But, new leadership seeking to end Russia's internal stagnation and external isolation may be more open to settling the worst outstanding disputes, like Ukraine, and exploring the basis for a genuine shift in relations toward partnership and mutually beneficial cooperation, picking up where things left off two decades ago. The political circumstances of such new leadership may be far more favorable than they were for Yeltsin; they will not be weighed down by the Soviet imperial collapse or the chaotic results of incomplete and spotty reforms.

Conclusions

The coming years may offer new opportunities for a Russia that is thinking about itself and the world in more constructive ways. The post-COVID-19 international system may (and, the authors believe, will) be more multilateral, with its core consisting of key democracies in Europe, North America, Asia, and elsewhere, rather than being centered on US primacy, while maintaining the values-based fundamentals of the post-1945 US-led system at its best. A more multipolar West would represent an achievement of US grand strategy since 1945, rather than a defeat for US power.

This would not meet the Kremlin desire for spheres-of-influence arrangements that would give it leave to dominate its neighbors. Neverthe-

less, a different, more constructive Russian leadership might find it more comfortable to join such a system—less a surrender to US hegemony from its point of view, and more multilateral in form—and the United States would be well advised to welcome this.

The fundamentals underlying Russian foreign policy require realism and practicality in the West's response in the short term. But, while dealing with Putin's Russia as it is, the United States should also be ready to deal in a different way with a different Russia when it ultimately emerges.

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Nuclear Disarmament and New Transatlantic Challenges

I am satisfied with the evolution that we have witnessed over the past few years: from the Readiness Action Plan that was established just after the invasion of the territory of Ukraine by Russia, especially following the illegal annexation of the Crimea, to both the Enhanced and Tailored Forward Presence. It is without doubt a great achievement for the Alliance. I am also very satisfied with all the capabilities that were deployed in the east-central part of Europe, including Poland. I am taking into account, for example, the presence of American troops and American equipment there. Allow me to emphasize that during a recent discussion in the Polish Parliament, both in the House and in the Senate, the opposition supported the new SOFA agreement between Poland and the US, although we had some doubts concerning the matters of both jurisdiction and costs for the host country, i.e. Poland. Therefore, these are the achievements that are visible, important, and that should be taken into consideration when speaking about both deterrence and collective defence.

I would like to focus rather on what is missing right now and what are the questions, or at least one general question, that we should answer. I would like to speak about nuclear deterrence and the nuclear threat from the Russian state, maybe because my first article in the underground press was published right after the INF treaty had been signed. I published that article in 1988 and 21 years later, in August 2019, the United States for-

mally withdrew from the INF treaty. I heard Secretary of State Mike Pompeo saying that with the full support of NATO allies, the US determined that Russia was in material breach of the Treaty and suspended American obligations under said treaty, and that Russia is solely responsible for the treaty's demise. I considered our response: what should a joint American and European transatlantic response to this new situation be, because that treaty was one of the pillars of the post-Cold War order, part of the network of agreements limiting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction as well as controlling the armaments in this sphere. Of course, it was the conclusion of several reports on SSC-8 missiles that Russia has been developing since the mid-2000s. Certainly, when US officials reported in February 2017 that Russia had deployed two missile battalions including SSC-8, we were convinced that there should be a collective response to that. However, after the decision of the US to withdraw from the INF treaty there has been a grey zone in that sphere. On the other hand, we have witnessed an ongoing modernization of Russia's nuclear capabilities: consider the deployment of the first RS-28 (Sarmat) ICBMs by 2021. The fact that they will replace the older-generation R-36M ICBMs is a completely new sign and it is still in our hands whether we should extend the New Start agreement, the last pillar of this post-Cold War architecture of arms limitations and non-proliferation. According to a Heritage Foundation report, 82% of Russia's nuclear forces have been modernized. That is a significant amount and, without doubt, Russia still has the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons among the nuclear powers, including short-range nuclear missiles. Russia is still one of the few nations with the ability to destroy many targets in the US homeland but also to threaten allied nations. We have to find a joint common response to those threats connected with the modernization of Russian nuclear capabilities, including new threats coming from other directions, mainly from China. However, it should be a collective responsibility, because this is a collective challenge and a collective threat. It does not refer only to US security, it refers also to European partners' security, and mainly to the security of countries located in the central part of Europe, as far as intermediate range nuclear capabilities are concerned. Allow me to raise this issue as one of the crucial, not only conventional but also nuclear issues that we have to resolve in a much friendlier atmosphere after the American elections in November 2020. By "friendly" I mean not in a transactional atmosphere, but in a much more value-oriented approach.

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The COVID-19 Pandemic: Geopolitical Implications for Europe¹

COVID-19 erupted into a landscape of change: even before the pandemic unfolded, ‘uncertainty’ had become the defining feature of our times. This perception of heightened uncertainty and unpredictability was the result of several trends occurring simultaneously: from relations with China to those with the US, from a change in international trade patterns to a rise in disinformation campaigns and a global decline in democracy, and with several building blocks of European foreign policy appearing to shift dangerously. In the case of some of these trends, the pandemic provided an opportunity for accelerated linear continuity, and merged into other trends without necessarily being connected to them. As for others, COVID-19 had a transformative impact, creating an opening for change.

¹ This chapter reproduces parts of a publication by the EU Institute of Security Studies: Florence Gaub and Lotje Boswinkel, How Covid-19 changed the future. Geopolitical implications for Europe. Chaillot Paper no. 162, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, December 2020; DOI 10.2815/690426. The publisher gratefully acknowledges the Authors’ kind permission to reproduce parts of this publication.

Out of love? Transatlantic relations

Pre-pandemic trend

Transatlantic relations entered a turbulent period with the coming to power of President Trump in early 2017. Although several of the issues raised by his administration had also been raised by previous ones, the tone and style differed significantly, making it a particularly challenging relationship.

One of the main points of contention was defense spending: since 2014, allies have been expected to reach a 2% defense spending target by 2024. While some allies have met this target, the majority—including Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany and Portugal—have not.² Throughout 2017 and 2018, denigrating comments by President Trump (such as branding NATO “obsolete”) and leaks from his entourage raised fears of an American withdrawal from the Alliance.³ By the end of 2019 this had led to increased defense spending among NATO allies in an unprecedented way—but European disillusionment with American commitment remained, leading French President Emmanuel Macron to declare in a forthright interview with *The Economist* that the United States “doesn’t share our idea of the European project”, and that therefore, “what we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO.” He added that “If we don’t wake up [...] there’s a considerable risk that in the long run we will disappear geopolitically, or at least that we will no longer be in control of our destiny.”⁴ These tendencies in NATO had ripple effects for European security, too: in December 2017 the EU launched the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PeSCo) initiative, its framework to deepen defense co-

² NATO, “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2012-2019)”, June 2019, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_06/20190625_PR2019-069-EN.pdf.

³ “Trump Discussed Pulling U.S. From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia”, *The New York Times*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>.

⁴ NATO, “NATO Secretary General announces increased defence spending by Allies”, November 29, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_171458.htm; “Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead”, *The Economist*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>.

operation, and in 2019 it established the European Defence Fund (EDF).

Despite increased European defense commitments the relationship remained fraught—in part because transatlantic relations suffered not just from disagreements over defense spending; trade was also a contentious issue. In the first months of his mandate President Trump singled out the EU ahead of China and Russia as “a foe” and a competitor because of the trade deficit.⁵ From 2018 the US imposed several tariffs on Europe, including a 25% tariff on steel imports and a 10% tariff on aluminum imports.⁶ But more generally, the Trump White House displayed a general antipathy towards the EU that was difficult to frame, or indeed resolve, with political means. Indicative of this attitude were President Trump’s support for a no-deal Brexit, the downgrading of the EU delegation from its embassy status, or Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s questioning of whether the EU “is ensuring that the interests of countries and their citizens are placed before those of bureaucrats here in Brussels.”⁷

While European leaders met these developments with stoicism or humor (such as then President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, who tweeted “America and the EU are best friends. Whoever says we are foes is spreading fake news.”⁸), Washington’s behavior did trigger a shift in European attitudes hitherto unseen: the EU’s envisioning of itself as a sovereign, autonomous or self-reliant pole independent of the US. In the summer of 2019, the European Council’s Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 noted that “in a world of increasing uncertainty, complexity and change, the EU needs to pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act

⁵ “Donald Trump: European Union is a foe on trade”, *BBC News*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44837311>.

⁶ Maria Demertzis and Gustav Fredriksson, “The EU Response to US Trade Tariffs”, Bruegel Intereconomics, 2018, <https://www.bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/EU-Response-US-Trade-Tariffs.pdf>.

⁷ “U.S. Downgraded E.U.’s Diplomatic Status (but Didn’t Say Anything)”, *The New York Times*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/world/europe/eu-us-diplomatic-status.html>; “Pompeo Questions the Value of International Groups Like U.N. and E.U.”, *New York Times*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/04/world/europe/pompeo-brussels-speech.html>.

⁸ “EU Leaders Respond As ‘Friends’ After Trump’s ‘Foe’ Remarks”, *Radio Free Europe*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-eu-friend-foe-tusk-timmermans/29366996.html>.

autonomously to safeguard its interests, uphold its values and way of life, and help shape the global future.”⁹

The impact of the pandemic

The pandemic did not create an opportunity to review the underlying causes of the pre-existing tensions; as a result, relations developed along the same lines as in the pre-COVID era. In addition to his attacks on China, President Trump blamed the EU’s “failure to take the same precautions” for “a large number of new clusters in the United States”.¹⁰ On 12 March, the US imposed travel restrictions on passengers coming from the Schengen area—a move the EU criticized as taken “unilaterally and without consultation”.¹¹ Although surprising, the move followed the same pattern as other decisions taken pertaining to Europe, with an absence of consultation and accompanied by incendiary rhetoric. By the summer of 2020, the US proved to be one of the worst-hit countries in terms of cases and mortality. It also suffered severe economic impacts, with 30 million new unemployment insurance claims filed in the first six weeks of the pandemic and a 9.5% contraction in GDP.¹² Perhaps unsurprisingly, outrage exploded in May 2020 over the killing of an African-American citizen by a police officer. In the subsequent clashes, President Trump threatened the application of the Insurrection Act, a law authorizing the use of military force against civilian unrest.¹³

⁹ European Council, “A new strategic agenda for the EU: 2019-2024”, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/#group-EU-in-the-world-zh3uey0ErW>.

