

NATO 2030: A Celebration of Origins and An Eye Toward the Future

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NATO's strength is its adaptability to new geopolitical realities and emerging security challenges.

The world has changed significantly since NATO allies agreed the last Strategic Concept in 2010. At that time, Moscow was still being courted as a potential partner; threats were mostly kinetic with hybrid threats still primitive; the People's Republic of China was in a pre-Xi era; and the economic crisis was still at the forefront of our thinking. During the past decade we could not have predicted the scale and pace of change, which will only continue to accelerate in this decade.

NATO's challenge is to adapt once more to a world where autocrats seek to weaponize our freedoms, and security challenges are no longer confined by geography or the battlefield. This requires NATO to assume a more political and global role in the future, developing new tools and capabilities - while not losing sight of its more traditional roles, including the collective defence of its own territory.

Today our freedom is attacked by autocrats and dictators every day, but their attacks fall under the threshold of what would traditionally trigger a NATO Article 5 response. It is a tactic of salami-slicing away at our security and internal cohesion, so that we sleepwalk into the dependency or internal wrangles that our enemies relish.

Autocracies vs Democracies

The era of power competition has returned. Today's great geopolitical challenge is the world's emboldened autocracies. They deploy similar tactics: they seek to divide the free world, sow dissent within our societies, and coerce us to make our societies look more like theirs.

In essence, autocracies seek to exploit our own freedoms. Free speech and an open internet are used to disseminate false narratives that undermine the legitimacy of our democratic processes. Free and open markets are abused for economic coercion, or to facilitate the strategic corruption that sustains kleptocratic systems like Putin's Russia and Xi's People's Republic of China (PRC).

To this end, NATO and its Allies should strengthen three areas: 1) our alliances with like-minded partners around the world, 2) our political resilience, and 3) our economic resilience.

Strengthened Alliances around the world

NATO is an Atlantic Alliance which includes Pacific Allies. Especially the USA and Canada, but also a couple of European states have territory and direct interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

NATO has already begun the process of closer cooperation with like-minded allies in the region. For example, during my term as NATO Secretary General, we signed a partnership with Japan and relations have continued to blossom since. This should be expanded upon.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or 'Quad' is a critical development aimed to create an "Asian Arc of Democracy." It is in NATO and the free world's interests to develop further this initiative, under US leadership in the Pacific. A NATO-Quad summit should be convened to discuss critical topics of mutual interest such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, China's growing hostility against Taiwan, and how we can further promote interoperability in our military systems.

NATO can grant like-minded countries Enhanced Opportunities Partnership status. This is a status awarded to countries like Ukraine, Sweden and Jordan, to increase collaboration and participation in joint operations without granting full membership and the Article 5 guarantee. To date Australia is NATO's only EOP country in the Indo-Pacific and other countries could benefit from this enhanced cooperation. Just as NATO works closely with non-members Sweden and Finland to promote security and freedom of navigation in the Arctic, it should work with Indo-Pacific allies to ensure the Indo-Pacific remains a zone of freedom, rules and reciprocity.

The Alliance should also strengthen and expand ties with what it calls, 'Partners around the globe', to build cooperation, improve interoperability, and support the security of democracies.

NATO must also walk the talk on its open door policy. Putin seeks to exercise a veto by fomenting low-level conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine. Georgia is ready to join the Alliance and should be given a solution that enables it to join without the Article 5 guarantee applying to those territories under enemy occupation – much like West Germany joined NATO with Article 5 applying only to the territory controlled by the West German government. Likewise, when Ukraine has completed sufficient reforms to be ready for a Membership Action Plan, we cannot let the Donbas conflict continue to hold it back. It's time to call Putin's bluff.

Political Resilience

Freedom House recently recorded the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom and democracy.

Our generation is the best connected ever – to each other and to those elected to serve us. Yet that lack of filter has facilitated autocrats to spread narratives that seek to delegitimize our democratic processes. The aim of such narratives is either to tap into a pre-existing bias that makes disenchanted individuals want to share or engage with the content, or to plant a seed of doubt so that citizens no longer trust anything they see or hear – whether that's information shared by US intelligence agencies, or evidence on the safety of vaccines.

