

The Origins and Enduring Value of the Transatlantic Alliance

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Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Kinzinger, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here. I am pleased to discuss the role that the transatlantic relationship, and the NATO alliance in particular, has played in advancing global security and U.S. interests since World War II.

This is a vitally important subject, one I address in my work at Johns Hopkins-SAIS and the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. I should make clear, though, that my testimony here reflects only my personal views, and not the institutional position of Johns Hopkins University, CSBA, or any other organization.¹

The modern transatlantic relationship—and the NATO alliance that represents the core of that relationship—emerged in the wake of World War II, during the early days of the Cold War. The creation of NATO marked a historic departure in U.S. foreign policy. It reflected a realization that the United States had a profound, enduring interest in shaping a favorable balance of power in Europe, and that persistent diplomatic and military engagement was the only way to shape such a balance. Additionally, American policymakers realized that only a U.S. security guarantee could provide the climate of reassurance necessary to generate postwar recovery, lasting prosperity, and the survival of democratic institutions in Europe. Finally, the initial U.S. commitment to Europe was based on the idea that this commitment was essential to suppressing historical rivalries between Germany and its neighbors and thereby facilitating the process of European economic and political integration.

Over subsequent decades, the U.S. relationship with NATO has evolved considerably, as new challenges have emerged and the alliance has taken on new roles and responsibilities. Moreover, NATO's membership has more than doubled since the alliance was created in 1949, and its geography has shifted as post-Cold War expansion pushed its front lines farther to the east. For generations, however, the U.S. relationship with NATO has produced a range of critical benefits, which I will briefly summarize before turning to some of the challenges the alliance currently confronts.

¹ Parts of this testimony draw on Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, "What Are America's Alliances Good For?" *Parameters*, Summer 2017; Hal Brands, *Dealing with Allies in Decline: Alliance Management and U.S. Strategy in an Era of Global Power Shifts* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017). See also Eric Edelman and Whitney McNamara, *U.S. Strategy for Maintaining a Europe Whole and Free* (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017); Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, "Trump's Transatlantic Crisis," *Commentary*, September 2018.

Benefits

Military Punching Power. The primary measure of any alliance is whether it augments its members' military power. And although NATO is often described as a mechanism through which America defends other countries, the flip-side of this commitment is that NATO has significantly increased the military power America can bring to bear on a given battlefield.

During the Cold War, European forces were vital to maintaining something approximating a balance of power vis-à-vis Warsaw Pact forces. During the Persian Gulf War of 1991, key NATO allies such as France and the United Kingdom made large contributions of ground, air, and naval forces. NATO countries (either individually or as part of a larger alliance mission) also contributed troops or other capabilities to U.S.-led missions in Korea, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and the counter-ISIS campaign. The United States rarely goes to war alone, and a key reason for this is that it can draw on the support of its closest allies in Europe.

Although there are always difficulties associated with coalition warfare, these allied contributions have been critical in easing the overall U.S. burden. For example, NATO contributions to the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan helped sustain that mission and made it possible for Washington to surge 30,000 additional troops into Iraq at a time when its forces were strained to the limit. Additionally, the deeply institutionalized nature of the NATO alliance adds to the military benefits the United States receives from the alliance. The fact that the U.S. military engages in regular training, exercises, and operations with its NATO allies makes it easier to coordinate with them in a crisis, improving interoperability and reducing the frictions associated with mobilizing a coalition. And for decades, the U.S. relationship with NATO has afforded American forces access to critical bases, logistical facilities, and strategic real estate, all of which serves to significantly lower the costs and difficulties of U.S. power projection.

Geostrategic Influence and Global Stability. If NATO alliance thus makes America stronger in the conflicts it wages, it is more helpful still in terms of the conflicts it prevents and the geostrategic influence it confers. For decades, NATO has bound some of the richest countries in the world to Washington through enduring relationships of deep cooperation; it thereby helps America maintain a significant *overbalance* of power vis-à-vis any competitor. NATO has also acted as a strong deterrent to aggressive states that might be attempted to destabilize Europe or the broader international system, whether the Soviet Union during the Cold War or Putin's Russia today. Indeed, it is notable that Russia has behaved most aggressively toward countries (Georgia and Ukraine) that lack U.S. alliance guarantees, rather than toward those countries (the Baltic states or Poland) that possess them. This fact shows the wisdom of NATO's post-Cold War expansion: The front lines of today's U.S.-Russia competition are in the Baltic and elsewhere along the frontiers of the former Soviet Union, rather than farther to the west, where they were during the Cold War.

