ARTICLE

NATO's Transformation into a Global Actor in the Age of Great Power Politics

Tarık OĞUZLU *

Abstract

Founded as a collective defense alliance in the early years of the Cold War era and then transforming itself by acquiring new missions during the U.S.-led unipolar period between 1991 and 2008, NATO is once again trying to redefine its core rationale amid growing geopolitical confrontations among key global actors, such as the U.S., China, Russia and the EU. This article mainly seeks to answer to what extent the resurgence of great power rivalries might pave the way for NATO's transformation into a credible global security organization in the emerging century. Although the chasm between the U.S. and its European allies has continued to widen in recent years, cohesion among NATO members with respect to the emerging multipolar world order and how Russia and China should be handled is now more vital than ever to the persistence of NATO as a credible global security actor. NATO's future will also be informed by how Russia and China view the existing liberal international order in general and NATO in particular. This article contends that NATO's transformation in the coming years will be increasingly informed by the evolving dynamics of great power politics.

Keywords

NATO, great power competition, alliance transformation, global actors, the West.

* Professor, Antalya Bilim University, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Antalya, Turkey. E-mail: tarik.oguzlu@antalya.edu.tr. ORCID: 0000-0002-5422-6203.

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Introduction

As the focus of international politics continues to shift from the transatlantic to the Indo-Pacific region in an emerging multipolar world order, NATO is trying to adapt itself to this new reality. Founded as a collective defense alliance in the early years of the Cold War era, and subsequently transforming itself by taking on new missions during the U.S.-led unipolar era between 1991 and 2008, NATO is once again trying to redefine its core rationale amid growing geopolitical confrontations among key global actors, such as the U.S., China, Russia and the EU.

This article mainly seeks to answer to what extent the resurgence of tensions in relations between the western world/actors and major non-western powers, such as China and Russia will pave the way for NATO's transformation into a credible global security organization in the emerging century. Russia's recent adventures in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine and Syria, and its waging of hybrid warfare against Western democracies have led many Westerners to conclude that Russia now poses the most important challenge to Western security interests across Europe and beyond. Likewise, China's spectacular rise in global politics over the last decade is another challenge facing the alliance.

The U.S. now defines China and Russia as its global rivals. Both the National Security Strategy document of December 2017 and the National Defense Strategy document of January 2018 mention Russia and China as global rivals to be reckoned with.[1] A recent document issued by the White House in May 2020 defines China as the number one challenge to American primacy and spells out the wisest strategy to adopt to address it.[2] Looking from the American perspective, then, NATO should be transformed into a robust global security alliance that aims to contain Russia and China. If NATO's European members do not share this American position on NATO and increase their defense spending accordingly, NATO's relevance to American security interests will likely decrease in the years ahead. The rift between the transatlantic partners seems to have widened in the post Covid-19 era, as the degree of anti-Americanism across Europe spectacularly increased following the failure of the U.S. to demonstrate credible global leadership. The Trump administration's decision to scale down the American military presence in Germany, in part as a reaction to the reluctance of the German Prime Minister to attend the G7 meeting held in the U.S. in fall 2020, seems to have added further insult to injury.[3]

Unlike the U.S., the European allies seem to be divided as to how to approach Russia and China. Will they increasingly view Russia and China from a geopolitical perspective rather than a geoeconomic one? Even if they increasingly see these countries more as potential rivals or challenges than partners or opportunities and begin improving their hard power capabilities, will they do so within the framework of NATO—or the EU?

What if the bulk of the European allies no longer believe in the credibility of the U.S. as the main security provider of the liberal international order? How will such European perceptions of the U.S., particularly in the wake of the Trump presidency, affect NATO's cohesion in the future? It is well known that the chasm between the U.S. and its European allies has continued to widen in recent years. Yet cohesion among NATO members with respect to the emerging multipolar world order and the way Russia and China should be treated is now more vital than ever to the persistence of NATO as a credible global security actor. Do the NATO allies believe that the growing political, economic and military cooperation between Russia and China amounts to the emergence of an anti-Western/anti-NATO alliance in the greater Eurasian region?

