

COUNTRY CHAPTER ON THE UNITED STATES

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THE UNITED STATES DEBATES THE FUTURE OF NATO

Caroline FehI

Historically, the United States and NATO have been of critical importance to one another. To the United States, NATO has constituted one of the central pillars of the US-led post-war international order. Designed not only to defend and balance against the Soviet Union, but also to win European support for US liberal hegemony and for intra-European reconciliation and integration through a strategy of »institutional binding« (Ikenberry 2019: 12), it remained valuable to US interests and strategy even after the demise of the Warsaw Pact. To NATO, conversely, the United States was and is the most important ally. US national defence spending dwarfs that of other allies in absolute and relative terms, accounting for two-thirds of the alliance's overall defence spending and 3.4 per cent of US GDP (in 2019). The alliance also depends on the United States for 22 per cent of its budget and for key assets in areas ranging from intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance to ballistic missile defence (NATO 2021). Most critically, US nuclear weapons provide the backbone of NATO's nuclear deterrence posture. Furthermore, the United States traditionally staffs NATO's most important command post, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), who is double-hatted as the commander of the US European Command (EUCOM).

As a result of this material and organizational pre-eminence, positions and policy choices taken by US governments matter more to the alliance than those of any other individual member state. In this respect, the presidency of Donald Trump has left a divided legacy both for the organization and for his successor Joe Biden. While Trump's rhetorical attacks on NATO and contested troop withdrawal decisions have fuelled doubts about the strength of the US commitment to allies, his administration also exhibited continuities with past US policies in reinforcing US capabilities on NATO's Eastern flank through the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) (EUCOM 2020). Already on the campaign trail, President Biden affirmed his strong commitment to NATO as part of his foreign policy platform (Biden 2020a), as well as his intention to recommit the United States to bilateral and multilateral arms control and cooperation among democracies. Speaking at the 2021 virtual Munich Security Conference, he accordingly reaffirmed that »the transatlantic alliance is back«, promising to »keep faith with Article 5« (Biden 2021a). And yet, he will still have to manage transatlantic differences on issues ranging from burden-sharing to relations with Russia and China. And while Biden is determined

to revitalize US global engagement in general, and the transatlantic partnership in particular, he cannot ignore long-term structural shifts in US politics that have eroded the political centre and have lessened voters' appetite for global engagement (particularly military engagement) on both the left and the right. These realities are recognized, for instance, in a seminal report co-authored by Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan that sets out a »foreign policy for the middle class« (Ahmed et al. 2020). At the same time, the very fact that US foreign policy can fluctuate strongly with presidential terms complicates Biden's reengagement with allies, who are well aware that a future Republican president could quickly re-inflate the conflicts they faced during Trump's term. A critical question for both the United States and its NATO allies is thus whether Biden will be able, through a more systematic and thought-through effort, to set a course that will guide US foreign policy for years to come with regard to key challenges, ranging from climate change to the rise of China.

These complications and open questions notwithstanding, Biden's (partial) policy reversal on NATO is certain, for the coming four years, to bring US policy back in line with a strong bipartisan mainstream view of the alliance that prevails not only within the US government bureaucracy, military and Congress (Gould 2019), but also across the vast landscape of think tanks constituting the wider US expert community. This mainstream view is shared by major centrist institutes such as the Atlantic Council, the Brookings Institution, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, as well as by the progressive think tanks that carry most influence with the present administration, the Center for American Progress and the Center for a New American Security. It is characterized by a set of agreements: on China as the number one long-term security challenge; on Russia as a major threat to US national security and NATO as the primary tool for countering it; on the values of liberal democracy as the basis of the Atlantic alliance; and on the increasing relevance and diversity of non-military and non-traditional threats that need to be addressed, both within and outside NATO. While the mainstream is thus solidly Atlanticist, most pundits also agree on the need for greater European self-reliance as the United States continues the »pivot to Asia« initiated under Barack Obama, and for stronger European contributions to NATO burden-sharing.

And yet, former President Trump is not alone in positioning himself outside the mainstream. Both at US universities and think tanks, influential scholars and experts – particularly, but not only those placing themselves in the «realist» school of thought – are questioning conventional Atlanticist wisdom, such as the rationale for a continued US military presence in Europe, understanding NATO as a community of values, and hawkish policies vis-à-vis Russia.

THREAT PERCEPTIONS

While it is beyond the scope of this report to paint a full picture of the plethora of threats and challenges discussed by US security policy experts, a number of core agreements can be identified. These largely concur with the «4+1» formula coined by former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Joseph Dunford to identify the main threats to US national security (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2016): China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and the (more diffuse, hence «+») threat of violent extremism and terrorism (O’Hanlon 2020; see also Wood 2020: 215–236). The consensual nature and stability of this threat perception is also evidenced by the fact that the Biden Administration’s *Interim National Security Strategy* lists the exact same threats in identical order (Biden 2021b).