¹⁰ New Atlanticist, “Trump hits out against Europe in coronavirus speech: The transatlantic alliance suffers”, *Atlantic Council*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/trump-hits-out-against-europe-in-coronavirus-speech-the-transatlantic-alliance-suffers/>

¹¹ “Coronavirus: Trump suspends travel from Europe to US”, *BBC News*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51846923>.

¹² Sophia Chen, Deniz Igan, Nicola Pierri, and Andrea F. Presbitero, “Tracking the Economic Impact of COVID-19 and Mitigation Policies in Europe and the United States”, *IMF Working Paper*, July 2020, file:///C:/Users/fgaub/Downloads/wpica2020125-print-pdf.pdf.

¹³ “What Is the Insurrection Act of 1807, the Law Behind Trump’s Threat to States?”, *The New York Times*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/insurrection-act.html>.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2020 the US continued to escalate tensions with Europe, including on issues that preceded the pandemic. With regard to China, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged it to choose “between freedom and tyranny” while adding that “democracies that are dependent on authoritarians are not worthy of their name”.¹⁴ The decision to withdraw 12,000 troops from Germany, where they were seen as a deterrent force against Russia, was perceived as another blow to transatlantic cooperation. As President Trump stated: “We spend a lot of money on Germany, they take advantage of us on trade and they take advantage on the military, so we’re reducing the force... They’re there to protect Europe, they’re there to protect Germany, and Germany is supposed to pay for it... We don’t want to be responsible anymore.”¹⁵ In July, Europe was threatened, once more, with tariffs, after it had proposed ways to find a commonly acceptable solution in May.¹⁶ More generally, President Trump repeated his statement that the EU had been established to “take advantage of the United States.”¹⁷

In contrast to previous years, Europe responded strongly to some of these provocative statements. HR/VP Borrell called American leadership “weak”, adding: “They were not at all prepared to face the problem and now they are seeing the consequences.”¹⁸ When in July 2020 the EU issued a list of states from which travel was banned until further notice, the inclusion of the US was seen as payback for the unilateral ban on European travelers in March.¹⁹ While this might have very well been for sanitary rather

¹⁴ Mike R. Pompeo, Secretary of State, “Europe and the China Challenge”, Speech at the Virtual Copenhagen Democracy Summit, June 19, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-at-the-virtual-copenhagen-democracy-summit/>

¹⁵ “US to withdraw nearly 12,000 troops from Germany in move that will cost billions and take years”, *CNN*, July 29, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/29/politics/us-withdraw-troops-germany/index.html>.

¹⁶ “Trump threatens EU, China tariffs over lobster duties”, *Euractiv*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/trump-threatens-eu-china-tariffs-over-lobster-duties/>

¹⁷ “Trump says the European Union was ‘formed in order to take advantage of the United States’”, *Business Insider*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.fr/us/donald-trump-says-european-union-formed-take-advantage-united-states-2020-7>.

¹⁸ Andrew Rettman, “EU bluntly criticises US handling of pandemic”, *EU Observer*, April 21, 2020, <https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/148130>.

¹⁹ “Cracks in the Trump-Europe relationship are turning into a chasm”, *CNN*, July 4, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/04/europe/trump-europe-relationship-intl/index.html>.

than political reasons, the way the decision was communicated certainly displayed a new assertiveness in European diplomatic behavior.

In the second half of the year the US was absorbed by its presidential election campaign. COVID-19 affected the elections in a variety of ways: 46% of voters are estimated to have cast votes by postal ballot to avoid contact at voting stations.²⁰ At the time of the elections the US was experiencing another surge in cases but refrained mostly from implementing restrictions. Reactions to the pandemic were also mirrored in politics: voters supportive of President Trump (who had caught the virus in October but recovered within a week) were less concerned with the pandemic and generally content with the President's handling of the economy. Supporters of his opponent, Democrat Joseph Biden Jr., tended to be much more concerned about the pandemic and to have suffered personally from it.²¹ Biden won the election and Trump's attempts to contest the result did not change the outcome.

What does this mean for Europe?

The behavior of President Trump and his administration during the pandemic led to a new focus among Europeans on notions of self-reliance, sovereignty and autonomy. In his concluding remarks to the European Council in April 2020, President Charles Michel noted that "it is of utmost importance to increase the strategic autonomy of the Union"—a statement repeated in the European Commission's communication that outlined a way out of the crisis.²² In June 2020, the EU defense ministers agreed to develop a 'Strategic Compass' for security and defense, a document that

²⁰ Pew Research Center, "The voting experience in 2020", November 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/11/20/the-voting-experience-in-2020/>

²¹ "Exit Polls Showed the Vote Came Down to the Pandemic Versus the Economy", *The New York Times*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/03/us/politics/exit-polls.html>.

²² European Council, "Conclusions of the President of the European Council following the video conference of the members of the European Council", April 23, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/04/23/conclusions-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-video-conference-with-members-of-the-european-council-on-23-april-2020/>; European Commission, "Europe's moment: Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation", May 27, 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0456&from=EN>.

would synthesize the threats facing Europe and the ambitions and needs of European defense. Although the trend towards more European self-reliance preceded the pandemic, Washington's attitude during the crisis clearly precipitated this process.

The change of administration following the presidential elections is unlikely to reverse this reflection process or lead to a return to pre-Trump transatlantic relations. In fact, while a Biden White House is likely to bring back a more cordial and diplomatic tone, it is expected that the new president's demands on European defense, and his attitude towards China, will be much the same as those of the Trump presidency. This means that for Europe, cooperation with the United States can only be deepened if its own strategic self-reliance is strong.

More trouble: Russia and the eastern neighborhood and the Western Balkans

Pre-pandemic trend

Up until 2014, Russia was considered a partner to the EU, albeit a difficult one. Although it cooperated on a range of issues such as trade, energy and climate change, Russia's position on a host of issues stood in stark contrast to that of the EU. The first cracks became apparent at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, when the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, lamented the domineering—and negative—role of the US and its allies in world politics.²³ In 2011, then as prime minister, Putin described the Libya intervention by NATO allies as a “crusade”.²⁴ Following the 2013 chemical attacks in Syria he cautioned strongly against an American strike in retaliation, instead mediating the removal of the arsenal under the supervision of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).²⁵

²³ “Putin Says U.S. Is Undermining Global Stability”, *The New York Times*, February 11, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/world/europe/11munich.html>.

²⁴ “Putin likens U.N. Libya resolution to crusades”, *Reuters*, March 21, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-russia/putin-likens-u-n-libya-resolution-to-crusades-idUSTRE72K3JR20110321>.

²⁵ “A Plea for Caution From Russia”, *The New York Times*, September 11, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html>.

What was seen as Russian de-escalation and mediation would, however, later pave the way for a string of actions that would propel Russia back onto the world stage as a global actor on a collision course with the EU.

In 2014, Russia annexed parts of Ukraine. A year later, it sent military support to the Syrian government, and embarked on an outreach campaign across the Middle East and North Africa that led it to first support Libya's Khalifa Haftar politically, and later with military assistance in the shape of the Wagner Group, a private militia.²⁶ At the same time it became increasingly prolific in the use of cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, most famously during the American presidential election campaign of 2016, but also the French presidential elections of 2017. Russian campaigns are not just focused on elections; they are part of a broader effort to shape public opinion abroad and undermine democracy and the rule of law in the US as well as in Europe.²⁷ Just before the Brexit referendum, 150,000 Russia-tied Twitter accounts posted both pro-Brexit and pro-EU membership messages—suggesting the campaign aimed at sowing division.²⁸ Meanwhile, RT and Sputnik posted 261 articles with anti-EU messages, reaching up to 134 million viewers.²⁹ Evidence of Russian interference in domestic political affairs elsewhere in Europe has also accumulated over the past few years, from the Baltic States to the Netherlands and France. Meanwhile, Russia has grown closer to China.³⁰ The two countries align their positions

²⁶ “Russian Snipers, Missiles and Warplanes Try to Tilt Libyan War”, *The New York Times*, November 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/middleeast/russia-libya-mercenaries.html>.

²⁷ See for example: Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, “Putin’s asymmetric assault on democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US national security”, January 10, 2018, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>; House of Commons, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, “Disinformation and ‘fake news’: Final Report”, February 14, 2019, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcmumed/1791/1791.pdf>.

²⁸ Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate “Putin’s asymmetric assault on democracy in Russia and Europe...”, op.cit.

²⁹ European Parliament, Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, “Disinformation and propaganda - Impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States” February 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU\(2019\)608864_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU(2019)608864_EN.pdf).

³⁰ Alice Ekman, Sinikukka Saari and Stanislav Secrieru, “Stand by me! The Sino-Russian normative partnership in action”, *EUISS Brief* no. 18, EU Institute for

in multilateral fora, share similar perspectives on domestic unrest at home and abroad, and conduct ‘diplomacy by numbers’: their circle of ‘friends’ is already reaching majority-levels in many UN bodies. During a state visit in 2019, President Xi called Putin his “best friend” and the two agreed to double trade over the coming five years, particularly in sectors such as energy, industry and agriculture.³¹

At the same time, Russia’s neighborhood saw an increase in violence. In Ukraine, where it occupies the Crimean peninsula and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, violent incidents increased by 12% in the year preceding the pandemic, indicating an escalatory trend.³² While Russia signaled readiness to make concessions on Donbas, a closer look revealed underlying intentions that were irreconcilable with Ukrainian stability and territorial integrity.³³

In the years before the pandemic, the Western Balkans’ prospects for EU membership appeared to have receded. Terms such as ‘democratic backsliding’ and ‘state capture’ described worrying developments in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republic of North Macedonia.³⁴ Declining freedoms, collusion with criminal networks and increasing corruption over several years has led to a gradual erosion of progress, dampening hopes for accession to the EU or NATO.³⁵ In 2018, the Sofia Summit declaration remained vague on the accession perspective, with

Security Studies, August 2020, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/stand-me-sino-russian-normative-partnership-action>.

³¹ “Xi Jinping’s Visit to Russia Accents Ties in Face of Tensions with U.S.,” *The New York Times*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/05/world/europe/xi-jinping-china-russia.html>.

³² Roudabeh Kishi, Mel Pavlik and Sam Jones, “Year in Review: The armed conflict location and event data project 2019”, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 2020, https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2020/03/ACLED_AnnualReport2019_WebVersion.pdf.

³³ Karen Madoian, “Devil in the detail: local versus regional approaches to peace in Donbas”, *EUISS Brief* no. 2, EUISS, February 2020, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/devil-detail-local-versus-regional-approaches-peace-donbas>.

³⁴ European Commission, “Key findings of the 2016 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, November 9, 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_16_3634.

