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Adapting NATO for an Era of Great Power Competition

Thank you Chair Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, Chair Connolly, and Vice Chair Turner for the opportunity to testify today.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) must fundamentally reorient and adapt for a new era of great-power competition. That is the main message that a high-level group of experts from both sides of the Atlantic, which I co-chaired, recently delivered to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.¹ The group's report was the result of seven months of consultation with all thirty NATO capitals, most of NATO's 26 partner states, and leading military officials and experts from North America and Europe. It contained 138 recommendations for reform in NATO's strategic, political and administrative functions, many of which were adopted by the North Atlantic Council at the June 2021 NATO Leaders Meeting.

The changes needed at NATO are serious but feasible. They include a fundamental reappraisal of NATO's priorities and update to its Strategic Concept, including to deal with the challenge from China; a more equitable distribution of burdens among NATO's members to support a refocusing of U.S. military resources to the Western Pacific; and better tools for dealing with politically-motivated blockages, deconflicting activities with the European Union (EU), and making quicker decisions in a crisis.

NATO is capable of making these changes; indeed, its history is one of successful strategic adaptation in the face of geopolitical change. But the hour is late, the opponents of the West are gaining in strength, and the obstacles to reform are real. The costs of failure would be high.

¹ "NATO 2030: United for a New Era; Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General," *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, November 2020, (https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf).

What makes NATO's adaptation so urgent is the scale and pace of change that is underway in the international balance of power. The leitmotif of global geopolitics in the coming decade will be intensifying rivalry between the world's largest states, especially between the United States and the People's Republic of China. By 2030, China's GDP is projected to be greater than that of the United States and EU combined. China's defense budget has doubled over the last decade and that country has already surpassed the United States in naval shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air-defense systems.² At the same time, the Russian Federation remains a powerful and vengeful military actor with modernized conventional forces and one of the world's two largest nuclear arsenals. Both China and Russia are led by despotic regimes that seek to undermine the democratic political order of the American republic and its allies.

In these circumstances, the main task facing NATO is, as outlined by the Reflection Group's report, to "consolidate the Atlantic Alliance for an era of strategic simultaneity," in which the countries of the West will face concurrent military, political and economic pressure from two large state actors in opposite directions from the Euro-Atlantic area.³

This new environment presents two chief dangers, one political and one military.

The political danger is that China and Russia will use their size and power to divide, isolate and manipulate American allies. China in particular enjoys an enormous disparity in wealth and power vis-à-vis individual Western states. Russia has a well-practiced repertoire of cyber, energy and military tools with which to cow smaller states. The danger for the United States is that its rivals will use these techniques to subtly deliquesce the bonds between it and its allies, rendering NATO less cohesive and therefore less effective, even as it continues to exist in name.

The military danger is that the China and Russia will present the United States and its allies with simultaneous military crises at opposite ends of Eurasia that strain or exceed our military capacity to handle. Under the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the United States replaced its previous two-war standard, which was designed to ensure the ability to fight two (smaller) opponents simultaneously, with an emphasis on fighting and winning a war with its strongest adversary, China, in conditions in which it is unlikely to possess escalation dominance. Consequently, for the foreseeable future

² "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," Annual Report to Congress, *Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense*, 2020, (<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>).

³ For more on strategic simultaneity, see A. Wess Mitchell, "A Strategy for Avoiding Two-Front War," *The National Interest*, July/August 2021, forthcoming.

Europe is likely to be the secondary theater from a U.S. military-strategic perspective. In practical terms, this means that more and more U.S. military resources and attention will go to the Indo-Pacific and that the United States will prioritize developing capabilities for Asian/maritime rather than European/land combat environments.⁴

These two dangers provide a baseline for how the United States should think about NATO's role. The absence of a peer competitor in the immediate post-Cold War period enabled the United States to largely assume the cohesion of the West and think of NATO primarily as a tool for projecting stability to outside regions—first the Balkans and, after the September 11th attacks, to places further afield like Afghanistan. With the return of great power competition, when we are confronted by two large, determined, and capable state actors, U.S. attention must shift to consolidation of the Western strategic core itself to provide the broadest possible political, demographic and commercial base from which to engage in protracted competition with China and Russia. NATO has an indispensable role to play both politically, in cementing the United States to its closest allies in Europe, and militarily, in providing a secure foundation from which we can devote attention to Indo-Pacific without calling into question the stability of the European theater.

What will this require of NATO?