Among these widely agreed threats, the highest priority is China, which is now – in the words used by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at his Senate confirmation hearing – widely perceived as «the most significant challenge of any nation state to the United States» (Blinken 2021a: 15). Blinken’s promise to «approach China from a position of strength» (ibid: 16) is echoed in numerous think tank publications on the «China challenge» (Anonymous 2021; Ford/Goldgeier 2021; Kroenig/Cimmino 2020; see also Beckley/Brands 2021; Campbell/Doshi 2020). The growing regional and global assertiveness of Russia is a second point of broad agreement (Coffey/Mrachek 2020a; Weiss/Rumer 2020). As with China, however, influential voices also caution against an overly confrontational policy toward America’s former Cold War rival (see below). Third, Iran, North Korea and the problem of WMD proliferation linked to both countries are widely seen as significant threats to the United States and global stability, even though there is little agreement on how to respond to them (Catalano et al. 2020; Cordesman 2020; Mrachek et al. 2020; Jackson 2019). Violent extremism and terrorism (particularly jihadist) is still on the list of key threats for US experts and policymakers (Phillips 2020), but has recently declined in relative importance.

Cutting across the 4+1 issues, experts across the political spectrum agree on the ever-increasing importance of non-traditional (non-kinetic) threats, particularly cyber and hybrid threats (Bellasio/Silfversten 2020; Nelson/Perkovich 2020; Wheeler 2018). These threats are seen as emanating from non-state actors, but also from governments, including China and Russia (Polyakova/Boyer 2018). Furthermore, the trend toward «democratic backsliding» both within and outside the West is perceived as an increasingly serious security issue by large parts of the US foreign policy establishment

(Kendall-Taylor 2019; Katz/Taussig 2018) and has been flagged as a key challenge by President Biden, but is viewed differently by a sizeable conservative minority (see below). The Interim NSS highlights this problem even before addressing the list of more conventional threats, warning that «democracies across the globe, including our own, are increasingly under siege» (Biden 2021b: 7). Lastly, the NSS also captures a broader trend in the US foreign policy establishment in describing pandemics, climate change and other environmental and societal risks as part of the «global security landscape» and as forming part of the «biggest threats» (ibid.).

RUSSIA

«Geography still matters. Russia—NATO’s largest, most militarily capable neighbor—remains NATO’s principal external challenge» (Burns/Lute 2019). This statement by former US NATO ambassadors Douglas Lute and Nicholas Burns, put forth in a report for the Harvard Belfer Center on the occasion of NATO’s 70th anniversary, captures the predominant view of the US foreign policy community, which understands Russia as NATO’s principal «raison d’être» (Goldgeier/Martin 2020). At the same time, the statement that «geography matters» can also be interpreted as a characterization of the US perspective on NATO: unlike Europeans looking to NATO for the military defence of their homelands, US policymakers and experts discuss the Atlantic alliance from a geographical distance as an organization dealing with US interests in one specific world region. As far as the US mainstream view is concerned, NATO’s business is the «territorial defense and the maintenance of stability in Europe» (Moreland 2019), and Russia is the single most important threat to that business. Accordingly, discussions about NATO are closely intertwined (albeit by no means identical) with broader debates about the bilateral US–Russia relationship.

Both with regard to the nature of the Russian threat and with regard to advisable responses within and outside NATO, three broad perspectives can be distinguished in the landscape of US think tanks.¹

The first, and by far most influential perspective can be characterized as both Atlanticist and deterrence-focused. In this perspective – widely shared by policymakers on both sides of the aisle – Russia is a «revisionist» or «revanchist» power bent on «undermin[ing] the security order that emerged in Europe after the Cold War» (Colby/Solomon 2016; Herbst 2020; see also Vershbow/Breedlove 2019; Daalder 2017; Schmitt 2018). This revisionist impulse should be met with resolve rather than attempts to «accommodate» Russia (Fried/Vershbow 2020). As a study published jointly by several major US think tanks put it: «Some argue that such demonstrations of strength would be provocative. We

¹ While these perspectives do not represent ideological camps with fixed borders, and individual experts at times combine positions attributed here to different perspectives, they nevertheless represent visible argumentative clusters in the US debate.

believe Western weakness would be more provocative« (Binnendijk et al. 2016).

For NATO, this means, in the first place, strengthening deterrence particularly on its Eastern flank. While this demand is fairly consensual at a general level, pundits are by no means agreed on what a stronger deterrence posture would look like in practice. Largely in line with NATO's current strategy of »deterrence by rapid reinforcement«, an Atlantic Council report (Vershbow/Breedlove 2019) proposes qualitative and quantitative reinforcements of US and NATO conventional forces that should be made on a rotational basis (with some additional permanent elements, such as headquarters) or just outside former Warsaw Pact territory. This cautious reinforcement is intended to avoid divisions over the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which commits NATO to carrying out its mission without »permanent stationing of substantial combat forces« (ibid.; similarly Binnendijk et al. 2016). In contrast to this approach, analysts such as Elbridge Colby at the Center for a New American Security (Colby and Solomon 2015) or David Shlapak and Michael Johnson at the RAND Corporation (Shlapak/Johnson 2016) advocate a strategy of »deterrence by denial«, proposing to permanently station significantly stronger conventional forces in Poland and the Baltics.² The aim of this force posture is to make a quick Russian land grab in the Baltics (a »fait accompli« – see below) hard enough to deter such an aggression in the first place.³

Beyond the Baltics, analysts highlight the need for the alliance to »set NATO's sights on the High North« (Danoy/Maddox 2020). Warning against the threat of a »Russian A2/AA [A2/AD] bubble along the Alliance's Northern flank«, they argue that »[t]he question [...] is not whether NATO should be actively engaged in Arctic issues, but rather what is to be the form of that engagement« (ibid.: 76–77). Proposals under discussion range from diplomatic engagement with Russia – for instance, by working on a military code of conduct for the Arctic through the NATO-Russia Council – to the establishment of a NATO Arctic Command, Arctic Rapid Reaction Force, and investment in icebreaker capabilities.