³⁵ Marko Čeperković and Florence Gaub (eds.), “Balkan futures: Three scenarios for 2025”, *Chaillot Paper* no. 147, EUISS, August 2018, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_147%20Balkan%20Futures.pdf.

European leaders such as the French President voicing concerns over enlargement generally. While the European Commission was in favor of initiating membership talks with Albania and (what has since become) North Macedonia, member states did not follow suit. The growing influence of Russia, directly aimed at undermining the possible accession of Western Balkan states to the EU, became particularly visible in the rise of disinformation campaigns and the sponsoring of separatist and incendiary rhetoric.³⁶

The impact of the pandemic

EU-Russia relations remained largely the same during the pandemic—that is, not particularly good. Unsurprisingly, Russia embarked on a disinformation campaign as soon as the crisis unfolded, targeting European states. French and German content produced by Russian outlets highlighted the weakness of democratic institutions and civil disorder in Europe. It also pushed anti-American narratives to Spanish-speaking audiences across the Americas.³⁷ President Putin claimed that Russian handling of the virus was superior to the US, and, like China, credited Russia's political system with its "success"—although the veracity of Russian case numbers has been contested.³⁸ Russia went ahead with a constitutional referendum allowing Putin to stay in power until 2036, and—despite a spat over the Vladivostok celebrations—signaled further rapprochement with China.³⁹ At the beginning of the crisis Putin took a stance against criticism of China's handling of it, calling "the attempts by some people to smear China" on

³⁶ Stanislav Secieru, "Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical wins, strategic setbacks", *EUISS Brief* no. 8, July 2, 2019, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russia-western-balkans>.

³⁷ Katarina Rebello et al, "Covid-19 News and Information from State-Backed Outlets Targeting French, German and Spanish- Speaking Social Media Users", University of Oxford, Oxford Internet Institute, 2020, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/covid19-french-german-spanish/>

³⁸ "Putin says Russia's handling of coronavirus is superior to U.S.", *Reuters*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-russia-cases/putin-says-russias-handling-of-coronavirus-is-superior-to-u-s-idUSKBN23L07U>.

³⁹ "Putin wins right to extend his rule until 2036 in landslide vote", *Politico*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-wins-right-to-extend-his-russia-rule-until-2036-in-landslide-vote/>

the origin of the virus “unacceptable.”⁴⁰ Xi and Putin promised to fight “unilateralism” together and support each other in their respective paths of political development.⁴¹ Meanwhile, the pandemic has not led to social unrest in Russia—with the exception of some online activity—although its economy has contracted by 6%.⁴² As in other states, restrictive measures temporarily affected some human rights such as freedom of movement and privacy, but several other measures are permanent, such as the March 2020 law on ‘fake news’ that allowed measures that target activists, journalists, bloggers and politicians disseminating information considered false by the government.⁴³ In August, Russia surprised the world by announcing the first COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik V. But concerns over its safety, efficacy, and production meant that it met with a cool reception from the start. By November 2020, Russia, too, was experiencing another surge in cases.

In Donbas and the eastern regions of Ukraine the pandemic appeared to induce a slight decrease in violent incidents—but this is likely the effect of lockdown measures rather than an indication of a positive change in attitudes or behavior on the part of the conflict parties.

This assumption is further substantiated by developments in Belarus in August 2020. Following the contested presidential elections, protests erupted that were met with force by the government. While France, Germany and the EU urged restraint, President Putin warned against foreign interference, thereby effectively supporting Alexander Lukashenko—Russia’s long-time ally in power—who has ruled the country for over a quarter of a century. Russia’s activity in Libya also intensified during the pan-

⁴⁰ Chen Qingqing and Yang Sheng, “X-Putin call shows joint stance against politicising pandemic”, *Global Times*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1185880.shtml>.

⁴¹ “Xi Jinping tells Vladimir Putin: China and Russia should stand firm against unilateralism”, *South China Morning Post*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3092395/xi-tells-putin-china-and-russia-should-stand-firm-against>.

⁴² World Bank, “Russian Economy Faces Deep Recession Amid Global Pandemic and Oil Crisis, Says New World Bank Report”, July 6, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/07/06/russian-economy-faces-deep-recession-amid-global-pandemic-and-oil-crisis-says-new-world-bank-report>.

⁴³ International Partnership for Human Rights, “Human rights impact assessment of the COVID-19 response in Russia”, August 2020, <http://afew.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Covid-19-RU-upd.pdf>.

demic, with 14 warplanes deployed in May and violence further escalating throughout the summer.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, in Azerbaijan the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh flared up after years of a stable ceasefire.

In the Western Balkans, Russia and China used the pandemic to expand their foothold in the region: the aid that Beijing and Moscow delivered to Serbia and the Serbian part of Bosnia-Herzegovina⁴⁵ was accompanied by aggressive disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting the EU. The US, in turn, exploited the crisis in Kosovo⁴⁶ to push for negotiations with Serbia. But countries in the region also used the pandemic for nation-branding purposes: both Serbia and Albania sent equipment and doctors to Italy in March and April.⁴⁷ The Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic, severely criticized the EU—calling European solidarity a “fairy tale”⁴⁸—for allegedly banning medical exports even though the Commission quickly explained that this was not the case.⁴⁹ Soon the EU launched an ambitious €3.3 billion financial rescue package, consisting of €38 million in funds for the health sector, access to EU instruments and medical equipment (including Western Balkan countries in the joint procurement of medical equipment), €750 million in macro-financial assistance, and €1.7 billion in preferential loans by the European Investment Bank. In addition, the European Commission announced an Economic and Investment Plan

⁴⁴ “Russia expands war presence in Libya”, *Deutsche Welle*, May 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-expands-war-presence-in-libya/a-536236666>.

⁴⁵ Maxim Samorukov, “Ventilator diplomacy in the Balkans”, Carnegie Moscow Center, July 8, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/2020/07/08/ventilator-diplomacy-in-balkans-pub-81895>.

⁴⁶ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

⁴⁷ “Vucic: ‘Italy has always offered open support to Serbia on its path to the EU’”, *Euractiv*, April 27, 2020, https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/vucic-italy-has-always-offered-open-support-to-serbia-on-its-path-to-the-eu/

⁴⁸ “Serbia turns to China due to ‘lack of EU solidarity’ on coronavirus”, *Euractiv*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/serbia-turns-to-china-due-to-lack-of-eu-solidarity-on-coronavirus/>

⁴⁹ European Western Balkans, “Export of medical equipment not banned by EU, member states decide on authorisation”, March 17, 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/17/export-of-medical-equipment-not-banned-by-eu-member-states-decide-on-authorisation/>

that was subsequently launched in October, as well as the start of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia.

While the EU is by far the region's largest partner—not only in terms of aid but also trade, which adds up to €43 billion annually⁵⁰—its communication efforts could have been better. A poll in March showed that 39.9% of Serbians thought that most COVID-19 aid came from Beijing, followed by 17.6% who thought it came from the EU and 14.6% who thought it came from Russia. Communication and information in general pose a challenge in the region: since the pandemic, conspiracy theories have skyrocketed, harming institutional trust and damaging already fragile democracies.⁵¹ But even before the pandemic hit, a majority in the region were of the opinion that disinformation is a problem.⁵²

What does this mean for Europe?

While the crisis did not open an opportunity for new relations between Russia and the EU, the rapprochement of Russia and China is a trend that will likely have negative implications. This concerns particularly their joint action in multilateral fora where the pair are already aligning to promote their geopolitical agenda. In July, they both vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution that would have extended aid deliveries to Syria, arguing that rather than transiting through Turkey, these provisions should be delivered by the Syrian government. Russia also continues to expand its presence in Europe's neighborhoods, both east and south, countering EU efforts to promote peace in Syria, Libya and Ukraine. Emboldened by its relationship with China, Russia is likely to intensify these activities.

In the Western Balkans, the pandemic left the EU struggling with a rather negative image, especially in the early days of the crisis. At the same time, China and Russia seized the opportunity to promote themselves—

⁵⁰ Vesko Garcevic, "Russia and China are penetrating Balkans at West's expense", Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), August 18, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/18/russia-and-china-are-penetrating-balkans-at-west-s-expense/>

⁵¹ Marija Djoric, "Growth in conspiracy theories risks undermining democracy in Balkans", *Balkan Insight*, August 14, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/14/growth-in-conspiracy-theories-risks-undermining-democracy-in-balkans/>

⁵² International Republican Institute, "Western Balkans regional poll, February 2 2020 – March 6 2020", https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final_wb_poll_deck_for_publishing_1.pdf.

and their system of governance—during the crisis. Although the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, stated that “we have a special responsibility to assist in this pandemic our partners in the Western Balkans, as their future clearly lies in the European Union,”⁵³ public perception of the EU in the region appeared to be somewhat negative. While surveys have indicated that the share of the population wishing to join the EU is 50% in Serbia, 63% in Montenegro, 74% in North Macedonia, 93% in Kosovo and 76% in Bosnia-Herzegovina, these numbers appear to be declining. The EU financial package has been viewed by some in the region as the EU “throwing money at a problem at the expense of its values and promises”—a sentiment that reflects a wider discontent with the EU’s attitude to the region, which is sometimes perceived as opportunistic.⁵⁴

The crisis has therefore exposed some of the most contentious elements of the EU’s approach to the region. For instance, a campaign countering disinformation is clearly necessary but insufficient due to the limited use of social media in the region (between 15% and 23%).⁵⁵ Similarly, the EU could consider including the Western Balkans in its Green Recovery plan. In its efforts to diversify supply chains, the EU could find important trading partners in the Western Balkans. For instance, critical mineral borates can be found in Serbia and platinum deposits in Albania.⁵⁶

Conclusions

In a survey conducted by the EU Institute of Security Studies, authors of all 17 papers that were written about how COVID-19 is going to change the world came to the same conclusion: it will accelerate the existing trends,

⁵³ European Commission, “Western Balkans’ leaders meeting: EU reinforces support to address COVID-19 crisis and outlines proposal for post-pandemic recovery”, April 29, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_777.

⁵⁴ Vanja Mladineo, “Could COVID-19 poison the EU’s relations with the Western Balkans?”, Friends of Europe, May 27, 2020, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/could-covid-19-poison-the-eus-relations-with-the-western-balkans/>

⁵⁵ International Republican Institute, “Western Balkans regional poll, 2 February 2020 – 6 March 2020”, op.cit.

