



# NDC Policy Brief

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## The future of NATO

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NATO's reflection process (NATO 2030), as well as the decision to revisit the Alliance's Strategic Concept in 2022 pose two sets of questions: the first pertains to the organization's adaptation to tomorrow's security environment; the second is on whether there is agreement inside the Alliance on the kind of organization to be built, and what its principles and methods should look like.

This *Policy Brief* examines these two levels of questions to identify five possible directions in which the Alliance might move: continuity; refocusing on collective defence; morphing into a security organization; standing up to China; and marginalization.

### Determining NATO's future

In 2019, one of the leitmotifs around the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Alliance (created in 1949), was that it was no time to retire.<sup>1</sup> Security needs are constantly rising, and faced with Russia, terrorism, hybrid and cyber threats, pandemics and maybe soon China, NATO's *raison d'être* seems to be as clear as ever. Yet at about the same time, the statements of then US President Trump on NATO might easily have been interpreted as a sign that the Alliance was weakening, and even as a precursory sign of its demise, were the US to withdraw. In that context, Europeans voiced their concern about a possible US disengagement from an Alliance deemed crucial to their own defence. They also boosted their defence budgets, partly in response to American pressure for burden-sharing (and for many of them, in response to the Russian threat), while at the same time considering the idea of European strategic autonomy. These

three issues – the threats, US policy, and the European stance – are critical to any forward-looking analysis since they will determine the role NATO plays in the years to come.

### *The threats*

Fundamentally, NATO exists as a response to the security threats against its member states. These threats have evolved dramatically since the Cold War. Contrary to the massive, state-centred, military threat posed by the Soviet Union, there have been a host of military and non-military, state and non-state, domestic (within member states) and external, direct and indirect, strategic and secondary risks. In addition to Russia putting collective defence back on NATO's agenda, today's threats to security range from the instability of states located on NATO's periphery, terrorism, hybrid and cyber threats, as well as other more pervasive dangers such as disinformation, pandemics, the consequences of technological advances, uncontrolled migration or climate change.

This raises the question of how NATO's Allies perceive what really threatens them, and therefore what needs to be prioritised. Russia versus terrorism? Instability in the South or China? Internal cohesion or great power competition? In this context, the Alliance's regional or more global vocation is one of the important factors shaping its future course. Another consideration is the capacity of the Alliance to respond to threats which are vastly different from its core business.

### Keywords

Strategic Concept  
NATO's future  
Strategic foresight  
Collective defense  
China

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1 T. Tardy (ed.), "NATO at 70. No time to retire", *Research Paper* No.8, NATO Defense College, Rome, January 2020.

The Alliance does not necessarily have the know-how to deal with pandemics, disinformation, or even cyber threats, for which the states themselves or other organizations such as the European Union, might be better placed. Looking forward, the central or peripheral focus (real or perceived) granted to a given threat by NATO's main members will have a direct impact on the role and geographical expanse the organization covers.

### *The United States*

Second, NATO's genetic make-up means any US policy within the Alliance determines the organisation's future role and course. Over the last twenty years, NATO's major changes have been largely shaped by the choices made in Washington, be they enlargements, crisis management decisions (in the Balkans, and then in Afghanistan) or the fight against terrorism. Trump's presidency also highlighted

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the extent to which cohesion within the Alliance could be affected by US positioning and rhetoric. Yet, in spite of the return of an administration more sympathetic to NATO, the debate over the US pivot to the Indo-Pacific and the emerging strategic confrontation between the US and China, raise the dual question of American commitment

to NATO in Europe and NATO's potential role *vis-à-vis* China. Against the background of an Asia-focused geo-strategic confrontation, NATO must demonstrate its added value to its principal member. The American perspective of what the Alliance can contribute in this novel environment will directly impact NATO's future.

### *The Europeans*

Third, NATO's future will, in part, be decided by the positions taken by the Europeans on three specific issues: their role within NATO's European pillar; their desire to develop strategic autonomy outside NATO; and what they see as being NATO's role with regard to China. In the first two instances, Europeans will have to decide how they intend reacting to American disengagement, i.e. by actions taken from within or outside of NATO. Both options would involve a mix of capacity development and shaping a European strategic culture leading to some autonomy from the US, which

would vary according to whether the institutional format was a NATO or a European one. The Europeans will also have to decide on whether the Russian threat prevails (over other risks such as terrorism or instability in the South), and in what way they can take on their share of the burden in NATO's defence and deterrence policy *vis-à-vis* Russia.