In addition to reinforcing deterrence, Atlanticist deterrence advocates generally favour continuing NATO's open door policy vis-à-vis countries aspiring to membership, and »standing strong in the face of Russian intimidation« aimed at preventing a further expansion of the alliance, rather than granting Russia a »veto« over alliance policy (Farkas 2015; see also Coffey/Mrachek 2020b; Montgomery 2019). While acknowledging that NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia may need to remain on the back burner for some time to come,

they advocate a more proactive NATO policy to »boost both partners' deterrence capacity and reduce Moscow's ability to undermine their sovereignty« (Vershbow 2020: 69). Such a policy could include the provision of military capabilities, a permanent NATO presence at Ukrainian and Georgian training centres, and common exercises on Ukrainian and Georgian territories.

As already mentioned, US discussions about NATO policy toward Russia are closely intertwined with debates about bilateral US–Russian relations. In these broader debates, Atlanticist deterrence advocates support providing bilateral »lethal assistance« to Ukraine – a policy already advocated by Joe Biden when he was Obama's vice president – as well as maintaining and expanding economic sanctions, in response to both Russian aggression in Crimea and human rights violations committed in the country and against dissidents abroad (Vershbow 2020). Importantly for Germany, this includes sanctions against the Nord Stream II project, long considered a »bad deal for Europe« by Joe Biden (Gardner/Hunnicut 2021). Under pressure from Senate Republicans threatening to derail senior Biden appointments, Secretary of State Blinken renewed these sanctions threats against the »Russian geopolitical project intended to divide Europe and weaken European energy security« (Blinken 2021b). These threats notwithstanding, the administration has waived congressional sanctions on German companies for the time being. A durable compromise, however, may yet require the German government to agree to strict safeguards that would prevent Russia from politically exploiting the pipeline, including a »snapback« mechanism (Stelzenmüller 2021).

In contrast to the hard-line positions that dominate the US discourse on Russia, a second cluster of analyses offered by US think tanks describe the Russian threat in more nuanced terms and place somewhat greater hopes in cooperation, while also insisting on strong deterrence and an Atlanticist stance. At Brookings, for instance, Michael O'Hanlon and Steven Pifer agree on the need to (moderately) reinforce NATO's deterrence posture in the Baltics (O'Hanlon/Skaluba 2019; Pifer 2019a), but also caution against steps that would squander cooperative opportunities with Russia. More boldly, O'Hanlon (2017) argues that NATO expansion has gone too far and proposes negotiating a new security architecture for Eastern Europe, with a belt of »permanently neutral« states separating NATO and Russia. Rejecting claims that the United States or the West are »on the brink of a Cold War« with Russia (or China) (O'Hanlon/Zeigler 2019), he calls for the United States and NATO to prepare measured, non-escalatory responses to scenarios involving small-scale and/or hybrid Russian aggression, lest they be drawn into an involuntary great-power conflict (O'Hanlon 2019). Closer to the mainstream, Pifer rejects the idea of a neutral buffer zone as inappropriate and impracticable, and supports both NATO's open door policy and lethal aid to Ukraine, but also advocates a temporary compromise formula that Ukrainian NATO membership should happen »not now, but not never« (Pifer 2019b). He also differs from Russia hawks in demanding that sanctions be »closely coordinated with allies, and clearly messaged«, promising sanc-

2 Based on a series of wargames, the RAND report famously concluded that seven brigades were needed to effectively deter Russian aggression in the Baltics, although not all of these would need to be forward deployed (Shlapak/Johnson 2016).

3 Colby and Solomon (2015: 43) argue that a stronger permanent presence would still remain under the threshold of the Founding Act, although they also question whether the political conditions stipulated in the Founding Act are still in force, given Russia's recent aggressions.

tions relief in return for clearly specified cooperative behaviour (Pifer 2020a).

At the Woodrow Wilson Center, Russia analyst Michael Kofman echoes O'Hanlon in rejecting the idea of a »Cold War« with Russia, pointing to Western »over-extension« as having contributed to tense relations (Marcus 2018). With regard to deterrence, he questions both NATO's current deterrence posture and a »deterrence by denial« strategy aimed at preventing a Russian »fait accompli«. Stating that »[y]ou can have the prospect of NATO expansion eastward [or] deterrence by denial, but not both«, he argues that even a substantial permanent NATO presence in the Baltics would be unable to effectively deny a Russian attack, while also crossing the red line of the Founding Act and risking provoking the Russia aggression it seeks to deter. The logical consequence is »deterrence by punishment«, a strategy relying on the threat of both horizontal and vertical (including nuclear) escalation in response to a Russian attack (Kofman 2016a, b).

Looking further North, Russia experts at the CSIS see the Arctic as »a positive outlier in a receding list of areas where U.S.-Russia engagement is cooperative«, while also criticizing both Moscow's enhanced military presence and NATO's responsive measures as having contributed to an unhealthy »securitization« of the region (Newlin et al. 2020). Although there is now broad agreement that the Alliance should discuss Arctic issues and »conduct the occasional large exercise like Trident Juncture«, experts such as David Auerswald at the US National War College caution that, for the time being, »NATO itself should play a very limited, direct role in the Arctic« and that »[t]o do more risks weakening alliance unity and needlessly antagonizing Russia« (Auerswald 2020).