⁵⁶ “Europe joins the global scramble for critical minerals”, *Reuters*, September 7, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/eu-metals-ahome/rpt-column-europe-joins-the-global-scramble-for-critical-minerals-andy-home-idUSL8N2G13WK>.

keeping China and the United States on a collision course. China suddenly showed its true face.

That sparked off a whole debate on strategic sovereignty or strategic autonomy—the real change that has happened is that for the first time in its history, the European Union is beginning to consider a world where it has no allies outside the European continent. This is not to say this will lead to a divorce with the US, but a profound sense of strategic loneliness is becoming a real thing one can feel everywhere in Brussels.

For Europe the real challenge is to understand who it wants to be in the future, what it wants its contribution to the world to be, and it cannot be just the rule of law and good governance. It has to stand up and fend for itself, and that is a challenge it will have to take up otherwise there is a real risk that it will become the Switzerland of the world; nice to visit but ultimately not important.

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NATO's Eastern Flank: The Focus on Long-Range Precision Fires

NATO's deterrence and defense posture has been underpinned by viable military reinforcement from not only continental European members, but also from across the Atlantic¹. While NATO stresses that it maintains a 360-degree security approach, the Alliance could not ignore the erosion of existing international treaties which, coupled with Russia's expansionist behavior, shifts attention to NATO's Eastern Flank². Sensing the vulnerabilities along this front, NATO continues to assure its members that its defense and deterrence posture remains credible, coherent, and resilient, while pledging to maintain the full range of capabilities necessary to ensure security in this region. Such a strategic imperative is achieved through the Alliance's increased responsiveness, heightened readiness, and improved

¹ NATO, "Brussels Summit Declaration, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11-12 July 2018", Press Release (2018) 074, August 30, 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm.

² As per NATO's 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO's Eastern Flank is characterized as the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Poland, and Romania. See NATO Public Diplomacy Division, "Warsaw Summit Key Decisions", Fact Sheet, 2017, p. 1, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_02/20170206_1702-factsheet-warsaw-summit-key-en.pdf.

reinforcement. NATO has adapted to the threat Russia poses vis-à-vis the Allies' strategic objectives by demonstrating a clear focus on modernizing mechanisms and capabilities for collective defense³. In the context of NATO's Eastern Flank, this consists of land forces operating in a combined arms capacity, meaning synchronous, if not synergistic, employment of fires and maneuver. However, due to Europe's operating environment, Allied air and sea power face considerable challenges in projecting precision strike capabilities to support maneuvering forces on land⁴.

This chapter aims to further examine the role of Long-Range Precision Fires (LRPF) within NATO's defense and deterrence strategy, focusing on the United States and Russia. LRPF allow military forces to rapidly penetrate and disintegrate adversary defensive capabilities and provide extended range and lethality overmatch at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels⁵. Russia is undergoing a LRPF and nuclear modernization in line with its new assertive national security strategies, and the Russian military demonstrated significantly superior fires capabilities in the war in Donbas in 2014⁶. The exposure of this capability gap calls into question the credibility of NATO's deterrence strategy. With the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019⁷, the technological

³ IISS, *The Military Balance 2019: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defense Economics* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 70.

⁴ K. Hicks, L. Samp, O. Olikier, J. Rathke, J. Mankoff, A. Bell, and H. Conley, *Recalibrating U.S. Strategy Toward Russia: A New Time for Choosing* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. 110, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170329_Hicks_USStrategyTowardRussia_Web.pdf?PHeYffp2ZLh9ZiFy7s99TukdFvRdWRLX.

⁵ Army Futures Command, "Long Range Precision Fires Cross-Functional Team", US Army, 2019, <https://armyfuturescommand.com/lrpf/>. While LRPF lack a uniform or standardized definition, herein LRPF is defined as precision land-based surface-to-surface artillery and missile capabilities at ranges not exceeding a medium-range ballistic missile of 3000 km. See US Army, *Weapon System Handbook 2018* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army (Acquisition, Logistics and Technology), 2018), p. 408, <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/533115.pdf>.

⁶ US DIA, "Russia Military Power - Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations", 2017, p. V, <https://www.dia.mil/portals/27/documents/news/military%20power%20publications/russia%20military%20power%20report%202017.pdf>.

⁷ NATO, "Statement by the North Atlantic Council on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty", August 2, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_168164.htm?selectedLocale=en.

and tactical potential of long-range fires are only now just beginning to be understood, and are, in turn, threatening to upend the traditional balance of power in the Baltic-Black Sea regions and jeopardize NATO's defense and deterrence strategies.

US Forces

The United States, as the guarantor of NATO's credibility, responded to Russia's brazen annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine with the European Reassurance Initiative, which was later renamed the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) in 2017⁸. Crucially, the EDI rotates three to four US Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) to Europe every nine months⁹. The EDI includes heavy forces with artillery capabilities, without which NATO would be incapable of effectively deterring a potential Russian attack¹⁰. These forces operate under the US's Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR). Commanded by a forward-stationed US division headquarters in Poznan, Poland, OAR US combined arms forces reinforce Allies in Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania to conduct military exercises and training. OAR's core maneuver combat power is an armored brigade supported with 15 Paladin howitzers¹¹.

The EDI also consists of vital pre-positioned capabilities. For example, in November 2019 NATO contracted the construction of a Long-Term Equipment Storage Maintenance Complex facility in Powidz, Poland where equipment for a single US Army armored BCT will be pre-positioned. This would include an artillery squadron of 18 Paladin

⁸ European Parliament, "European Deterrence Initiative: the transatlantic security guarantee", 2018, p. 1, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625117/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)625117_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625117/EPRS_BRI(2018)625117_EN.pdf).

⁹ US Army Europe, "Operation Atlantic Resolve", Fact Sheet, November 20, 2020, https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/Portals/19/documents/Fact%20Sheets/Atlantic%20Resolve%20Fact%20Sheet%2011202020.pdf?ver=y-f6OsHSTWescboM_LA1w%3d%3d.

¹⁰ W. Schroeder, *NATO at Seventy: Filling NATO's Critical Defense Capability Gaps* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council - Scowcroft Center for Security and Strategy, 2019), p. 12, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/NATO_at_Seventy-Filling_NATOs_Critical_Defense-Capability_Gaps.pdf.

¹¹ US Army Europe, "Operation Atlantic Resolve". The M109A6/7 *Paladin* is a tracked, self-propelled, armored 155 mm cannon capable of striking targets 30-70 km away. See: US Army, *Weapon System Handbook 2018*, op. cit., p. 104.

self-propelled howitzers¹². Forward-deploying US artillery units would use these Paladins in the event of a conflict along NATO's Eastern Flank. While the US continues pre-staging its equipment and ammunition in Europe, NATO still "has a critical shortage of stockpiled munitions to the extent that its guns would fall silent within days of operations commencing at scale"¹³. NATO concurs that a sufficient provision of precision munitions is necessary for enabling its combat operations. To remedy this, NATO aggregates and harmonizes individual munition requirements in order to lower acquisition costs and achieve cost savings through multinational warehousing, an approach that offers greater flexibility for its logistical requirements¹⁴.

In support of its national interests, the US permanently stations forces in Europe in line with NATO strategic objectives of deterring aggressors, reassuring Allies, and enabling a rapid response force¹⁵. In November 2018, the US Army reactivated the 41st Field Artillery (FA) Brigade in Grafenwoehr, Germany. Prior to this, there were only two US light artillery battalions permanently based in Germany with limited LRPF potential, fielding 105 mm and 155 mm towed howitzers¹⁶. The 41st FA employs the M270A1 Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) and the M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) between two FA battalions¹⁷. Certification of the 41st FA's capabilities within NATO's de-

¹² M. Szopa, "Powidz - A New US Army Base. Polish-German Consortium to Work on the Largest NATO Investment Ever," *Defence24*, November 20, 2019, <https://www.defence24.com/powidz-a-new-us-army-base-polish-german-consortium-to-work-on-the-largest-nato-investment-ever>.

¹³ J. Watling, "By Parity and Presence: Deterring Russia with Conventional Land Forces," *RUSI Occasional Paper*, July 2020, pp. 49-50, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/by_parity_and_presence_final_web_version.pdf.

¹⁴ NATO, "NATO's capabilities," July 6, 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49137.htm.

¹⁵ J. Glasser, "Withdrawing from Overseas Bases: Why a Forward-Deployed Military Posture Is Unnecessary, Outdated, and Dangerous," *Policy Analysis* No. 816, Cato Institute, July 18, 2017, https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/withdrawing-overseas-bases-why-forward-deployed-military-posture#_idTextAnchor000.

¹⁶ M. Berberia, ed. "The 2018 Red Book," *Fires*, January-February 2019, p. 15, <https://sill-www.army.mil/fires-bulletin-archive/archives/2019/jan-feb/jan-feb.pdf>.

¹⁷ US Army Europe, "41st Field Artillery Brigade," <https://www.41fab.army.mil>. The HIMARS is a wheeled light multiple rocket or missile launcher, and the MLRS

terrence and reinforcement strategy came through exercise Rapid Falcon in November 2020. Rapid Falcon was a bilateral, joint training event between the US and Romania that demonstrated the US's ability to rapidly reinforce NATO's Eastern Flank with LRPF at a moment's notice. During Rapid Falcon, the 41st FA fired HIMARS rockets from Romania into the Black Sea during a joint mission known as HIMARS Rapid Infiltration, or HI-RAIN, which involved rapidly deploying LRPF, firing quickly, and then immediately returning to their home station¹⁸.

To coordinate the US Army's European-based artillery units, new Theater Fires Commands will be soon be established. These high-level headquarters will allow the US and NATO to better combat the security challenges posed by Russia¹⁹. Theater Fires Commands are an important element of the US Army's new doctrine of Multi-Domain Operations, where successful achievement of strategic objectives comes primarily from deterrence. Should that fail, the Army uses long-range precision strike capabilities to disable enemy anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) systems²⁰. Therefore, in order to effectively target and strike Russian forces in the event of a conflict, US Army BCT commanders will need LRPF coordinated through the specialized, technical, and tactical support of a Theater Fires Command²¹.

The Alliance also benefits substantially in terms of knowledge sharing and training along its eastern flank from the US's State Partnership Program (SPP), a supporting element of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) strategy. The US's primary operational reserve component, the US National Guard, establishes direct bilateral security cooperation programs with

is the tracked version with twice the firing capacity, both capable of striking targets up to 300 km away. See US Army, *Weapon System Handbook 2018*, op. cit., pp. 82, 102.

¹⁸ US Army Europe and Africa, "US Army Europe to conduct exercise Rapid Falcon in Romania", Press Release, November 13, 2020, <https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/ArticleViewPressRelease/Article/2413738/press-release-us-army-europe-to-conduct-exercise-rapid-falcon-in-romania/>.