NATO's future will also be informed by how Russia and China view the existing liberal international order in general and NATO, the security organization of this order, in particular. If they consider the existing liberal international order illegitimate and take further steps to improve their bilateral cooperation in economic, political and military fields, this might indirectly contribute to the revival of NATO by pushing Americans and Europeans to cooperate more than ever. How, for example, might the recent surge in China's assertive and muscular foreign policy during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis affect the future of NATO? Can one now confidently argue that the European allies have lately come closer to the American perception of China, given that the EU now defines China as a systemic rival to be reckoned with?[4] That said, it would not be an overestimation to suggest that NATO's transformation in the coming years will be increasingly informed by the evolving dynamics of great power politics.

This article is written with a view to offering an intellectual exercise as to how the future of NATO might evolve in light of growing great power competition. The piece should be seen rather as an attempt at offering food for thought on such a vital issue than an original research article aiming at hypothesis testing. In this sense, the article will first discuss NATO's transformation since the end of the Cold War era until a multipolar order began emerging in the late 2000s. Then an attempt will be made at demonstrating the main characteristics of the security understanding and international vision of the major global actors that have been increasingly interacting with each other in a multipolar setting. The ways in which the U.S., the EU, China and Russia define their security interests, and how they approach the existing international order are almost certain to have a great impact on how NATO will evolve as a security alliance.

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NATO's Transformation during the Unipolar Era

Having existed in limbo for a long period of time and embracing new missions outside its traditional collective defense mandate, NATO now seems to be once again at a critical juncture in its history. When NATO was established in 1949, it was assigned three main functions to fulfill: to keep the U.S. in, Germany down and the Soviet Union outside Europe.[5] Faced with the existential communist threat to the East, the U.S., the architect of the postwar-era liberal international order, decided to boost the security and economic resilience of the West by midwifing multilateral organizations of a different kind in Western Europe. Rather than bilateralism, multilateralism shaped the American way of dealing with Western European countries. American military presence in Europe, the reasoning went, would be considered more legitimate within multilateral security platforms. NATO and the EU have long been viewed as the two most important institutional linchpins of the Western international community. Bringing the liberal-democratic capitalist states of the transatlantic area together would not only help the West defeat the Soviet menace more easily, but also facilitate the economic and political integration process among European allies by domesticating Germany. Despite periodical crises within the Alliance, in particular concerning the burden-sharing debate, NATO members united around common strategic priorities, threat perceptions and political values throughout the Cold War era.

Indeed, NATO members not only united around common threat perceptions during the Cold War years, but also shared some common political values and norms. Those values also lay at the roots of the liberal international order. Since its foundation, NATO has stood for the security cooperation of the liberal democratic states of the transatlantic area. It had been established against the communist Soviet Union in the past, and some now argue that NATO should be refashioned as the security organization of the so-called league of liberal democracies against the so-called league of authoritarian states.

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Although the Cold War era appeared to have come to end with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this has not prevented NATO from continuing to exist. Although the allies have continued to quarrel among themselves on as many diverse issues as possible, their commitment to NATO membership has endured all hardships. Instead of leaving the alliance and charting their own ways, NATO allies have continued to value NATO's existence.

Lending support to NATO's adoption of new tasks, they have contributed to NATO's cohesion.[6] NATO's enlargement toward the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe; its prioritization of crisis-management tasks outside the scope of Article-5 missions; its building up of security partnerships with many countries in the Middle East, Northern Africa and the Gulf regions; its development of institutional cooperation with other international organizations like the EU; its entering into security cooperation with such global partners as India, Japan and Australia; and its identification of defeating transnational terrorism as its key task in the post-9/11 era have all contributed to its relevance during much of the post-Cold war era. NATO's latest strategic concept, adopted at the Lisbon summit in 2010, defines the core mission of the alliance as collective defense, comprehensive security and cooperative security.[7]