Some of the analyses and proposals endorsed by cooperation-focused Atlanticists (see also Haass/Kupchan 2021; Newlin et al. 2020) are echoed in a recent open letter calling for a »rethinking« of US Russia policy under the Biden administration. In this document published by *Politico*, six prominent authors and a long list of co-signatories argue that »America's current mix of sanctions and diplomacy isn't working« (Gottemoeller et al. 2020). While recognizing that Russia »complicates, or even thwarts« US foreign policy, they contend that a »mix of competition and cooperation« is possible, and urge a return to normal diplomatic relations, a »balanced commitment to deterrence and détente« pursued through strategic dialogue, renewed cooperation on arms control, and an easing of sanctions in return for Russian cooperation. With regard to Europe, the letter calls for the United States to »remain firm« in support of allies, while also considering »measured and phased steps forward« to improve the relationship with Russia.

Interestingly, the list of signatories to the letter – which prompted an immediate response from a more deterrence-focused group (Kramer 2020) – also includes scholars at both universities and think tanks that diverge from the Atlanticist bent of the first two perspectives in taking a NATO-sceptical stance. This small but vocal group of schol-

ars, which includes self-identified »realists« and libertarians, as well as isolationists from the left of the political spectrum, tend to see NATO's expansionism, rather than Russia's, at the heart of present tensions. Accordingly, they argue that granting Russia its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe would moderate, if not resolve, the West's and the United States' conflict with Moscow (for example, Ashford 2016b; Beebe 2019; Carpenter 2019a; Mearsheimer 2014; Shiffrinson 2021; Walt 2018). As Cato Institute fellow Doug Bandow (2019) puts it, »if Moscow had expanded the Warsaw Pact to Latin America, engineered a coup in Mexico City, and offered to bring that nation into an anti-American alliance, Washington would have been equally displeased« (Bandow 2019). While some of this criticism is shared by cooperation-oriented Atlanticists (see above), scholars in this last group are much more radical in declaring NATO ultimately superfluous, an »outdated alliance« (Bandow 2019), an »anachronism« (Walt 2018) and a »dangerous dinosaur« (Carpenter 2019b). Pointing both to what they perceive as an exaggeration of the Russian threat and to Europe's economic capabilities, NATO sceptics conclude that »Europe can defend itself« (Posen 2020; see also Posen 2019) and that the United States should turn over responsibility for deterring Russia to Europeans, at least in the medium to long run.

CHINA

While NATO occupies a central place in discussions about US–Russia relations, it is more peripheral to the extensive debate about the United States' »China challenge«. This debate is marked by a broad agreement on China as a key foreign and security policy threat and an increasing convergence of pundits across the political spectrum on competitive policies vis-à-vis the rising power.

At the conservative end of the spectrum, getting tough on China is supported by clear majorities among voters (Silver et al. 2020), pundits (Anonymous 2021; Beckley/Brands 2021; Brands/Cooper 2019, 2021; Carafano et al. 2020; Mattis et al. 2021; Schmitt 2019; Zakheim 2021), and policymakers. Despite some initial flirtation with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Trump and the vocal China hawks in his administration turned up the pressure both on China itself and on US allies viewed as being too soft on China.

Joe Biden, during his campaign to replace Trump, took on board much of the latter's China rhetoric, and his administration's early public clashes at bilateral US–China talks and determination to enlist Quad members India, Japan and Australia in a »show of unity against Beijing« (Sevastopulo/Kazmin 2021) confirm his intention to continue down a competitive path. However, Democrats and liberal pundits are not unified around hard-line positions. As Brookings scholar Thomas Wright highlights, the question of how to deal with China is central to a broader split within the Democratic Party between »restorationists«, who argue for a return to an Obama-style balance between cooperation and competition, and »reformists«, who »see China as the

[Biden] administration’s defining challenge and favour a more competitive approach than Obama’s» (Wright 2020).

The latter, more influential group includes key Biden administration appointees who previously worked for the Obama administration and/or liberal think tanks: National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan (Campbell/Sullivan 2019); Kurt Campbell (Campbell/Ratner 2018), formerly at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) and now Asia-Pacific coordinator on the National Security Council; Rush Doshi, formerly at Brookings and now senior China coordinator at the NSC; and Ely Ratner (Ratner et al. 2019), formerly at CNAS and now chief principal adviser on China matters to Secretary of Defence Austin.

A second group of liberal-leaning pundits, while not disagreeing with the magnitude of the challenge, places much stronger emphasis on the need for continued and even enhanced US–Chinese cooperation. At Brookings, Jeffrey Bader (2020) cautions that China is »a strategic competitor, not an enemy«, echoing an »open letter« published previously by a group of scholars from the Wilson Center, Carnegie Endowment and Harvard and Yale universities in the *Washington Post* (Fravel et al. 2019) and co-signed by Bader and many other US think tank experts. Bader’s Brookings colleague Michael O’Hanlon – in line with his position on Russia – warns against getting involved in a major power conflict with China over Taiwan and other regional conflicts (O’Hanlon 2019). Thom Woodroffe at the Asia Society Policy Institute points particularly to the problem of climate change as an area in which cooperation with China is not only feasible and necessary but also supported by the American public (Noisecat/Woodroffe 2021). These and further proposals for US–Chinese cooperation were collected and elaborated in a 2020 Brookings report (Hass et al. 2020).