On China, how much support the Europeans give to US policy will determine NATO's role in the Indo-Pacific but also its position on collective defence. Americans and Europeans may – or may not – want to give NATO a central role in the response to China and these choices will have a significant impact on the Alliance.

## **NATO in 2030-40: five scenarios**

Taking into consideration the three above-presented factors provides us with five possible scenarios for NATO's development within a decade or two. The scenarios are not mutually exclusive, and some are variants of others.

### *Scenario 1: Continuity*

The first scenario is a picture of continuity, in other words an organization which continues to adapt to the threats as it has over the last three decades but which does not substantially change, neither in its missions nor in the positioning of its member states. In this hypothesis, the 2022 Strategic Concept and later modifications endorse the basic trends of the last twenty years; the Alliance continues to evolve, through the combination of its know-how in defence matters with a growing involvement in security issues of all kinds – as recommended in the NATO Secretary General's "NATO 2030" agenda. Such a scenario is likely, barring any unforetold event which would cause a breakdown. Institutions are inherently difficult to change, and any Allied consensus to opt out of continuity is hard to imagine.

This scenario does not prejudice NATO's performance in implementing the agenda of the new Strategic Concept. With an improved performance combined with renewed cohesion among its members, NATO would be an essential player. In contrast, failure to deliver coupled with growing divergence of purpose among its members could lead to scenario 5 – marginalization.

### *Scenario 2: Renewed focus on collective defence*

In this second hypothesis, NATO refocuses on its core business of collective defence, leaving aside more generic and not necessarily military threats. At least two sets of developments could encourage this: on the one

hand the return of the Russian threat (and future confirmation of its existence), and of power competition more generally, which have endowed NATO anew with a central role in deterrence and defence; or alternatively, the questioning of NATO's role in crisis management, both in terms of general rethinking about the constraints of large operations operating far from Allied territory and the special lessons drawn from the Libyan and of course Afghan contexts. A number of countries – those who fear Russia in particular – favour this renewed focus,<sup>2</sup> which would allow NATO to bolster its credibility on an arguably narrow segment but one for which it does have a real comparative advantage. For NATO to be credible in this vision of the future, Europeans would need to commit more (including financially) to the European pillar of the Alliance.

But NATO would also incur the risk of no longer contributing to answering a wide array of threats, which although not traditional, are nonetheless real. This version of the future would also give the European Union a wider margin to deal with security issues not strictly linked to defence. This would also imply that NATO would play its part in countering the threat from China, mainly from a defence posture, and in the geographically limited area of the Atlantic (unless collective defence is also interpreted to mean force projection). This would mean that considerable effort would have to be made by Europeans *in Europe*, in order to free up the Americans to operate, outside of NATO, in Asia.

### *Scenario 3: Transformation into a security organization*

The third alternative is the slow transformation of the Alliance into a security organization, to the detriment of its prowess in terms of defence. There are a significant number of issues threatening the security of Allies which are non-military in nature and there is pressure for the Alliance to position itself on these dangers. Terrorism, instability in the South, climate change, pandemics, uncontrolled migration, a sizeable range of the so-called hybrid threats, such as disinformation, cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure – all of these are challenges against which NATO does not necessarily have first responder abilities but which are gradually moving into its focus. NATO would embrace those tasks at the expense of its military role. It would risk dilution, and then incrementally lose relevance as a strictly military actor, especially since developments in technology aggravate the disparities between Allies in the military domain.

There would also be further competition with the

European Union in this scenario, since both organizations would be operating in the same environment. NATO would have a security-based global agenda, built around the notion of resilience, capacity-building and countering hybrid threats. But it would no longer have the comparative edge in “high spectrum” activities, a narrow segment of military operations for which only a handful of countries still have the know-how.