Despite its successes, since the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, NATO allies have been quarrelling with each other as to how to redefine the rationale of the alliance. The most important challenge has been finding a common strategic purpose in the absence of common enemies. Neither the transnational terrorism threat posed by Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, nor the promotion of Western liberal values to the erstwhile communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, nor the internal crises in war-torn countries on Europe's peripheries, nor the growing salience of such issues as immigration, organized crime, trafficking in drugs or piracy seem to have replaced the Soviet threat as the glue connecting all NATO members to each other through unbreakable bonds.[8] Nevertheless, the unipolar era in which many believed that history came to an end with the victory of liberal democracy, the widespread perception of the U.S. as the indispensable nation and the zenith of the EU's soft power, seems to have shrouded NATO's internal crisis. For example, neither the national security strategies adopted by the George W. Bush and Obama administrations in the U.S., nor the first-ever security strategy document of the EU adopted in 2003, mentioned great power competition and ideological polarization as potential threats leveled against the fabric of the liberal international order.[9]

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Indo-Pacific region. It is not only that the growing material power capabilities of non-Western powers, most notably China, put a dent in Western primacy, but also that the ideational and normative underpinnings of the U.S.-led liberal international order has come under attack. Maintaining NATO as a credible and relevant security organization has become increasingly difficult as multipolarity has gradually set in in global politics.

Revitalizing NATO as a Global Security Actor in the Emerging Multipolar Order

Before ascertaining the prospects of NATO's redefinition as a Western security alliance against the authoritarian states of the non-Western world, it is worth taking a moment to describe the characteristics of the emerging multipolar order in brief.[10] Over the last decades, great power competition and the accompanying search for spheres of influence have shaped international politics. As hardcore geoeconomic and geopolitical motivations have gradually informed states' foreign policy behaviors, the dynamics of alliance relationships have also changed in decisive ways. During the last decade, long-term identity-based alliance relationships have been replaced with short-term, pragmatic and issue-oriented strategic partnerships. The practice of forming interest-oriented cooperation initiatives within multilateral and bilateral frameworks has gained ground in recent years. In today's world, countries of different value orientations, geographical locations, power capabilities and threat perceptions are no longer bound to define each other categorically as enemies or friends. The notion of 'frenemy' has already become an identity signifier in interstate relations. The practice of coalitions defining missions has gradually given way to the practice of missions defining coalitions. In contrast to the Cold War bipolarity and the unipolar order during the first two decades of the post-Cold War era, the practice of illiberal authoritarian states engaging in pragmatic, outcome-oriented cooperation with liberal-minded states is now conceivable.

Even though the emerging world order evinces some characteristics of bipolarity, it is much closer to multipolarity. First, the evolving geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China is not as rigid as the one between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War era—not only because the degree of economic interdependence between the U.S. and China far outweighs the one between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, but also because neither the U.S. nor China has been proselyting its distinctive political, economic and social values in a missionary fashion. Second, the strategic

choices facing other powers are numerous today. Many small and middle powers alike do not have to choose either one of these two behemoths as committed warriors. Their maneuvering capability has increased in parallel to the growing, complex interdependency among many actors. Neither the U.S. nor China is powerful enough to impose its strategic choices and values onto other states in a top-down manner. It is even likely that if many middle powers were to join their capabilities and coordinate their foreign policies, they might be able to form credible balancing coalitions against the U.S. and China.

What Does Russia Want?

The atmosphere in relations between the West and Russia appears to have fundamentally changed over the last decade. Russia has lately come into the international limelight once again following its annexation of Crimea, the support that it gives to separatist groups in eastern Ukraine, its military involvement in Syria on the side of the Assad regime and its continuous political meddling in Western liberal democracies. Russia is believed to have been acting as a nineteenth century power in the twenty-first century.

This state of affairs has led many in the West to argue that Russia's geopolitical revival under Putin's rule now offers NATO the opportunity prove its resilience and relevance in the emerging multipolar era.[11] There are some reasons for this. First, Russia has overtly challenged the post-Cold War era European security order by annexing part of a sovereign country in Europe into its territories. Worse, Russia did so by using brute force. The use of force in interstate relations in Europe has long been castigated as inappropriate and illegitimate. The whole story of the European integration process dating back to the early postwar era is about throwing realpolitik considerations and geopolitical rivalries into the dustbin of history.