¹⁹ A. Feickert, *The Army's Aim Point Force Structure Initiative*, Congressional Research Service, IF11542, May 8, 2020, p. 2, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF11542.pdf>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²¹ S. J. Freedberg, Jr., "Army Rebuilds Artillery Arm For Large-Scale War," *Breaking Defense*, April 27, 2020, <https://breakingdefense.com/2020/04/army-rebuilds-artillery-arm-for-large-scale-war/>.

the militaries of partner nations, with the goal of developing and maintaining important security relationships in support of common, long-term strategic interests²². Starting in 1993, the program targeted ex-Soviet and former Warsaw Pact nations, with Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia partnering with Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, respectively. Romania maintains a strong SPP relationship with Alabama²³. The Illinois-Poland SPP is an important part of the deterrence and reassurance strategy along NATO's Eastern Flank and is considered one of the most robust and successful security partnerships in Europe²⁴. The SPP creates a vital conduit for integrating existing and improving future LRPf capabilities between Allies²⁵ considering that more than half of US artillery resides in the National Guard²⁶.

To further advance US-NATO LRPf proficiency and readiness, the US Army carries out the artillery-centric exercise Dynamic Front (DF). This joint, multinational, annual training event combines all of the US's European based artillery forces with those of 27 other countries, firing simultaneously from Germany, Latvia, and Poland²⁷. DF is essential for NATO's multinational fires interoperability at the operational and tactical levels: it refines NATO doctrine, serves as a critical think tank and testing ground for NATO's LRPf, and is revitalizing the Army's Theater Fires Commands²⁸. DF nests into Exercise Defender Europe, another annual operational exercise that deploys nearly 20,000 US troops to Europe. Defender Europe further tests the US's ability to reinforce Allies with artil-

²² J. L. Lengyel, "Securing the Nation One Partnership at a Time", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Fall 2018, p. 3, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/Portals/31/Documents/J-5/InternationalAffairs/StatePartnershipProgram/Securing-the-Nation-One-Partnership-at-a-Time.pdf>.

²³ Alabama National Guard, "State Partnership Program", State of Alabama, <https://al.ng.mil/ALABAMA/Pages/StPartnrshpPgm.aspx>.

²⁴ J. L. Lengyel, op. cit., p. 7.

²⁵ M. Berbera, op. cit., p. 92.

²⁶ A. Feickert, *U.S. Army Long-Range Precision Fires: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, R46721, March 16, 2021, p. 29, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46721>.

²⁷ R. K. Gunther, "Bold developments in the Field Artillery. Why Exercise Dynamic Front (DF) and Artillery Systems Cooperation Activities (ASCA) matter!", *Fires*, September-October 2019, p. 51, <https://sill-www.army.mil/firesbulletin/archives/2019/sep-oct/articles/8.pdf>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

lery by deploying a stateside FA brigade to Europe to draw pre-positioned Paladins in Poland²⁹. DF and Defender Europe bolster NATO's deterrence objectives whilst deeper integrating LRPF capabilities among participating nations³⁰. Such operational exercises demonstrate the willingness and capacity of Allies to move assets quickly and at scale, thus underscoring the principles of deterrence and defense along NATO's Eastern Flank³¹.

NATO Forces

While the US maintains a robust precision strike arsenal, only a select few NATO members—the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Turkey—possess comparable capabilities. This operational disparity limits NATO's overall ability to leverage LRPF advantages along NATO's Eastern Flank in order to strengthen deterrence³². Despite this imbalance, NATO maintains a multitude of LRPF options through the Allied Land Command (LANDCOM) and its subordinate and partnering forces. LANDCOM exercises operational control of ground forces within NATO's assurance measures and forward presence activities along NATO's Eastern Flank³³. As of 2021, LANDCOM is a theater-level, multinational command responsible for the coordination and synchronization of NATO's land operations involving NATO's Graduated Readiness Forces (GRF), the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), the NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU), and the NATO Response Force (NRF)³⁴. LANDCOM ensures the readiness, interoperability, standardization, and competency of

²⁹ E. Frisell, R. Dalsjö, J. Gustafsson, J. Rydqvist (eds.), *Deterrence by Reinforcement: The Strengths and Weaknesses of NATO's Evolving Defense Strategy*, Swedish Defense Research Agency, November 2019, p. 32, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4843--SE>.

³⁰ US Army Europe Public Affairs Office, "DEFENDER-Europe 20", Fact Sheet, February 20, 2020, p. 1, <https://www.eur.army.mil/Portals/19/documents/DEFENDEREurope/DEFENDEREurope20Factsheet200224.pdf>.

³¹ J. Watling, op. cit., p. 53.

³² K. Hicks, L. Samp, O. Olikier, J. Rathke, J. Mankoff, A. Bell, and H. Conley, op. cit., p. 108.

³³ SHAPE Public Affairs Office, "Activities", NATO, <https://shape.nato.int/operations/activities>.

³⁴ LANDCOM Public Affairs Office, "Operations", NATO, <https://lc.nato.int/operations>.

these forces and their available LRP assets under NATO's defense and deterrence strategies³⁵. Within this structure, LRP are most readily available in the NRF, eFP, and the supporting Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) under the Multinational Corps North-East and the Multinational Division North-East command headquarters in Szczecin and Elblag, Poland, respectively.

A decisive element of NATO's strategy to defend its eastern flank is the eFP, a reinforcing deployment of four multinational battlegroups to the Baltics and Poland³⁶, which, combined with the tailored Forward Presence (tFP), fits into the larger NATO tripwire concept of deterrence by denial and punishment³⁷. Although NATO views the eFP principally as a political instrument, the Polish/Baltic host nations see a strong and necessary military dimension³⁸. The eFP trains and operates in concert with national home defense forces and is always present in the host countries. The eFP consists of roughly 4,500 troops led by four framework nations: Canada, Germany, the UK, and the US. Each framework nation receives support from other contributing Allies on a voluntary, fully sustainable and rotational basis, thereby offering myriad capabilities³⁹.

In December 2015, NATO established the Multinational Division South-East headquarters in Romania. This was in direct response to Russia's expanding military potential in the Black Sea region⁴⁰. As demonstrated in exercise Rapid Falcon, this command has the capacity—albeit limited—to facilitate artillery unit deployments to the southern segment of

³⁵ LANDCOM Public Affairs Office, "Mission", NATO, <https://lc.nato.int/about-us/mission>.

³⁶ NATO, "NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence", Fact Sheet, December 2018, p. 1, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_10/20191024_1910-factsheet_efp_en.pdf.

³⁷ K. Stoicescu and P. Järvenpää, *Contemporary Deterrence: Insights and Lessons from Enhanced Forward Presence* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defense and Security, 2019), p. 7, https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ICDS_Report_Contemporary_Deterrence_Stoicescu_Järvenpää_January_2019.pdf.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁹ JFC Brunssum Public Affairs Office, "Enhanced Forward Presence: Boosting NATO's Footprint In The East", *Northern Star*, August-September 2017, p. 4, https://g/jfcbs.nato.int/systems/file_download.ashx?pg=1900&ver=1.

⁴⁰ M. Fryc, *From Wales to Warsaw and Beyond: NATO's Strategic Adaptation to the Russian Resurgence on Europe's Eastern Flank*, *Connections*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Fall 2016), p. 51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26326459>.

NATO's Eastern Flank. Most importantly, they command the tFP tripwire deterrent. The tFP is built around the Romanian-led NATO Multinational South-East Brigade in Craiova, though the tFP's air and maritime forces are its substantive deterrent⁴¹. Operational since April 2017, the tFP land forces consist of 4,000 soldiers complemented by a separate deployment of 900 US troops⁴². The tFP, structured as a Romanian infantry brigade, is supported with an organic artillery battalion⁴³.

Neither the eFP nor the tFP would outright defeat or deny a Russian military incursion, but would rather trigger a unified collective operational response under NATO's Article 5 to usher rapid reinforcements from the NRF or VJTF. Validating this capability, the 2020 NRF rotation was led by Eurocorps, a multinational, rapidly deployable corps headquarters with around 1,100 soldiers from 10 nations⁴⁴. These forces synergize NATO's Framework Nations Concept (FNC) and Smart Defense strategy, and fortify NATO's tripwire deterrence and reinforcement strategies in support of collective defense operations. The Eurocorps framework nations of France and Germany, and the associate nations of Italy, Turkey, and Romania, greatly augment the NRF's potential. However, the large-scale employment of Russian LRF would seriously hamper the efficacy and speed of the NRF⁴⁵.

Central to NATO's tripwire deterrence strategy for the eFP are 5,000 troops comprising the VJTF, who would spearhead the NRF in the event of a crisis⁴⁶. The constituent forces of the NRF and VJTF rotate among

⁴¹ NATO, "Boosting NATO's presence in the east and southeast", January 21, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm.

⁴² J. Day, *Reinforcing NATO's Deterrence in the East*, NATO Defense and Security Committee, November 17, 2018, p. 5, https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2018-12/2018%20-%20DETERRENCE%20IN%20THE%20EAST%20-%20DAY%20REPORT%20-%20168%20DSC%2018%20E%20fin_0.pdf.

⁴³ IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, op. cit., p. 140.

⁴⁴ Eurocorps Headquarters Public Affairs Office, "Hand Over-Take Over NATO Response Force 2020", January 8, 2020, p. 3, https://www.eurocorps.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/BOOKLET_EC_HOTO.pdf.

⁴⁵ S. Boston, M. Johnson, N. Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Y. Crane, *Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), p. 11, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2402.html.

⁴⁶ W. Schroeder, op. cit., p. 15.

NATO's larger European members, and their high alert state of readiness enables crisis response within as little as 48 hours⁴⁷. The main role of the VJTF is to deter aggression and reassure Allies, but the inconsistency of the VJTF challenges LRPF credibility and capability. Operationally, the VJTF may be outnumbered, outranged, and outgunned in the event of a conflict, as Russia would foreseeably "achieve initial advantages in tanks (7:1), infantry fighting vehicles (5:1), attack helicopters (5:1), cannon artillery (4:1), long-range rocket artillery (16:1), short-range air defense (24:1), and long-range air defense (17:1)"⁴⁸.

The eFP may also be waning in resiliency and resolve. For example, in 2020 the 3rd Squadron from the US 2nd Cavalry Regiment assumed command and primary support of the eFP Battle Group in Poland, the 6th iteration since the eFP's inception. Unlike previous US eFP rotations that activated and deployed US-based units across the Atlantic, instead this American squadron moved from its permanent forward base in southern Germany, which brings into question the credible "enhancement" to deterrence through a temporary, lateral, eastward shift of combat power already stationed in Europe⁴⁹.