### *Scenario 4: China, the new raison d'être*

This fourth version of the future could be a variant of scenarios 2 or 3 but deserves its own separate place by virtue of the possible implications for the Alliance. In this setup, China becomes the main focus of NATO's attention because the confrontation between the “Western camp” and China has become one of the mainstays of international politics. NATO, thus, becomes a privileged tool in the West's

*The third alternative is the slow transformation of the Alliance into a security organization, to the detriment of its prowess in terms of defence*

policy for containing China, either in its role of collective defence, or in power projection in the Indo-Pacific area, or both.<sup>3</sup> To do this, NATO develops partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, in particular with like-minded countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Korea.

This scenario may provide NATO with a new *raison d'être*, but would also raise doubts about consensus within the Alliance on the nature of the new direction, on its implications for defence against Russia, as well as on the spectrum covered by NATO (defence, security, politics, other). This scenario could also be the US way of trading support for Europe (against Russia) for European backing of the US policy on China. In the event of a 360° confrontation with China, then the European Union would also play a significant role.

### *Scenario 5: Marginalization*

In this final scenario, NATO is marginalized, either because it becomes increasingly ill-adapted to threats, or because it no longer tallies with US demands. This could happen if there were to be an all-out confrontation between the US and China in which the Europeans would refuse getting NATO involved. Pushing the scenario to the extreme would mean the dismantlement of NATO triggered by US withdrawal. Such an event must be mentioned because a number of sources have

2 See M. Dembinski and C. Fehl (eds.), “Three visions for NATO”, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021.

3 See B. Jones, “The future of NATO in an order transformed”, Brookings, Washington, DC, 14 June 2021.

referred either to President Trump's 2019 statements favouring a US withdrawal, or the eventuality of a US withdrawal should Trump be reelected for a second mandate.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the sociology of the American electorate makes it impossible to exclude the scenario of a new Trumpian president at the White House.

More generally, the future of the Alliance will be determined by the degree of support it garners from public opinion in member countries, and their governments. This became a case in point under Trump's presidency but could also apply to other Allies, where public opinion is expressed in mass opposition to certain aspects of NATO policy – in the nuclear domain, for instance – or when openly NATO-hostile political parties come to power. Brexit has exemplified how the

the result of NATO's inadequacy in the face of evolving threats, leading to a subsequent return to national policies and bilateral defence agreements. Some European states could be satisfied by bilateral agreements with the US, others by a greater role for the European Union or multilateral non-institutionalized frameworks. These alternatives could be the cause or the consequence of NATO's marginalization.

### Towards the Alliance's relevance

The five scenarios cited above are more or less desirable according to one's idea of the role of the Alliance, and more or less likely (see table below) depending on the development of other parameters.

### Five scenarios for the future of NATO

	Scenario 1 Continuity	Scenario 2 Refocus on Collective Defence	Scenario 3 Transformation into a Security Organization	Scenario 4 China, NATO's new <i>raison d'être</i>	Scenario 5 Marginalization
<b>Threat spectrum dealt with by NATO</b>	<i>Large</i>	<i>Narrow</i>	<i>Very large</i>	<i>Large</i>	---
<b>Level of US engagement</b>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Medium/Strong</i>	<i>Low/Medium</i>	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Low or non-existent</i>
<b>Level of European engagement</b>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Medium/Strong</i>	<i>Low/Medium</i>	<i>Medium/Strong</i>	<i>Low or non-existent</i>
<b>Degree of probability</b>	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Low</i>

public policies practiced by international organizations can be questioned radically, with a greater or lesser amount of rational reasoning behind.

Another development which could marginalize NATO would be the emergence of the European Union as a security and defence provider, together with a relative disengagement by the Americans. In this case, the European Union would, to a degree, replace NATO. Finally, marginalization could come about as

Policy makers may consider this exercise of limited benefit but the scenarios point to plausible developments that could buttress the Alliance's relevance, or jeopardize its very existence if not handled with care.

NATO's official narrative stresses both the success and adaptability of the organization over time. In this window of opportunity that is both post-Afghanistan and pre-China, the next Strategic Concept should capitalize on what the Alliance needs to do and does well, rather than venture into areas NATO is ill-equipped to succeed in, or just simply – should abstain from; so that maladaptation, marginalization or irrelevance do not prevail.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Bolton, *The room where it happened: a White House memoir*, Simon & Schuster, 2020; "Trump Discussed Pulling US From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia", *New York Times*, 14 January 2019.



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