



COHESION AND SHARED CULTURE: NATO'S KEY ASSETS IN RESPONSE TO THE NEW STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

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Today's strategic environment is characterised by persistent competition between states, most of all between the West, Russia and China, but also more broadly as nationalist narratives gain traction in many key middle powers. While this competition does not itself lead to war, it makes the international system more vulnerable to unpredictable shocks. Today, some of the most worrying potential shocks are those often characterised as being 'grey zone' – intended to be below the threshold that risks triggering a broader conflict. There can be no all-out winners in the competition between NATO, Russia and China. Nor is its end in prospect any time in the foreseeable future. Rather we can look forward to frequent, and continuing, probing and opportunistic behaviour – subversion, espionage, assassinations, designed to gain tactical advantages in the ongoing struggle.

Much of this behaviour will be reactive – seen by its perpetrators as a necessary response to unexpected threats, even while its adversaries see it as an unprovoked escalation. Thus the two biggest shocks emanating from Russia over the last five years – in Ukraine and Syria – were both triggered by revolutions that threatened to undermine and replace

Russian allies. In response, Russia launched rapid actions that presented NATO allies with a 'fait accompli' – unable to respond directly without risking escalation to wider conflict. Rather, they responded indirectly, primarily through economic sanctions and security assistance.

This scratchy game of proxy conflict is not new. But new technologies are changing and expanding the tools available to both the West and its competitors. And the close economic interdependence between the West, Russia and China (in contrast to the Cold War) also changes the equation. On the one hand, mutual interests can deepen the incentives to avoid escalation. But it also heightens concern over mutual vulnerability – as seen most recently in debates over Chinese ownership of critical national infrastructure and suppliers of key technologies. As a result we may now be at a tipping point, leading to much greater security protectionism, even if this involves reductions in economic efficiency.

Cohesion

In the face of this complex and fluid environment, NATO is as relevant as ever. It is a remarkable institution, with no equivalent in any other part of the world or indeed in European history. But it is not a supranational institution. Unlike the EU, there is no NATO body of agreed law, far

less a NATO supreme court. Rather, NATO's relevance, as a grouping of sovereign states, rests on the continuing and active consent of its member governments to be effective. Even so, since its creation, NATO has been central in cementing a lasting peace between the major powers of Europe, adding immeasurably to British and European security, and playing a central role in creating and sustaining the US's role as the world's leading superpower. Other elements have played key roles in Europe's Long Peace since 1945 – the triumph of liberal democracy, the restraint imposed by nuclear weapons, the building of the European Union. But the commitments embodied in the NATO Treaty also remain key to Europe's peace.

For a moment, just consider what a Europe in which NATO had lost its relevance (or disappeared altogether) might look like. Would it see a return to shifting bilateral alliances and nationalisms? Enhanced competition between multiple European powers, even as Europe as a whole was getting ever smaller compared with the big powers of the world? And how far would a more divided Europe be easier for Russia and China, both of whom would have a natural interest in dealing with Europeans separately rather than together? Some in the current US administration, led by President Trump, see the appeal in a weaker NATO, allowing them to privilege bilateral relations with favoured European leaders even as they confront others when they are seen as posing a threat to US interests. But such a view does not command the support of most of the US political establishment, who understand how profoundly a strong NATO is in the interests of all its members.

But we do need to recognise the challenge that the rise of nationalism amongst key member states now poses to NATO. And NATO members, while remaining entirely respectful of national sovereignty, can gain from working together to protect their democratic systems from external interference (especially, at present, from Russia). But, while doing so, NATO also needs to respect differences between its members. It is not the role of NATO to police the internal politics of its member states, far less to impose specific political conditionalities (for example on Turkey). And NATO should also be careful to respect the deep-seated asymmetries in defence capabilities and cultures between its members, which are deeply rooted in the nature of the post war settlement. The US, UK and France will continue to spend more on defence – and be more militarily active – than Germany and



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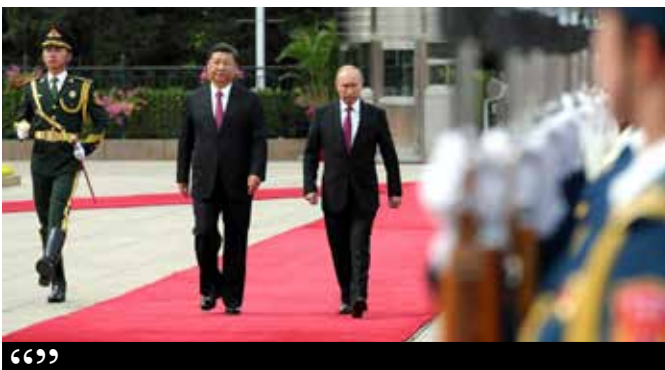
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Italy. Burden-sharing targets and processes do have a place, as they have had since the alliance was founded. But a sense of proportion and mutual respect is needed if these targets are not to undermine the very cohesion that they are designed to promote. NATO is not a protection racket, and the Article 5 security guarantee cannot be made hostage to meeting the two per cent target.

At the same time, member states cannot expect automatic protection from their allies whatever they themselves do. If a NATO state, for example, were to attack another country without consultation or provocation, and then faced a counter attack, it could not then expect NATO to automatically come to its defence. Most member states understand this very well. But it does bear repetition, not least in order to ensure that shared risks must be linked to shared understanding of how these risks are responsibly managed.

Culture

Finally, much of what NATO does as an organisation needs to be understood not only as being about providing the most efficient collective defence. It is also about deepening solidarity, and a sense of shared strategic and military culture, even as it continues to respect the independence and sovereignty of member states. It is about being both militarily and politically interoperable, enhancing the credibility of the commitment to fight together when the time comes. In the end, the most precious deterrence that NATO has is its remarkable ability to remain united against external threats. That commitment, made seven long decades ago, remains remarkably strong. But it is not without its challenges, not least in a world where nationalist thinking is gaining traction, and in which its competitors would clearly benefit from a less cohesive NATO.



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