Despite NATO's collective operational safeguards, deterrents, and capabilities, nations constituting NATO's Eastern Flank must still maintain domestic defense capabilities in accordance with Article 3 of the Washington Treaty. "There is a direct causal relationship between NATO members having credible independent military capabilities and the capacity of the Alliance to bring those capabilities together in response to crises"⁵⁰. As part of credible deterrence, NATO members need sufficient domestic fires capabilities and cannot rely on reinforcements, since at the outset of conflict "the Alliance is likely to follow, not lead, its members"⁵¹.

⁴⁷ R. Allers and P. Hilde, "Is NATO ready?", *Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies Insights* No. 11, 2018, p. 5, [https://forsvaret.no/ifs/ForsvaretDocuments/IFS%20Insight%2011_2018_Is%20NATO%20ready%20\(003\).pdf](https://forsvaret.no/ifs/ForsvaretDocuments/IFS%20Insight%2011_2018_Is%20NATO%20ready%20(003).pdf).

⁴⁸ D. Shlapak and M. Johnson, "Outnumbered, Outranged, and Outgunned: How Russia Defeats NATO", *War on the Rocks*, April 21, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/outnumbered-outranged-and-outgunned-how-russia-defeats-nato/>.

⁴⁹ T. Hamlin, "3/2CR takes authority of eFP Battle Group Poland", US Army, January 22, 2020, p. 4, https://www.army.mil/article/231900/32cr_takes_authority_of_efp_battle_group_poland.

⁵⁰ J. Watling, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Russia's posture

Russia responded to the EDI and eFP by increasing its force structure opposite NATO's Eastern Flank, escalating military exercises, and augmenting its A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad⁵². What distinguishes Russia from NATO is its artillery-centric army⁵³. For example, a motorized Russian infantry brigade typically includes two self-propelled artillery battalions and a multiple rocket launcher (MRL) battalion, whereas a US BCT contains only one self-propelled artillery battalion. A main Russian maneuver effort would likely be supported by an equal or greater number of artillery units⁵⁴. Furthermore, whereas NATO doctrine employs artillery to enable its maneuver forces to gain territory and engage enemy forces, Russia employs maneuver forces to enable its artillery. As in Ukraine in 2014, Russian doctrine maneuvers enemy formations into a position for exploitation by massed conventional artillery. As the decisive arm of the Russian Army, massed conventional artillery presents the greatest threat to NATO's land forces⁵⁵.

After the US, Russia possesses the second highest number of nuclear weapons in the world, employed through three rocket armies operating silo and mobile launchers under their strategic command⁵⁶. Perniciously, all echelons of Russia's land forces include robust artillery and missiles that often outrange NATO equivalents⁵⁷. As of 2019, the Russian Army had over 4,000 artillery systems of varying calibers and models. Known LRPF threats include 144 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and some dual-capable, ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) like the 9M729

⁵² B. Fabian, M. Gunzinger, J. Van Tol, J. Cohn, and G. Evans, *Strengthening the Defense of NATO's Eastern Frontier*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019, p. 43, https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Stengthening_the_Defense_of_NATOs_Eastern_Frontier_WEB_1.pdf.

⁵³ Center for Strategic and International Studies, "King of Battle: The Future of Long-Range Precision Fires", streamed live on 18 July 2019, YouTube video, 19:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXC6iIq4Fac&fbclid=IwAR2y1PPe8EzRFFNxJquvORN_sI2WEGfzCWHpK0-5b_ZThDg_XIRP3v6wC9Y.

⁵⁴ B. Fabian, M. Gunzinger, J. Van Tol, J. Cohn, and G. Evans, op. cit., p. 13.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁶ IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, op. cit., pp. 195-196.

⁵⁷ B. Fabian, M. Gunzinger, J. Van Tol, J. Cohn, and G. Evans, op. cit., p. 13.

(SSC-8 Screwdriver)⁵⁸. Even the Russian Naval Infantry (Marines) and the Coastal Missile and Artillery Troops are supported by over 400 various self-propelled and towed artillery, MRLs and SRBMs⁵⁹.

Russia's military doctrine identifies LRPF as essential to its strategic deterrence but similarly sees it as a key external military risk, particularly considering NATO's military activity in the territories contiguous with Russia and its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) allies⁶⁰. Russia's goal is to offset US air superiority and capitalize on its traditional artillery advantage⁶¹. Evidencing this strategy, Russia's Western Military District bordering the Baltics and Poland has the highest density of Russia's most-capable ground and air forces, and fields substantial LRPF-capable units⁶². This includes two SRBM/GLCM brigades with Iskander-M's, and one SRBM brigade with Tochka-U's. In combat support, Russia fields three FA brigades and an MRL brigade. Therein also lies the Baltic Fleet which reinforces its naval infantry with an artillery brigade, and an SRBM/GLCM brigade that uses the Iskander-M⁶³. NATO's Baltic artillery forces are substantially overmatched in their present array as Russia holds a comparative advantage of 10:1 in self-propelled howitzers and 270:0 in MRLs⁶⁴.

Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast greatly exacerbates the threat to NATO's Eastern Flank. Should conflict arise, Russia sees Kaliningrad as key to achieving a rapid, coordinated coup de main via extensive artillery and LRPF to quickly accomplish campaign objectives and negate NATO reinforce-

⁵⁸ IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, op. cit., p. 197.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁶⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Russian Federation, "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, approved by the President of the Russian Federation on 25 December 2014", Press Release No. 2976, The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom, June 29, 2015, <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>.

⁶¹ M. Jacobson and R. Scales, "The United States Needs to get Serious about Artillery Again," *War on the Rocks*, October 6, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/the-united-states-needs-to-get-serious-about-artillery-again/>.

⁶² S. Boston, M. Johnson, N. Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Y. Crane, op. cit., p. 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 204. The *Iskander* is an SRBM with nuclear, electromagnetic pulse and thermobaric munition (aerosol bomb generating a high-temperature explosion) capabilities with considerable payload and a range unmatched by NATO SRBMs, thought to have violated the INF Treaty. See IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, op. cit., p. 174.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

ments⁶⁵. Russia uses the Kaliningrad Oblast to extend its offensive LRPF and A2/AD capabilities, which would restrict NATO's freedom of maneuver and air superiority. This enclave also gives Russia the geographic advantage to seize the Suwalki Gap and cut off the Baltics from any NATO land resupply⁶⁶. Owing to the strategic decisiveness of this isolated territory, Russia would likely consider effective Allied destruction of Kaliningrad's A2/AD as an existential threat to the entire state of Russia⁶⁷, in turn risking nuclear escalation in accordance with Russia's 2020 Nuclear Deterrence Strategy⁶⁸.

Russia's operational advantages extend beyond its current forces arranged along NATO's Eastern Flank. Not only are the NRF and VJTF overmatched, but the CSTO offers Russia a similar reinforcement capability with the Collective Operational Response Forces and Collective Rapid Reaction Forces⁶⁹. Russia has demonstrated its ability to leverage internal rail and road networks to mass combat forces, giving Russia a significant time-distance advantage in generating combat power from elsewhere within its borders during a crisis⁷⁰.

Belarus is a valuable asset to Russia's European theatre of operations. Russia remains Belarus' principal defense partner and trains regularly with Belarus and other CSTO allies⁷¹. Belarus' artillery and LRPF capabilities are extensive: it fields two artillery brigades in combat support of its mechanized maneuver brigades, with 569 artillery pieces. Belarus' special forces also field 24 towed 122 mm D-30's. Their Joint Force consists of one FA brigade, one SRBM brigade, and an MRL brigade in combat support with 96 conventional surface-to-surface missile launchers, in addition to fielding

⁶⁵ S. Boston and D. Massicot, *The Russian Way of Warfare: A Primer* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), p. 2, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE231.html>.

⁶⁶ M. Fryc, op. cit., p. 54.

⁶⁷ S. Boston and D. Massicot, op. cit., p. 6.

⁶⁸ Russian Federation, *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, Executive Order No.355, June 8, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_rp0fiUBmANaH&_101_INSTANCE_rp0fiUBmANaH_languageId=en_GB.

⁶⁹ CSTO, "From the Treaty to the Organization", <https://en.odkb-csto.org/25years/>.

⁷⁰ S. Boston, M. Johnson, N. Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Y. Crane, op. cit., p. 6.

⁷¹ IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, op. cit., p. 188.

112 artillery pieces, with 36 Smerch and four Polonez MRLs⁷². The Polonez is Belarus' indigenous LRPF modernization project⁷³. Moreover, being the eponymous Baltic neighbor of Belarus, the Polonez ostensibly offers an ominous warning given the range and lethality of this MRL, thereby complementing Russia's efforts to increase the Union State's (UnS) military capabilities relative to NATO's Eastern Flank. However, since Russia refuses to supply Belarus with Russian SRBMs, Belarus is reluctant to host any Russian Iskander-M units⁷⁴ and no longer fields tactical nuclear weapons⁷⁵. This does not imply that the UnS should maintain identical defense policies: on the contrary, Belarus has displayed a more nuanced interaction with NATO that suggests a greater degree of autonomy⁷⁶.

Adding weight to Belarus' role within Russia's sphere of influence was the major military exercise in 2017 called Zapad, or "West" in English. Russia tends to rehearse its eventual real-world deployments through such exercises, creating a fictitious pretext of NATO aggression against Belarus. This joint Russian-Belarusian exercise was the first of its kind since 2013, deploying thousands of Russian forces into Belarus and Russia's Western Military District, to include Kaliningrad⁷⁷. Zapad 2017 took place despite NATO's post-2016 reassurance efforts, and more importantly, demonstrated Russia's capacity for heavy combined arms operations⁷⁸. Despite Russia's obfuscation regarding its activity when participating in Zapad 2017, Belarus remained relatively transparent and in line with the mandates in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) for NATO observers⁷⁹. This may prove important in assessing the evolving LRPF capabilities in the UnS in the next iteration of Zapad in 2021, which will likely see larger and more intensified Russian conventional military deployments to Belarus⁸⁰.

⁷² Ibid., p. 189.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 183.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 180.

⁷⁵ D. Kimball and K. Reif, "The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) on Tactical Nuclear Weapons at a Glance", Arms Control Association, Fact Sheet, July 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/pniglance>.

⁷⁶ IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, op. cit., p. 179.