Second, Russian leaders argue that the European security order should be rebuilt on the principles of great power cooperation and spheres of influence. In Russian strategic thinking, Western institutions, most notably NATO, should not be the main regional platforms in which questions of European security are discussed. One particular Russian priority is that Western powers recognize Russia as a great power and redefine the security structure in Europe in close cooperation with Russia. Coming from an imperial legacy and with immense material power capabilities at its disposal, particularly compared to other countries in its neighborhood, Russians claim that Russia deserves a special status in European security architecture and is entitled to have its own sphere of influence.

Russian decision-makers believe that Western powers promised Russia not

to enlarge NATO toward Russian territories in return for Russian acquiescence to German unification and united Germany's ascension to NATO in the early 1990s. Despite such Russian expectations, however, NATO continued to enlarge closer to the Russian border. Nevertheless, in 1997, the NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed, whereby Russia would be able to join NATO meetings in Brussels without having the right to vote on final decisions. The incremental reductions in the military budgets of NATO allies, the near elimination of NATO's tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and the signing of cooperative agreements with Russia in 1997 and 2002 constitute the background against which NATO enlarged to Central and Eastern Europe. Russia seems to have acquiesced to NATO's enlargement in return for NATO's promises not to deploy nuclear weapons and permanent conventional troops in the territories of new members.

Despite the chill that the Kosovo crisis created in Russia's relations with Western powers, relations began gathering new momentum with the formation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002. Further, Russia was admitted to the G-7 group in 1998 as a consolation prize for not arguing against NATO's decision to admit Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic to membership in 1999.

Relations took a negative turn in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as the Bush administration supported the so-called color revolutions across the post-Soviet geography, first in Georgia, then in Kirgizstan and then in Ukraine, hoping that the successful implementation of liberal democratic practices in those countries would bring to power pro-American regimes. From Russia's perspective, these revolutionary movements were masterminded by Western circles and carried out by local agents. And indeed, the promotion of democratic values in Russia's near abroad cannot be seen as isolated from the geopolitical competition between Russia and the West. Notable in this context is the American support to the NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine. The NATO summit held in Bucharest in 2008 decided that Georgia would join NATO sometime in the future, pending its transformation into a democratic and capitalist state. From a Russian perspective, any NATO-led involvement in the internal affairs of other countries without the approval of the UN Security Council appeared illegitimate and illegal.

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Third, Russia's challenge to Western/European primacy is also normative

and ideological. The social and political values that the current Russian leadership espouses are in abject contradiction with Western values. Russia acts as the most ardent supporter of traditional religious, social and political values, and many of these values are opposed to the secularism, universalism, liberalism and individualism of the Western world.[12] Russian society is built on the primacy of patriarchal and traditional communal values, rather than of self-regarding individualistic morality. Russian society evinces a predisposition to communitarian ethics over individualistic or cosmopolitan ethics. If NATO were to embody the constitutive norms of the Western international community, then Russia's willingness to embrace traditional values should be considered a threat.

Russia offers an example of a traditional nation-state, in which sovereignty, state survival and territorial integrity are still the most important security issues. Having the largest stockpile of nuclear weapons all over the world, possessing sophisticated conventional military capabilities and sitting on a huge land mass with abundant natural resources are considered to be Russia's main power resources. To Russian rulers, there are no universally-agreed-upon human rights and the use of force in the name of 'responsibility to protect' only masks Western imperial designs on other places. Russian uneasiness with many multilateral UN-led operations can be seen in Kosovo in 1999 and Libya in 2011. The Russian position on the Syrian crisis also reveals that the principle of not interfering with states' internal affairs, no matter how severe the internal conditions are, should be kept sacrosanct. The historic talk Putin delivered at the Munich Security Conference in 2017 is now considered by many as the harbinger of Russian desires to hollow out the foundations of the liberal international order.[13]

Russia defines itself as a 'sovereign democracy' and abhors Western attempts at preaching the virtues of liberal democracy and universal human rights. From a Russian perspective, historical experiences, geopolitical realities and cultural values produce different conceptualizations of democracy across the globe.