First, NATO needs a strategy that matches the world of the next decade and, in particular, that equips the West to grapple with the reality of strategic simultaneity. The current NATO Strategic Concept was written in 2010. It reflects the assumptions of a permissive rather than contested strategic environment and the preoccupations which that lenient environment afforded: out-of-area operations against non-peer foes and crisis management rather than strategic anticipation. Last week NATO leaders agreed to our report's recommendation to update the Strategic Concept. The United States should use this updating process to bring NATO into better alignment with U.S. global strategic requirements, particularly by enhancing European allies' contributions to the conventional deterrence burden vis-à-vis Russia and affirming NATO's role in dealing with those aspects of Chinese behavior that affect the security of the Euro-Atlantic area.

Second, NATO needs better tools to deal with the challenge from China. Last week's Leaders Meeting acknowledged the scale of China's ambitious and assertive behavior

⁴ See Elbridge A. Colby, "Implementation of the National Defense Strategy," *Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 29 January 2019, (https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Colby_01-29-19.pdf), and Jim Mitre, "A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct," *Washington Quarterly* 41:4, (2018): pp. 7-30.

and agreed that NATO has a role to play in addressing these issues. But much more needs to be done. While it is inadvisable to push NATO to play a military role in Asia, it is in our interest, and squarely within the remit of NATO's mandate, for it to address Chinese activities that have an impact on military readiness, interoperability and secure communication in SACEUR's Area of Responsibility. As outlined in our report, NATO needs a consultative body to coordinate allied security policy on China, a North Atlantic equivalent of DARPA to spur allied cooperation in emerging technologies, stiffer barriers to allied military-technological ties with China, and increased cooperation with Asian partners, including India.

Third, the United States must redouble efforts to improve burden-sharing on the part of NATO allies. This is not only a matter of political fairness and good stewardship for U.S. taxpayers; it is first and foremost a strategic necessity, fulfilment of which is intimately tied to America's ability to manage the problem of strategic simultaneity and ensure the concurrent stability of the Western Pacific and Europe. As such, the United States must resist any effort to define downward the burden-sharing formulas agreed upon at the 2014 Wales Summit. While the United States will continue to provide the majority of strategic enablers for NATO for the foreseeable future, it is reasonable to expect Europeans to field at least fifty percent of the conventional capabilities and enablers for securing the European theater to free up U.S. forces to focus on the Indo-Pacific region in the event of a major crisis.⁵

Fourth and finally, NATO will need greater political cohesion to meet the growing threats from China and Russia. In an era of great-power competition, as I have argued today, the first object of U.S. statecraft must be the strategic, political and economic consolidation of the Western Alliance. Efforts at European "strategic autonomy" should be welcomed insofar as they avoid duplication of NATO and aid in meeting established NATO capability targets – but firmly resisted insofar as they involve initiatives that would deepen the bifurcation of the West into competing blocs.

But the threats to Western cohesion are not only or even primarily institutional. As articulated in the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO exists to 'safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of [its] peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.' NATO needs better tools to deal with the problem of allied capitals entering into deep political relationships with the very authoritarian rivals it exists to defend them against. As outlined in our report, NATO should develop a Center for Democratic Resilience to aid allies in resisting

⁵ This would correspond to maintaining the capabilities for fulfilling half (1+3) of the 2+6 responsibilities (two major operations plus six smaller ones) under NATO's agreed-upon Level of Ambition formula. See Heinrich Brauss and Christian Mölling, "NATO 2030 – The Military Dimension," *NDC Policy Brief*, No. 07, April 2021, (<https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1551>).

hostile foreign influence in their public institutions. It should institute the recommendation of the 1956 Wise Men report to conduct an annual review of the internal political health and development of NATO. And it should address head-on the growing tendency of some allies to politicize NATO decision-making in ways that benefit NATO's rivals, including the use of single-country blockages that import extraneous bilateral disputes into the North Atlantic Council.

It is in America's vital interest to preserve and strengthen NATO. Even as the United States shifts more and more military focus to the Western Pacific, the transatlantic Alliance remains the seat of the free West and the foundation of America's political and economic strength in the world. Preserving this alliance will require NATO to adapt to a strategic landscape that is much more competitive than the greenhouse-like conditions it has known since the end of the Cold War. We have a window of opportunity to make the needed changes. NATO needs to seize it. If it does, I am confident the transatlantic Alliance can deal with the profound challenges it faces in the coming decade.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.