⁷⁷ J. Day, op. cit., 8.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, op. cit., p. 179.

⁸⁰ G. Barros, "Belarus Warning Update: Putin Intensifies Russian-Belarusian Military Integration", Institute for the Study of War, October 27, 2020, <http://www>.

Under the auspices of the UnS and Zapad, Russia integrates Belarus into its defense plans with invaluable access to the Suwalki Gap, a thin strip of land connecting Poland and Lithuania. This strategic corridor is an imperative choke point between Kaliningrad and Belarus that could interrupt the contiguous integrity of NATO's Eastern Flank⁸¹. Given that Russia holds regional military superiority in forces and assets along NATO's Eastern Flank, Russia could presumably disrupt effective NATO reinforcements to the region while simultaneously leveraging its A2/AD advantages to exploit the Suwalki Gap from Belarus. Seizure of the Suwalki Gap to reinforce Kaliningrad significantly undermines NATO's defense and deterrence strategy⁸².

Conclusions

Allied forces may be qualitatively and quantitatively superior to Russia at the strategic level, but Russia enjoys operational superiority across NATO's Eastern Flank, largely due to its military build-up of Kaliningrad⁸³. This operational primacy rests on Russia's advantages in artillery employment and LRPF. Military exercises like Zapad not only refine Russia's LRPF potential but they also serve as a platform for operations through the critical Suwalki Gap.

Russia's regional network of alliances adds ample reinforcements and access to NATO's Eastern Flank. However, the feasibility of Russia exploiting its alliances cannot be assumed, as there is little evidence that its strategically poised ally, Belarus, is preparing for direct confrontation with NATO⁸⁴. NATO's multinational exercises, deployments, and partnerships like OAR/EDI, DF, Rapid Falcon, Europe Defender, SPP, eFP, and tFP, test the logistical capacity and ability of participating nations, build interoperability with host nation resources, and ensure that NATO's overall

understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-putin-intensifies-russian-belarusian-military-integration.

⁸¹ J. Day, op. cit., p. 11.

⁸² K. Hicks, L. Samp, O. Oliker, J. Rathke, J. Mankoff, A. Bell, and H. Conley, op. cit., p. 103.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 102.

⁸⁴ IISS, *The Military Balance 2019*, op. cit., p. 179.

strategies maintain validity and relevance. Although this has definitively altered the balance of force calculations, NATO's tripwire deterrence forces remain insufficient when considering Russia's Baltic area advantages in forces, structure, and capabilities⁸⁵. The added nuclear dimension of Russia's forces in its Western Military District under a permissive Russian nuclear deterrence strategy warrants greater caution for Allied operations.

Due to NATO's limited forward presence on its eastern flank, its strategy to achieve credible deterrence is heavily predicated on rapid reinforcements from the VJTF, NRF, and the US's forward stationed forces⁸⁶. The scarcity of long-range precision strike weapons across the Alliance to suppress Russia's A2/AD threat in Kaliningrad aggravate already difficult challenges to gain indispensable air superiority necessary for the maneuver of Allied reinforcements⁸⁷. Moreover, NATO's operational planning for LRPF employment is prone to variation and inconsistency because of the rotating nature of NATO's tripwire deterrence forces. The disjointed amalgamation of Allied forces along its eastern flank risks an inferior operational disposition "for which the whole is less than the sum of its parts"⁸⁸, leading to "member states that cannot field forces at a sufficient scale to offer any meaningful battlefield effect"⁸⁹. As a result of the minimal and diverse domestic artillery platforms in the Baltic countries and the modest LRPF capabilities in Poland and Romania, NATO is unmistakably reliant on the US to shore up credible defense and deterrence.

⁸⁵ J. Day, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁸⁶ E. Frisell, R. Dalsjö, J. Gustafsson, J. Rydqvist (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁸⁷ K. Hicks, L. Samp, O. Olikar, J. Rathke, J. Mankoff, A. Bell, and H. Conley, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁸⁸ J. Watling, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

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Vaccinating the Alliance? – The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on NATO and Transatlantic Security

Introduction

This paper argues that the pandemic that has clearly caught the world by surprise has not changed everything in world affairs, but rather accelerated some processes on the domestic, regional and global levels. This also holds true for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its members, which means that the threats and uncertainties that NATO and the transatlantic community faced before the outbreak of the COVID-19 have deepened during the pandemic. Examples of this trend are already visible with regard to the backlash against western liberal democracy, persistent praise for populist ideas on both sides of the Atlantic, Russia's aggressive policy, the remorseless rise of China, and the instability of European neighborhoods in the east and the south. Consequently, the challenges to transatlantic security have become more daunting, whether they come from state or non-state actors, or whether they stem from the already existing internal fatigue within the Alliance. The key question is whether the transatlan-

tic community will be able to address these threats while simultaneously dealing with the domestic and international consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not only a question of how strong the transatlantic ties remain, but also whether they are strong enough to guarantee NATO's security initiatives after the "pandemic wave" is over.

As with every crisis still unfolding, it is nearly impossible to predict the real consequences the pandemic will have on transatlantic security. For this reason, this chapter does not attempt to foresee the future of transatlantic security in the aftermath of COVID-19, but rather to point to some essential challenges that NATO and the transatlantic community have already been facing given the nature of the existing threats and the specific outcomes of the pandemic.

Sick but not brain dead (yet)

It can be argued that even before the pandemic that hit the world in 2020, the state of transatlantic ties left much to be desired. Even though NATO displayed great potential for solidarity and cohesion directly after Russia's aggression on Ukraine in 2014, the year 2019 revealed that there were deep rifts between some allies as the new/old questions about cohesion and unity resurfaced. The Trump administration's skeptical approach to NATO and American allies in Europe did not help either, as Washington's unilateral and often unpredictable decision-making process caught transatlantic allies by surprise. This was particularly noticeable in the aftermath of the US withdrawal of troops from Syria and the subsequent Turkish incursion into Syrian territory. Subsequently, some European allies – including France and Germany – voiced their reservations about the leading US role in the Euro-Atlantic partnership¹. The most well-known criticism came from France's President Emmanuel Macron, who, in his widely commented interview for "The Economist", stated that NATO is "brain dead"

¹ Even before the US announcement of withdrawal from Syria, German Chancellor Angela Merkel voiced her concerns in May 2017 – in the context of Brexit and disillusion with the cooperation with the Trump administration – when she admitted: "The times in which we could completely depend on others are on the way out" and called on Europeans to take their destiny into their own hands", *BBC News*, May 28, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40078183>.

and that “European countries can no longer rely on America to protect its allies”². Mr. Macron undoubtedly pointed the finger at American partners, blaming them for the dire state of NATO as the United States (in this narrative) slowly turned its back on Europe (mostly the Trump administration, but also Obama and his ‘Pivot towards Asia’). And even though he was not the first European leader to raise concerns about the changing character of the transatlantic alliance, his criticism has quickly become one of the most potent media soundbites.

Fast-forward to January 2021, when Joe Biden takes the office of the president of the United States, and a noticeable change in the transatlantic climate could be observed, as on both sides of the Atlantic there is a new hope for a new opening between the US and its European allies. From the first days of the new administration, the messages reinforcing American commitment to NATO’s importance have been strong. In his first telephone conversation with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, President Biden stressed the United States’ commitment to the Alliance and its role in transatlantic security³. The overall mood regarding the recalibration of transatlantic relations has been optimistic, which clearly indicates that it is not only content but also style that matters in strengthening the Euro-Atlantic partnership. Yet it would be a mistake to expect that the change in the White House will somehow magically erase the obstacles and challenges that NATO has been facing, including the external and internal frictions that are rooted in global, regional and domestic developments. It can be argued that paradoxically, the hardest test for NATO and the transatlantic community will come from inside of the Alliance, as the current pandemic only magnified the threats to the unity and cohesion of NATO. In this context, Ken Booth’s assessment from 1975 still holds true: “The NATO edifice is threatened more by internal erosion than external explosion”⁴. As one pillar of NATO stands firmly in Europe, it will be equally important for the well-being of the Alliance to tighten up the cooperation between

² “Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain dead”, *The Economist*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>

³ NATO Secretary General speaks with US President Biden, January 26, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_180872.htm.

⁴ Ken Booth, “Security Makes Strange Bedfellows: NATO’s Problems from a Minimalist Perspective”, *The RUSI Journal* 1975, vol. 120, No. 4, p. 9.

the European Union and NATO, especially in times of internal crisis and austerity. As NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană pointed out in October 2020, “NATO-EU cooperation makes the world safer, and NATO and the EU need to continue to complement each other”. At the same time he acknowledged a striking unevenness in burden-sharing, as “80% of defense spending in NATO is by non-EU members, and yet 90% of the EU population live in a NATO member state”⁵. In the post-COVID-19 world this imbalance needs to be scaled down if these two natural partners wish to benefit from mutual cooperation.

Shock to the system

To claim that the wave of COVID-19 that swept across the globe in 2020 affected NATO and its member states would be an understatement. Only within the Euro-Atlantic realm the pandemic caused over 1.3 million deaths (as of February 2021), taking over 500.000 lives in the United States alone⁶. As the overall consequences of COVID-19 for the transatlantic security are yet to be understood, the staggering economic and political costs have already started to become visible as states on both sides of the Atlantic have struggled with keeping their economies stable and maintaining solidarity across national borders. Among the worrying outcomes of the pandemic, transatlantic partners will likely be affected by contracted economies (i.e. the output of “the euro area is expected to contract by 10.2% in 2020”) and increasing public debt, which definitely reshapes the perception of threats. Even at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic some experts listed defense in 14th place out of 20 priorities (in a similar survey in 2018, defense ranked 9th out of 20)⁷. As the third wave of

⁵ “NATO Deputy Secretary General stresses there is no substitute to the transatlantic relationship”, October 13, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_178677.htm.

⁶ Numbers cited in: COVID-19 situation update worldwide, as of week 6, updated 18 February 2021, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases>.

⁷ Pierre Morcos, “Toward a New “Lost Decade”? Covid-19 and Defense Spending in Europe”, *CSIS Brief*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/toward-new-lost-decade-covid-19-and-defense-spending-europe>.

the pandemic unfolds in most of the Western states in spring of 2021, the systemic damage to their economies will probably be even higher.