In order to voice its strong criticism against Western aggrandizement credibly, however, Russia needed to recover from its economic malaise under the strong leadership of President Putin. Russia's improving economy and the Western powers' growing need to seek Russia's help in responding to the geopolitical challenges of the post-9/11 era seem to have emboldened Russian leaders to openly air their grievances with respect to the pillars of the liberal international order.

Fourth, the overwhelming importance that Russian strategic documents

place on nuclear weapons, both strategic and tactical, in the materialization of Russian security interests, suggests that NATO members would do well to increase their defense spending and build up NATO's conventional and nuclear weapons capabilities, particularly in regions bordering Russia. For NATO to preserve its credibility in the eyes of its members, particularly those bordering Russia, it needs to improve its reassurance and deterrence capabilities.

Finally, many Russia observers argue that Russia is quite adept at playing the infamous 'divide and rule' game in its relations with European states. Rather than addressing the EU or NATO as single-voice, credible international actors, Russia prefers to talk to Western/European states bilaterally. For instance, Russian oil and gas companies present alternative deals to different European states. The well-known example in this regard is the Nord Stream II gas pipeline project connecting Germany directly to Russia. As part of its efforts to woo European allies away from the U.S., the post-Cold War era Russian leadership has consistently sided with key European allies such as France and Germany whenever these countries had strong geopolitical and foreign policy disagreements with the U.S. Likewise, Russia feels sympathy with any European call for a multipolar world order in which Europe and the U.S. might part ways. The Russian leadership would feel content with any European initiative that might potentially hollow out NATO from within.

Moreover, Russian support to illiberal, populist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti-EU and anti-globalist groups across Europe should be seen as Russian attempts at helping create structural divisions within the continent. To Russian critics, Russia has already declared a political warfare against the West that increasingly evinces the thought of former Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov.[14] This will likely be seen as threatening NATO's internal cohesion and persuasive power vis-a-vis Russia. Russian threats to NATO emanate not only from growing Russian military prowess in its near abroad but also from Moscow's efforts to increase its influence across the West through the adoption of hybrid tactics, among which political manipulation and disinformation campaigns and supporting pro-Russian political movements stand out the most.

Russian overtures to build a quasi-alliance with China in the greater Eurasian region have attracted further Western ire. However, despite the growing strategic rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing in recent years, one should not conclude that these countries want to establish a military alliance like NATO. The closer Russia comes to China, the stronger the Russian message that Russia is not without alternatives. Active Russian

agency in the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICSs should be read as Russia's growing determination to soft-balance against the West.

Recently, the intensification of the trade war and a Cold War-like confrontation between the U.S. and China seem to have added up to Russia's geopolitical clout, because this time China appears to be quite willing to improve its relations with Russia. The recent visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Russia in early June of 2019 undoubtedly demonstrates that these two countries have now entered into a new stage in their relations, with strategic considerations shaping the tenor of those relations more decisively than ever.

China and the Liberal International Order

While the Chinese see their country's efforts to leave behind 'centuries of humiliation' as China's rightful return to its glorious days, the majority of Westerners tend to feel skeptical about the end results of this process. China is not questioning the Western-led international order in a revolutionary fashion. What it wants is to see its growing ascendance in global power hierarchy accommodated institutionally and peacefully. In case of Western reluctance to do so, China does not hesitate to mastermind the establishment of alternative institutional platforms under its patronage.[15] For example, through such initiatives as 'One Road One Belt' and the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, China is trying to give the message that there is a mutually constitutive relationship between its development at home and the development of others abroad. The goal is to bring into existence China-friendly regional and global environments in which China's march to global primacy will not only be uncontested but also accommodated easily. Despite the beliefs of Chinese rulers of the past in the superiority of their civilization and their country as the Middle Kingdom, they did not adopt an imperial mission whose driving logic was to conquer non-Chinese territories and project Chinese norms and values onto others in a universalistic imperial fashion. Reminiscent of its ages-old historical background, today's China is not pursuing a strategy of global hegemony akin to that pursued by the U.S. since the end of the Second World War.