Similarly, NATO (and the U.S. role therein) have long tamped down international instability more broadly, by suppressing potential security competitions *within* Europe and making it nearly unthinkable that war could occur between the countries that make up NATO's membership. It is remarkable that no one worries today about a war between France and Germany or Germany and Poland, given the pre-1945 history of those relationships, and NATO has everything to do with

this achievement. Given that wars in Europe repeatedly reached out and touched the United States prior to 1945, moreover, this achievement directly serves American security interests.

Finally, NATO acts as an impediment to dangerous geostrategic phenomena such as nuclear proliferation, by convincing historically insecure countries—such as Germany and Poland—that they can afford to forego possession of the world’s absolute weapon. The guiding principle among the framers of the post-World War II order was that massive instability, arms racing, and violence in key regions posed a threat that would ultimately imperil the United States. The U.S. alliance relationship with Europe has restrained precisely these phenomena.

Diplomatic Leverage and Cooperation. Beyond its military, geostrategic, and political value, the NATO relationship greatly increases the diplomatic leverage U.S. leaders can bring to bear. To be blunt, Europeans are obliged to listen to the United States on European and global issues because Washington’s leading role in NATO makes it the central player in European defense. To give one example, the United States has repeatedly been successful in preventing the European Union from lifting its arms embargo on China because of the security leverage it has through NATO. Similarly, the United States has used NATO as a vehicle for cooperation on counter-terrorism, counter-cybercrime, counter-proliferation, counter-piracy, and other challenges. All of these efforts involve substantial intelligence sharing, pooling of information, and coordination across law enforcement and other lines of action—and that coordination is greatly facilitated when conducted through a deeply institutionalized alliance.

Economic Benefits. Critics of the NATO alliance often allege that it costs the United States vast sums to defend its allies. Yet the economic costs of the U.S. commitment to NATO are lower than conventionally assumed, because the alliances allows the United States to project military power much more cheaply than otherwise would be the case, and also because those NATO countries that host American troops generally provide payments to offset basing/presence costs.

Alliances such as NATO also generate numerous economic benefits. One analysis of the deployment of U.S. troops abroad and of U.S. treaty obligations shows that both of these forms of security commitments are correlated with several key economic indicators, including U.S. bilateral trade and global bilateral trade. Adding all the economic costs and benefits of these treaty commitments together produces the estimate that U.S. alliances offer more than three times as much economic gain as cost.²

For decades, moreover, U.S. diplomats and trade negotiations have used the security leverage provided by its NATO commitments to extract more favorable terms in bilateral financial and commercial arrangements. During the Cold War, for example, West Germany was willing to make “offset” payments to the United States—transfers that helped shore up the U.S. balance of payments—in order to preserve the American troop presence. Finally, given that NATO and other U.S. alliances sustain a climate of overall geopolitical stability in which trade and free enterprise can flourish, they bolster American and global prosperity in broader ways, as well.

² Daniel Egel and Howard Shatz, “Economic Benefits of U.S. Overseas Security Commitments Appear to Outweigh Costs,” *The RAND Blog*, September 23, 2016, <http://www.rand.org/blog/2016/09/economic-benefits-of-us-overseas-security-commitments.html>

Political Legitimacy. Beyond its military, geostrategic, diplomatic, and economic virtues, NATO provides important political benefits which facilitate the use of American power. Formal alliances such as NATO provide greater legitimacy for multilateral action, especially in cases—such as the Kosovo conflict in 1999—when the United States is unable to secure a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force. Allied support also enhances the perceived legitimacy of military action for domestic audiences, thus strengthening the political foundations for military ventures. The willingness of European allies (or other allied states) to participate in a military intervention can signal that the resort to force is a wise and necessary move, and that it has a reasonable prospect for success. Finally, the NATO allies have long provided useful input on use of force decisions. Particularly when the deliberations involve long-standing treaty allies, U.S. officials can have more honest discussions about difficult policy choices because the participants are “all in the family.” Put another way, while every U.S. president reserves the right to use force unilaterally when U.S. interests demand, presidents have generally understood that the failure to persuade other partners to approve and join America in the effort is itself a powerful signal that the proposed action may not be viable.

Challenges

The transatlantic relationship and the NATO alliance in particular have thus provided a range of important benefits for the United States. Today as in the past, however, there are pressing challenges that are testing the U.S.-NATO relationship. Key challenges include:

Forward defense. The combination of unfavorable geography and Russian military modernization presents severe challenges to NATO’s ability to defend its easternmost states from a potential Russian assault. The alliance will need additional presence and a stronger regional force posture if it is to reestablish a credible deterrent to Russian aggression.³

Burden-sharing. Burden-sharing is a perpetual challenge within NATO. Yet it is fair to say that this issue has reached a crisis point when America’s three most important European allies—the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—would each struggle to deploy and sustain a single armored brigade in combat beyond their own borders.⁴ In general, alliance military spending has been moving in the right direction since 2015. But the performance of some key countries (namely, Germany) continues to be disappointing and Brexit is likely to further curtail the resources the United Kingdom can make available for defense.