The common lexicon and facts upon which we base democratic societies are being decayed. Here, our challenge is both to take steps that tackle the narratives, detect and close down the bot and other networks that are disseminating such information, and find ways to build a far more media literate society – able to fact check and discern sources ourselves.

Domestic politicians also need to question whether they sometimes borrow from the autocrats' playbook. Candidates should stand on the front line of defending the democracy they participate in.

Societal resilience is a rising challenge and NATO is seeking to step up its actions here. The NATO2030 experts group proposed establishing a Centre of Excellence for Democratic Resilience dedicated to providing support to individual Allies, upon their request, for strengthening societal resilience to resist interference from hostile external actors in the functioning of their democratic institutions and processes.

Economic Coercion

NATO's European Allies are not unfamiliar with the use of economic coercion by autocratic states. Moscow has used its gas supplies as a weapon to blackmail its neighbours for many years. But while the Kremlin invented the playbook, Beijing has mastered using economic coercion to silence its critics and impose its will on democracies.

As a lifelong free trader, it pains me to see our open markets turned into a vulnerability.

Following the Eurozone crisis, Beijing acquired a number of strategic assets, especially in the Mediterranean. We began to see how Beijing was also buying influence in 2017 when the Greek government blocked an EU statement at the UN criticising China's human rights record, only months after the acquisition of the Port of Piraeus by China's COSCO.

In recent months we have seen the coercion step up a gear. The list of companies that have changed their behaviour to avoid offending China is long and growing, from movie companies to hotel chains. Fast fashion companies have been subjected to boycotts because they question the use of forced labour in Xianjiang. Australian wine producers have been subjected to PRC tariffs after the Australian government criticised Beijing's human rights record.

NATO alone cannot solve this challenge. Businesses will also have to play a role. However, the PRC uses economic coercion because it works.

This is why I have proposed an economic Article 5. In my view this should be an initiative of President Biden's planned Summit for Democracy and therefore not confined to NATO Allies alone. However, the principle could be the same – that an economic attack on one would trigger a collective economic response including rallying to support the company or country under attack, launching a credit facility to cushion losses or re-direct supply chains. If economic coercion stops being a successful weapon, autocrats will stop using it.

Meanwhile, NATO should strengthen its own in-house geo-economic tools in order to carry out assessments of the PRC's weaponizing economic power or the impact of its economic coercion on Allies. NATO should be able to carry out reviews of the security implications of FDI in Allied critical infrastructure and high-tech and adjust our own defence planning accordingly. We need to better assess the impact of the defence industries of third countries outside NATO on Allies and their security.

Winning the race for emerging technology – and setting global rules

For once I agree with Putin who said of Artificial Intelligence, “Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world.” It must be the world’s democracies.

For NATO this means revisiting the ‘other’ spending target. We hear much about the two percent GDP target. However, at NATO’s 2014 Wales Summit we also committed to spending 20 percent of defence budgets on new equipment and R&D. This is critical but it won’t be enough. Let’s raise the ambition.

In the UK, for instance, the recent spending announcements associated with the Integrated Review, have aligned the MOD to focus on future capabilities such as AI, Cyber capabilities and space. All Allies should work individually or collaboratively to develop new capabilities, especially in the cyber domain where our critical infrastructure continues to be harmed by what appear to be relatively unsophisticated attacks.

However, simply developing capabilities will not be sufficient. We must also find more common rules and standards for how we will develop technology that both meets future challenges and upholds our democratic principles.

One example is fully autonomous weapons systems (aka killer robots). They will present significant challenges around ethics (whether humans will be involved in life and death decisions), and the need to develop split-second decision-making. I believe ‘Robot Wars’ lower the potential cost of conflict for the aggressors, which is why I have advocated for global conventions to address these questions now.

These are questions that we should answer within the Alliance, but they also rely on a stronger industrial base which puts innovation and collaboration at its heart. Here we need far more cooperation across the Atlantic in developing new technologies, allow for a freer flow of data within a strong framework of protection, and creating a common approach to the building blocks of our tech and green revolutions: semi-conductors and Rare Earth Elements.

On this topic I direct the Committee to the US National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (NSCAI) whose final report sets out a number of recommendations that should be taken forward both by the US and NATO allies.