The most radical dissent with the dominant China hawks is articulated by libertarians such as Ted Carpenter at the Cato Institute, who argues that the United States and its Western partners need to accept China’s sphere of influence and »dial-back their insistence that all nations, even great powers, adhere to the principles of a U.S.-led liberal, rules-based, international order« (Carpenter 2019a).

Diverging general perspectives on China also entail different assessments of NATO’s role in dealing with the rising power. On one hand, it is clear that all US alliances, NATO included, will be affected in one way or another by the fact that China tops the list of US foreign policy priorities; on the other, this does not imply that NATO is necessarily seen as a centrepiece of US China policy.

Libertarians such as Carpenter (2019a) point to diverging US and European interests on China to question NATO’s overall rationale. At the other end of the spectrum, many centrist and liberal Atlanticists advocate »enlisting NATO to address the China challenge« (Nietsche et al. 2020). A group from CNAS, for instance, contend that Chinese policy, while not directly threatening NATO, has the potential to disrupt alliance cohesion. They advocate deepening and institutionaliz-

ing cooperation with allies in the Indo-Pacific, including through an »Indo-Pacific Council«, and recommend both joint and NATO exercises in the region (Nietsche et al. 2020). Similarly, an Atlantic Council report envisages NATO as the »node of a network to counter CN hostile activities«. By developing its bilateral relations with Asian partners into a more institutionalized »Atlantic-Pacific Partnership«, the authors argue, NATO should »take the lead in becoming the necessary strategic counterweight to China’s rise«. In their view, a coordinated response of NATO as an alliance of democracies would enjoy greater global legitimacy as a US-led response to China (Hildebrand et al. 2020; see also Brzezinski 2020; Kroenig/Cimmino 2020). At the same time, engaging China through NATO is seen as opening windows for cooperation, for instance through the establishment of a »NATO-China Council« modelled after the NATO-Russia Council (Brzezinski 2020). According to all of these scholars, China’s challenge and NATO’s response are only in part about traditional military capabilities; cyber threats and Chinese global »influence operations« necessitate close allied cooperation on issues such as 5G network security and an expansion of NATO’s seven »baselines for resilience« (Hildebrand et al. 2020; similarly Nietsche et al. 2020).

Situated in between NATO sceptics and NATO enthusiasts is a group of pundits who argue that NATO should »cautiously pivot towards China«, building up partnerships with East Asian democracies but serving as a forum for discussion and coordination rather than taking immediate action on non-military issues, such as 5G network security (Goldgeier/Martin 2020; see also Coffey/Kochis 2020: 17–18; Ford/Goldgeier 2021). Arguing that »Russia must remain the main focus of NATO«, they suggest tying NATO allies into a broader »Atlantic strategy« toward China that goes beyond NATO’s geographical borders, and argue that »the U.S. should help to forge agreement inside the Alliance on what role, if any, NATO should play in dealing with Beijing, helping to create a united front that cannot be easily exploited« (Carafano et al. 2020). At Brookings, Lindsey Ford and James Goldgeier (2021) see the need for »frank discussions« about what could and what could not be expected of European NATO allies in hypothetical military crisis scenarios involving Beijing. At the same time, they point to »tradeoffs« associated with a more prominent European role in the Indo-Pacific, arguing that regular European deployments in the region could »detract« from NATO’s core tasks.

PROJECTING STABILITY IN THE SOUTH

As discussed above, China and Asia are increasingly perceived as key challenges for NATO that will compel the alliance to adopt a more global outlook. This represents a remarkable discursive shift from discussions on »global NATO« in the 2000s (for example, Daalder/Goldgeier 2006), which revolved largely around terrorism and instability in the global South, particularly in the Middle East region. In this earlier, post-Cold War and post-9/11 perspective, terrorism, state failure and humanitarian crises were seen as not only presenting direct and severe threats to the allies, but also as re-

quiring military out-of-area interventions. These interventions, US policymakers and pundits agreed, would be less costly and more legitimate if undertaken by a multilateral alliance than unilaterally by the United States alone.

In today's US discussions about NATO, these issues have lost salience. In part, this is due to a re-evaluation of the terrorist threat confronting the United States, and of the strategy of addressing both terrorism and other sources of instability through military interventions. With the »war on terror« approaching its twentieth anniversary, some experts note that »jihadi-linked terrorism« appears to be »on the decline« (Byman 2018) and that terrorist threat assessments have been »inflated« (Thrall/Goepner 2017), while others feel the need to caution that the terrorist threat is »not finished« (Travers 2020). With regard to interventions, both conservative and liberal scholars argue that past foreign missions designed to eradicate terrorism, to protect civilians and to bring lasting stability to the key Middle East region have largely failed (for example, Kupchan 2021; Stelzenmüller 2020; Thrall/Goepner 2017). As Charles Kupchan at the Council on Foreign Relations puts it, »unnecessary wars of choice« across the Middle East region have »produced little good«; remaining US interests in the region, including counterterrorism, can be achieved through diplomatic means or »surgical military operations« (Kupchan 2021). Brad Stapleton at Cato agrees, evaluating NATO's own out-of-area missions in Afghanistan and Libya as a »major mistake« that have failed to stabilize both countries, while also provoking Russia by casting doubt on NATO's defensive orientation (Stapleton 2016).