Even though pundits have been warning of the possibility of a pandemic sweeping the world for almost two decades, COVID-19 surprised and shocked most of the world, including the transatlantic allies⁸. It is telling that in this perspective the last NATO Strategic Concept of 2010 listed health risks as key challenges in the future security environment: “Key environmental and resource constraints, including health risks, climate change, water scarcity and increasing energy needs will further shape the future security environment in areas of concern to NATO and have the potential to significantly affect NATO planning and operations”⁹. This is also partly an answer to the question of why NATO, as an alliance, was (relatively well) prepared to maintain its function in the midst of the first wave of the pandemic even though many member states were severely hit (e.g., Italy, Spain and later the US). Commandingly, NATO maintained its military readiness and tackled the crisis by responding in two areas: ensuring continuity of its operations and establishing the NATO COVID-19 Task Force¹⁰.

Nevertheless, COVID could become the single most important crisis for NATO’s existence since the end of the Cold War. Its consequences seem to surpass those of 9/11, the Arab Uprisings and Russia’s invasion in Ukraine in 2014. What makes the current situation so complicated is the fact that none of these three challenges (global terrorism, instability in the Middle East, and a resurgent Russia) have disappeared. The pandemic seems to be so dangerous to the transatlantic community not because it has challenged the Alliance’s traditional ability to project security in the transatlantic realm, but precisely because NATO has not been created

⁸ Laurie Garrett, “The Next Pandemic?,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2005.

⁹ “Active Engagement, Modern Defense: Strategic Concept for the Defense and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” NATO Lisbon Summit, November 2010, https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf.

¹⁰ Due to the COVID-19 threat, some NATO trainings and activities scheduled for 2020 were limited or redesigned, including BALTOPS and DEFENDER-Europe 20. See: Giovanna De Maio, “NATO’s response to COVID-19: Lessons for resilience and readiness,” Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., October 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/FP_20201028_nato_covid_de-maio-1.pdf.

to address such non-military and non-traditional threats. So far, some of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for transatlantic security include: 1) severe economic crisis (of yet unknown magnitude) that will surely affect transatlantic security as NATO member states would struggle to maintain, if not increase, the military budgets they agreed before the pandemic. As the GDPs of member states are projected to decrease, so will real defense spending; 2) a growing need to balance military readiness with public expectations to address non-military threats including public health security. It is expected that nationalistic and often populist sentiments will increase as societies severely hit by the pandemic will focus more on domestic issues; 3) Consequently, debates about threat perception and the coherence of the Alliance will only be intensified as a result of COVID-19. As individual human security is receiving more and more attention, the traditional approach to military security might be challenged further by politicians and societies in most of the NATO member states; 4) Finally, disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks originating from states that are hostile towards NATO and its members might have a greater impact on transatlantic societies, as the pandemic exposed another vulnerability to Euro-Atlantic unity.¹¹

Mutating threats and the future of transatlantic security

As indicated above, it is essential to highlight that there are no preexisting threats to transatlantic security that will disappear once the health crisis is over. Whether it is the climate crisis, a resurgent Russia, a rising China, foreign or domestic terrorism, none of those threats has waned because of

¹¹ The European Commission warned of the disinformation campaigns, acknowledging that “we have also seen a systemic attack on Europe and our member states, promoted for instance by pro-Kremlin media about how badly we are dealing with the crisis or even that the virus was spread by NATO or that 5G masts are helping to spread the virus”. Speech of Vice President Věra Jourová on countering disinformation amid COVID-19 “From pandemic to infodemic”, December 4, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/speech_20_1000. See also: Richard Weitz, “Assessing the Russian Disinformation Campaign During COVID-19”, International Center for Defense and Security, November 13, 2020, <https://icds.ee/en/assessing-the-russian-disinformation-campaign-during-covid-19/>.

the pandemic. It is rather our Western approach of addressing only one danger at a time that brings us this illusion that one major international event overshadows other factors. Whether it was the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the economic crisis of 2008, or the Arab Uprisings, none of these challenges has erased other threats that the Euro-Atlantic community faced. From this perspective, to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on the Alliance it might be useful to look into the challenges it was dealing with just before the pandemic hit the world at the beginning of 2020, and how they relate to the future obstacles NATO is bound to face.

Like a vaccination process, safeguarding the wellbeing of the transatlantic alliance is a daunting and multifaceted task that does not guarantee 100% immunity from the challenges that the Euro-Atlantic security environment is facing. This is true especially for the current global security environment, where the structure of the global order is no longer in favor of Western liberal democracies. As the 2020 Munich Security Forum Report underlined: “Far-reaching power shifts in the world and rapid technological change contribute to a sense of anxiety and restlessness. The world is becoming less Western. But more importantly, the West itself may become less Western, too”¹². This means that NATO and the transatlantic community will have to prepare itself to act in an increasingly different (and often hostile) strategic setting than it face in the first three decades after the end of the Cold War. Ultimately it also indicates that transatlantic security will be affected by a number of challenges that originate from outside of the traditionally understood NATO defense and deterrence posture. Definitely, COVID-19 and its consequences has been one such challenge.

NATO as a whole has already taken the first, necessary steps to ensure the security of its members in the time of the pandemic, while also working on maintaining readiness for current and future challenges. As the Alliance preserved its deterrence and defense role regardless of the problems caused by COVID-19, it also engaged in the transportation of medical supplies and equipment, and the building of field hospitals. At the same time there has been a growing and intensified debate within the Alliance about the most imminent challenges to NATO, including security of the eastern and southern flanks, Russia’s increasingly unfriendly behavior, the ongoing rise

¹² “Munich Security Report 2020: Westlessness”, https://securityconference.org/assets/user_upload/MunichSecurityReport2020.pdf.

of China's global ambitions, the climate crisis, and cyber security threats¹³. This strategic reflection process started even before the pandemic, during the December 2019 leaders meeting in London, and continued through 2022 – when, in June, the Secretary General launched the 'NATO 2030' initiative aimed at strengthening the Alliance in the highly unpredictable environments of the coming years. The above-mentioned efforts will likely be crowned by the completion and implementation of NATO's New Strategic Concept.

On a related note, the future NATO Strategic Concept would need to address a series of profound issues pertinent to the cohesion and well-being of the Alliance. First: China. How to deal with the rise of China? Should NATO become an actor that counterbalances Chinese influence in the transatlantic realm? If yes, to what extent and with what means? More importantly, how to build an intra-ally consensus about how to deal with China? Clearly, the so-called "Chinese question" is of vital strategic importance to the United States, still the most preeminent NATO member, so if NATO decides to downplay China's influence the US might not retain its interest in treating the Alliance as a pillar of its global strategy¹⁴. Second: Russia. How permanent is the crisis caused by Russia's unlawful invasion of Crimea and its attack on the eastern part of Ukraine in 2014? How consistently (and for how long) will NATO's answer be spearheaded by the enhanced forward presence and deterrence of Russia on the eastern flank of the Alliance? What is the road to ending an almost 7-year stand-off between NATO and Russia? Is NATO able to keep its unity against Russia's continuous attempts to break it by tempting some member states with closer cooperation (e.g. selling weapon systems to Turkey; finalizing the Nord Stream 2 deal with Germany; offering vaccines to Hungary and Slovakia)? As it seems clear that Russia has been increasingly relying on non-military means to challenge NATO and the West, the Alliance would

¹³ For details see: Jens Stoltenberg, "The Secretary General's Annual Report 2020", March 16, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_182236.htm.

¹⁴ According to a recent paper: "a stable Europe is a precondition for the US to marshal diplomatic, economic, and military resources to compete with China. This means that the US both seeks to ensure a favorable balance of power in Europe and to enlist European support in its rivalry with China". L. Simon, L. Desmaele, J. Becker, "Europe as a Secondary Theater? Competition with China and the Future of America's European Strategy", *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 2021, vol. 15, No. 1, p. 91.

need to adopt and develop its capabilities to fight disinformation, disruption, and cyberattacks at a time where the lines between peace and war have become ever more blurred¹⁵. Finally, in an era of limited resources the question of how to do more with less also needs to be addressed. One of the possible avenues to take is closer cooperation between NATO and the EU in the sphere of common security and defense interests. As it has been argued for years that these two organizations should be looking for closer cooperation, the consequences of COVID-19 could finally require mutual actions. In the words of Sven Biscop, “since both European Defense and the Transatlantic Alliance are churches with their zealous high priests and devoted believers” a sort of EU-NATO package deal (a Concordat) could and should be achieved¹⁶. The recurring question here is the willingness of the major powers in the EU and NATO to compromise and scale down their own ambitions in order to achieve this strategic deal. Paradoxically, despite all the differences between NATO allies in areas that range from defense spending, trade, climate change, energy policies, and the Iran nuclear deal, lately military cooperation within NATO has been quite successful. But this trend might not last if the Alliance does not address the above-mentioned challenges both on a conceptual and an implementational level¹⁷.

Conclusions

Out of all the transatlantic trends that have been mentioned above, it is safe to assume that retrenchment of the Euro-Atlantic world will continue at a steady pace. Therefore, the answer to the question about the short-term future of the transatlantic alliance lies predominantly in the way that the United States, Canada, and Europe will be able to rescue their societies from the threat of COVID-19, and simultaneously their ability to

¹⁵ Warren Chin, “Technology, war and the state: past, present and future”, *International Affairs* 2019, vol. 95, No. 4, p. 780.

¹⁶ Sven Biscop, “EU and NATO Strategy: A Compass, a Concept, and a Concordat”, *Security Policy Brief*, No. 141, March 2021, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2021/03/spb141-sven-concordat-final.pdf?type=pdf>.

¹⁷ Bogdan Klich, “NATO’s Stoltenberg paradox”, *The Strategist*, 8 Apr 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/natos-stoltenberg-paradox/>.

recover economically from its consequences. As Andrea Gilli argues “the mix of social, political, economic, and technological developments (...) suggests that in the years ahead, Western countries will have to pay increasing attention to domestic issues: to their societies, their economies, their industries, and their polities”¹⁸. Consequently, NATO and the transatlantic community will have to concentrate on doing rather more with less, which the Alliance was already trying to achieve before the pandemic. In more practical terms it would mean two things: enhancing the Alliance’s cooperation with the European Union while cutting ambitions to only the necessary activities on the fringes of NATO’s east and southern flanks. This might not be enough given the turbulence that could come from the High North, another immigration crisis, or China. So, taking the new realities of economic austerity and budget cuts into consideration, the security of the transatlantic region relies also on the readiness of its members (including NATO and non-NATO allies) to undertake actions that would balance the need to address existing threats with the available economic and military resources.

¹⁸ Andrea Gilli, “Microparasites and the age of bigness” [in:] Thierry Tardy (ed.), “COVID-19: NATO in the Age of Pandemics”, *NDC Research Paper*, No. 9, May 2020.