Adapting to confront emerging threats. While NATO faces traditional military threats in the East, it also confronts more novel, unconventional threats such as information warfare, cyberattacks, political meddling, and economic coercion on the part of authoritarian rivals. The alliance will have to rebuild its ability to repel conventional aggression while also improving its capabilities—perhaps in cooperation with the European Union—to address emerging threats.

³ See *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission* (United States Institute of Peace, 2018).

⁴ Michael Shurkin, “The Abilities of the British, French, and German Armies to Generate and Sustain Armored Brigades in the Baltic,” RAND Corporation, 2017, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1629.html.

Reconciling competing priorities. As NATO's geography has expanded, so has the difficulty in reconciling the alliance's competing priorities. Whereas states on the alliance's eastern frontier are most worried about Russian aggression, states on the alliance's southern flank are often more concerned about terrorism, refugee flows, and other challenges emerging from the Middle East and North Africa. Similarly, as the prospect of state-on-state warfare in Europe increases, NATO countries will face increasing difficulties balancing that mission with "out of area" challenges such as the war in Afghanistan.

Concerns about U.S. credibility. At the level of day-to-day policy, U.S. engagement with NATO has remained relatively steady, and the alliance has made progress both in improving readiness for a potential conflict with Russia and in focusing on non-traditional threats. At the political level, however, relationships with key European allies and leaders have frayed badly, and statements questioning America's commitment to NATO's Article 5 have produced concerns about the credibility of the U.S. security guarantee. In some European quarters, these concerns are leading to broader doubts about the long-term viability of the alliance. They are also leading some European countries to advocate the pursuit of "strategic autonomy" in the form of a more credible European Union defense capability, although progress toward that goal remains elusive so far.⁵ Put bluntly, if confidence in the U.S. commitment to NATO collapses, so will the alliance.

Authoritarianism within the alliance. NATO has had authoritarian members before, but in recent decades it had become an alliance of democratic states. Democratic backsliding in countries such as Turkey, Hungary, and Poland is now challenging that progress, and raising questions about how the alliance should deal with illiberalism within its ranks. The fact that Hungary and Turkey have established close relationships with Putin's Russia adds urgency to this challenge.

Fragmentation of the European project. NATO developed in tandem with moves toward greater European integration, which provided the political and economic cohesion to accompany the military cohesion that the alliance provided. Today, however, the cohesion of the EU is being challenged due to Brexit, surging illiberalism within certain European countries, and a populist backlash against the European project. In the near-term, challenges to European unity will reduce the possibility of "strategic autonomy" and the development of alternative defense mechanisms that might eventually rival NATO. Over the longer term, however, such fragmentation will probably weaken the European pillar of the alliance and thus weaken the alliance itself.

Conclusion

The seriousness of these threats should not be underrated. Yet NATO and the transatlantic relationship have faced periods of crisis before—during the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the 1980s, and the early days of the War of Terror. Some of the challenges that arose during those earlier periods—how to construct a viable deterrent to Soviet aggression, for instance, or how counter the deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe—were arguably as great or greater than any the alliance faces today. The alliance survived these earlier tests, in part because

⁵ Hal Brands, "Europe Wants to Defend Itself from Russia? Good Luck with That," *Bloomberg Opinion*, August 30, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-08-30/europe-wants-to-defend-itself-from-russia-good-luck-with-that>.

of its great resilience, and in part because the United States played a critical role in either holding the alliance together or repairing damage that had occurred.

Moreover, even though the cockpit of geopolitical rivalry has moved from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region, it does not follow that NATO and the transatlantic relationship are irrelevant to the geopolitical challenges the United States faces. For example, it is hard to imagine any successful democratic response to the rise of an aggressive, authoritarian China that does not feature close cooperation between the United States and its closest democratic allies in Europe.

The United States must therefore continue investing in the transatlantic relationship; it must provide the leadership that has proved so important in rallying NATO countries to overcome common challenges. There is no reason that NATO cannot continue to be an overwhelming net benefit to U.S. security, prosperity, and global influence, so long as America remains committed to the alliance that has served it so well. If, however, the United States weakens its commitment to the alliance and the broader transatlantic relationship, NATO will find it far harder to address today's challenges—and America will profoundly damage its own interests.