Against the background of this growing chorus of intervention sceptics and Biden's own campaign promise to end America's »forever wars«, the Biden administration's announcement of a full troop withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 2021 came as no surprise and was supported by pundits of different political shades (Bandow 2021; Kupchan and Lute 2021; Wertheim 2021). Others, including both liberal commentators and conservatives, such as former National Security Adviser John Bolton, advocated against or criticized the decision (Afzal and O'Hanlon 2021; Bolton 2021; Cunningham et al. 2021).

With regard to NATO's future out-of-area tasks, pundits draw different inferences from the alliance's poor intervention track record. Many conservative experts advise that NATO should go »back to basics« to defend alliance territory against the resurgent Russian threat (Coffey/Kochis 2019; similarly Ashford 2016a). According to Stapleton, the alliance »cannot afford to allow external operations to divert attention and resources from its core mission« (Stapleton 2016). Heritage's Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis (2019) argue that »NATO does not have to be everywhere doing everything. It does not have to become a global counterterrorism force or the West's main tool for delivering humanitarian aid.«

To others, the task of stabilizing »Europe's fragile Southern frontier« remains central to NATO (Burns/Jones 2016; Verzhbow/Speranza 2019). According to Kupchan, the United States is »reducing its military footprint in the broader Mid-

dle East, underscoring the need for NATO to focus more on a Southern strategy« (interview with the author, 7 May 2021). While large-scale interventions are an unlikely future scenario, peacekeeping, stabilization and training missions out-of-area should remain high on the organization's agenda. In the Mediterranean region, including Libya and perhaps eventually Syria, European NATO members should be prepared to take the lead in potential missions, »picking up some of the slack« as the United States re-focuses on domestic issues and directs more resources to the Asia-Pacific (ibid.). At the Center for European Policy Analysis, Lauren Speranza even recommends enhancing NATO's military crisis management capabilities with regard to counterterrorism or humanitarian contingencies (Speranza 2020: 8–9).

These recommendations notwithstanding, the task of projecting stability in general and military out-of-area missions in particular are relatively marginal themes in recent US think tank publications on NATO. Scholars emphasize defence and counter-terrorism cooperation with Middle Eastern partner governments, for example, through the Mediterranean Dialogue or Istanbul Cooperation Council programmes (Schroeder 2019: 28–29), or focus on Russia, China and other challenges to allied security. Implicitly, this lack of attention underscores what Kupchan and others articulate explicitly, namely that the United States will increasingly expect its European NATO allies to take responsibility for NATO's Southern flank.

ARMS CONTROL

Like discussions on other key aspects of US national security, US debates about arms control are only marginally about NATO. At a general level, despite long-standing cross- and within-party divisions on the subject, most policymakers and experts at major US think tanks agree in seeing arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation not as ends in themselves, but as one policy tool that can – depending on political outlook – help or hurt US security interests.

While the Biden administration is no exception to this pragmatic and strategic approach to arms control, its coming to office has dramatically improved the prospects for maintaining those bilateral and multilateral frameworks that have survived the Trump administration's onslaught. Shortly after his inauguration, Biden already agreed to the extension of New START, the only remaining bilateral nuclear arms control agreement with Russia. The Open Skies Treaty – renounced by Trump against the advice not only of the US arms control community but also the US military – is probably beyond rescue, given Moscow's recent announcement of withdrawal. In contrast, the administration is engaging in genuine negotiations to re-establish both US and Iranian compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Programme of Action, and to renew coordination with European partners on this issue, albeit not through the framework of NATO.

While many Republicans and (neo)conservative commentators oppose such plans (Geller 2021; Rubin 2021), liberal and

realist pundits and US arms control experts support them (Conley et al. 2021; Krepon 2021; Krepon/Roth 2021; Pifer/Acton 2021; Rose 2020a) – and propose even more far-reaching medium- to long-term steps. According to arms control advocates such as Steven Pifer at Brookings, the Biden administration should engage in strategic stability talks with Moscow, propose a partial replacement of the INF treaty that deals at least with nuclear-armed intermediate-range missiles, or even build on New START to seek a more comprehensive future agreement with Moscow limiting *all* US and Russian nuclear systems. To achieve such a comprehensive deal with Russia, even US missile defence should be put on the table. Furthermore, Biden should conduct a nuclear posture review – in consultation with allies – that should declare deterrence of a nuclear attack to be the »sole purpose« of US nuclear weapons (Pifer 2020b; similarly Conley et al. 2021).

This last proposal is of most direct relevance to NATO – and marks the upper limits of what can be expected of the Biden administration in terms of reforming nuclear deterrence. Influential US experts oppose a »sole purpose« or »no first use« doctrine (for example, Miller 2020), or propose a more modest change to the current US deterrence posture nuclear posture by limiting the use of nuclear weapons to »existential threats« against the United States (Perkovich/Vaddi 2021). With regard to NATO, some insist that the alliance needs a »credible threat of nuclear escalation« vis-à-vis Russia (Kofman 2016b). Others, more moderately, criticize the fact that »NATO's stated nuclear strategy is too stale, vague and timid to ensure deterrence« (Binnendijk/Gompert 2020) and should be spelt out to more clearly threaten symmetrical nuclear retaliation in case of a Russian first strike, in parallel with a deployment of new US sea-based nuclear cruise-missiles in the European theatre. In their view, European opposition to nuclear deterrence in general – and nuclear sharing specifically – leaves NATO without a credible deterrence (ibid). And while the US government and larger US defence community maintain a strong interest in nuclear non-proliferation and in reducing the risk of nuclear terrorism, US extended deterrence is seen as strengthening, rather than undermining this goal. As a recent report by the Chicago Council on Global Relations argues, doubts about US nuclear guarantees could ultimately prompt US allies to acquire their own nuclear weapons, fuelling a new nuclear arms race (Daalder et al. 2021).

As these discussions make plain, criticism of nuclear deterrence *as such* and advocacy of nuclear disarmament are limited to civil society activists and more radical arms control think tanks, but viewed by most policymakers and pundits as unrealistic at best and destabilizing at worst. The most far-reaching present nuclear disarmament initiative, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which entered into force in January 2021, will therefore continue to meet with opposition not only within the administration but also among mainstream think tankers (Williams 2020).

One arms control initiative that enjoys broad support in the US community is a potential successor to the INF treaty. As such an agreement would be particularly vital to European

security, European NATO allies stand a good chance of making their voices heard with the Biden administration. For instance, they could weigh in against over-ambitious proposals to ensure Chinese participation in such a future agreement (advocated, for example, by Binnendijk/Gompert 2020), which have received expressions of sympathy from China-critical »reformists« in the Biden administration, but are, according to Pifer, »doomed to fail« (Pifer 2020b).

Apart from the nuclear field, another issue of importance to many US think tanks is the arms trade. Many criticise the United States for exporting arms into crisis zones or to regimes with problematic human rights records. With regard to internationally contested US drones strikes, practically no moderate American think tank suggests an international ban or abandonment of the use of combat drones. However, some institutes, such as the Stimson Center, call for more transparency and oversight, as regards both transfer and use (Dick/Stohl 2020). The discourse on what has been termed »lethal autonomous weapon systems« is usually separated from the drone discourse and shows more nuances and a broader range of arguments vis-à-vis the European continental debate. Security-related arguments (for example, Laird 2020) are more prominent than in Europe and the overall need of the armed forces to invest in high-tech weapon systems is more widely accepted. Closely related, albeit again an individual issue is the debate about the (military) use of artificial intelligence (AI). Scholars such as Elsa Kania (2020) at Brookings are closely following Chinese ambitions in this area.

CYBER AND HYBRID THREATS, EMERGING AND DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES, SPACE

In recent years, tasks that go beyond the alliance's traditional core functions of military and territorial defence have steadily gained importance in US discussions on NATO. In line with the emphasis placed by NATO's own reflection group on cyber and hybrid threats, emerging and disruptive technologies, and space, US NATO experts are increasingly devoting attention and analysis to these (partially overlapping) new threats and challenges (Beaulieu/Salvo 2018; Edwards et al. 2020; Kramer et al. 2020; Reynolds/Lightfoot 2020; Rose 2020b). Despite their diversity and internal complexity, all of these issues share the feature that they are both linked to and cut across NATO's more traditional missions. Cyber and hybrid threats, in particular, are discussed most prominently in the context of NATO–Russia or NATO–China relations (Burns/Lute 2019: 26–27; Polyakova/Boyer 2018; Speranza 2020), but also with regard to non-state actors (Hamilton 2019). They have the clear potential to affect NATO's military position vis-à-vis these state adversaries, yet efforts to counter such threats or improve resilience against them need to go far beyond the military realm. Some scholars, such as Jim Goldgeier and Garret Martin at the American University, therefore question whether NATO as a military alliance is »best suited to take the lead« on issues such as cybersecurity in 5G networks or tackling disinformation (Goldgeier/Martin 2020). While they see the alliance in a

»supporting role«, others, such as Daniel Hamilton at Johns Hopkins University, argue that the task of building resilience has become part of NATO's *raison d'être*: »The challenge of hybrid conflict underscores why NATO, in its 70th year, must remain the keystone to Western security. NATO offers a ready mechanism for allies to promote shared resilience to disruptive attacks. It is a means by which resilience can be projected forward to neighbors who are weak and susceptible to disruption« (Hamilton 2019).

In terms of concrete measures, pundits propose a wide array of steps that NATO and its members could take to address new threats. These range from earmarking 2 per cent of national GDP for cybersecurity and digital defence modernization (Edwards et al. 2020) and the formation of »expert hunt teams« to detect intruders in defence systems to engaging in offensive cyber actions against Russia and China as part of a strategy of »persistent engagement« (Kramer et al. 2020). When it comes to space, pundits agree with NATO's decision to declare space an operational domain, and recommend improving intelligence sharing on anti-satellite threats, »mainstreaming« outer space in NATO institutions and processes, exercises and wargames, and improving cooperation with both the US Space Command and Space Force and the EU (Rose 2020b).

NATO AS A COMMUNITY OF VALUES

Strengthening democracy at home and abroad was one of the central messages conveyed by Joe Biden throughout his presidential campaign (Biden 2020b). With this renewed embrace of democratic values, he stands in stark contrast to his predecessor's anti-democratic leanings and professed sympathy for foreign authoritarian leaders. As Biden has made clear, this general outlook has important implications for NATO. In a direct rebuke of Trump's view of the alliance, Biden sees NATO not only as serving US interests but also as »the bulwark of the liberal-democratic ideal« and the US commitment to it as »sacred, not transactional« (ibid.). This reaffirmation of NATO as a community of values brings US government policy back in line with a broad consensus among US foreign and security policy think tanks.

And yet the new emphasis placed by Biden and his team on the defence of democracy also entails new challenges and discussions for NATO. As different perspectives among US pundits make clear, defending democracy can be interpreted as an external or an internal task for the alliance. Deterrence-oriented Atlanticists tend to stress external challenges to democracy emanating from NATO's authoritarian competitors, most notably China and Russia. According to this perspective – shared by many conservatives but also by »reformers« within the Democratic Party (Wright 2020) – NATO's traditional and current core mission is the »forward defense of democracy« on the European continent (Moreland 2019). In addition, pundits envision the »alliance of free nations« as the future »center of a global network of alliances« with other »leading democracies«, including Japan, Australia and India (Wilson/O'Brien 2020: 102–105).

While the external dimension of defending democracy is dominant in the US discourse, other scholars highlight the internal risk NATO faces from »democratic backsliding«. In Charles Kupchan's words, »the biggest threat today to the security of NATO countries is not Russia, not China, it's us – populism, polarization, inequality, political dysfunction. We need to get our own houses in order if we are to deal effectively with external threats« (Interview with the author, 7 May 2021). As Goldgeier and Martin point out, »[a]uthoritarianism within NATO is not just a threat because the alliance is based on democratic values, but because it makes less democratic countries more vulnerable to the threats posed by information manipulation and election interference from Russia and other outside meddlers« (Goldgeier/Martin 2020; see also Katz/Taussig 2018). In response to this challenge, Goldgeier and Martin suggest that »member states can speak loudly on behalf of democratic values and use their bilateral relationships to pressure authoritarian rulers«. For Jonathan Katz and Torrey Taussig (2018), such steps do not go far enough. In their view, institutional innovations are needed to address internal challenges to democracy, such as a governance committee under the chairmanship of NATO's assistant secretary general for political affairs and security policy, or a new special ombudsperson tasked with raising concerns over violations of the Washington Treaty.

Once more in disagreement with the Atlanticist mainstream, conservative NATO-sceptics criticize the latter's »transformational agenda« (Beebe 2019). To them, the notion that NATO can and should contribute to the spread of liberal democracy, particularly by expanding towards and into the Russian »sphere of influence«, is misguided. As Cato Institute expert Emma Ashford (2016b) asks rhetorically: »Does NATO promote the common defense of existing members, or seek to expand the Euro-Atlantic democratic community? It cannot accomplish both.«

INTERNAL ADAPTATION AND EUROPEANIZATION

Apart from challenges to NATO's underlying values, the two most pressing internal issues being broadly discussed by US NATO experts are the Europeanization of the alliance and the related, perennial question of transatlantic burden-sharing. At a general level, the notion that European NATO members are still failing to contribute their fair share to the allies' common defence is shared across the entire political spectrum. However, policy recommendations about what to make of this perceived imbalance vary widely, from the extreme recommendation to leave the defence of Europe entirely to Europeans (Bandow 2019; Carpenter 2019b) to nuanced discussions among Atlanticists about exactly how Europeans could contribute more. Past US governments have looked with suspicion at European Union efforts to achieve greater autonomy on matters of defence, and this suspicion is still palpable among conservative experts in particular. At the Heritage Institute, for instance, Ted Bromund and Daniel Kochis (2021) point to the »vital need to ensure that the EU

does not develop a defense identity or ambitions that would detract in any way from NATO«. However, the view that prevails today among both liberal and conservative observers is that both the United States and NATO stand to gain much more than they would lose from closer EU defence integration, which would simultaneously contribute to forming a solid European pillar within the Atlantic alliance. The United States, this dominant view holds, »should broadly welcome the prospect of stronger EU security and defense roles« (Brattberg/Valásek 2019; similarly Bergmann 2021; Hamilton 2021). As Kupchan puts it: »I don't like the term »strategic autonomy« – but the EU's efforts to become more capable militarily and forge a more common foreign and defense policy need to continue« (interview with the author, 7 May 2021). According to Ford and Goldgeier (2021), »if the U.S. is going to succeed in rebalancing its defense posture toward Asia, it needs a stronger Europe able to take the lead in its broader neighborhood«. Still, even EU-friendly Atlantacists such as Erik Brattberg and Tomáš Valásek at Carnegie warn against excluding US companies from EU defence projects, and argue that the EU should »prioritize capabilities over integrationist objectives« (Brattberg/Valásek 2019).

When it comes to burden sharing within the Atlantic alliance, a growing number of US experts agree that, although Europeans need to contribute more, NATO's 2 per cent goal constitutes a poor metric for measuring European efforts. According to Goldgeier and Martin (2020), for instance, there is a »very strong case to retire the 2 percent metric in normal times, but the extraordinary circumstances created by COVID-19 make this even more urgent«. Like them, Derek Chollet, Steven Keil and Christopher Skaluba argue in an Atlantic Council study that the focus should shift to measuring output and capabilities rather than mere defence spending, giving credit to more valuable capabilities (Chollet et al. 2020). When measuring spending itself, these experts argue that measures need to be more standardized, that trend lines should be emphasized over set percentage goals, but also that allied governments should »reconsider what counts for burden sharing« (ibid.). Suggestions in this respect range from investments in emerging tech or pandemic preparations to the improvement of transport infrastructure critical to ensuring mobility in a crisis scenario (ibid.) and investments in resilience against hybrid threats (Hamilton 2019). »It will be a difficult discussion«, argue Chollet, Keil and Skaluba (2020), »but NATO should reconsider the nature of twenty-first century security«.

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