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Chinese leaders have long been of the view that as China grows more powerful each passing day, both militarily and economically, other states would likely accommodate China and pay their tribute to Beijing in return for economic benefits and security provisions. China's rulers today view China as a benign power having legitimate claims to occupy a central place in East and Southeast Asia. To their minds, Chinese values are superior and China is vital to the developmental needs of many states across the globe. Chinese leaders seem to be very much against the idea of seeking a cosmopolitan vision of uniting all civilizations in a single, universal civilization. They are vociferously against the practices of setting global standards of human rights because they tend to believe that rules, values and norms are relative and products of different time and space configurations.

This does not, however, mean that China does not adhere to a certain set of rules, values and norms in its state-society relations and external dealings. Indeed, what seems to set China apart from Western powers is its commitment to state-led capitalism, society-based morality, hierarchical organization of societal relations, centralized administrative system, defensive realpolitik security culture and Confucian understanding of the Chinese state as a civilization.[16]

Since the late 1970s, when Chinese leaders decided to open up China, the assumption on the part of Western decision makers has been that China would gradually evolve into one of the responsible stakeholders of the liberal international order and embrace that order's core values, such as the consolidation and promotion of the principles of individual entrepreneurship, democratic governance, minimum state involvement in the economy, rule of law, free trade, the secularization of societal relations and respect for multiculturalism. As China grows richer, they imagined, it would gradually transform into a liberal democracy.[17] The main reason for such optimism was the fact that China benefited from becoming a part of the capitalist world economy, and its double-digit economic development was long made possible by its economic interaction with the U.S.

That Chinese rulers have been pursuing the so-called 'peaceful rise/peaceful development' strategy in their neighborhood since the late 1970s appears also to have encouraged American leaders to prioritize a 'strategy of engagement' over a 'strategy of containment' in their relations with China. China has not completed its internal transformation process yet, and for this to happen without interruption, a stable external environment is critical. So stability in East and South Asia remains in the interest of both China and the U.S. In other words, China cannot risk its internal transfor-

mation process at home by confronting its neighbors and key global actors, such as the U.S., head-on.

However, China's transformation into a state-led capitalist economy has not ensured its adoption of liberal democratic political values. Growing disillusionment on the part of American decision makers appears to have pushed them to reconsider China as a strategic rival, if not an existential enemy, to reckon with. The U.S. under both the Obama and Trump administrations has characterized China as the most important challenge facing American hegemony.

Today, the U.S. has already replaced the 'strategy of engagement' with the 'strategy of containment.' A bipartisan consensus has emerged in the U.S. that China's adoption of an ambitious stance in global politics, and its continuing salvos against the liberal international order warrant a radical change in the U.S. approach toward China, away from engagement to containment.

Despite this trend, at closer inspection, it seems that the maintenance of regional and global stability is still in China's national interests. As of today, particularly given the protectionist trade war that then President Trump waged on China and China's galloping internal challenges, Beijing is not in a position to risk the gains of its ongoing development process by adopting a hardline approach toward the U.S. and its neighbors. China has the largest financial reserves in the world and its access to the American market, technology and foreign direct investment is still important for its economic modernization. China does not have the luxury of postponing its transformation into an economy in which Chinese companies produce mainly technology-intensive, high-value-added goods and domestic consumption increases to such an extent that China's economic development is not negatively affected by recessions and contractions in developed Western economies. The Chinese economy cannot survive long on the principles of export-led growth and high domestic savings. Besides, an aggressive stance against its neighbors would likely push them closer to the arms of the U.S., thereby tarnishing Chinese attempts at manufacturing soft power.

China has now become the number one trading partner not only of its neighbors to the South and East, but of many developed countries in the West. China is still the global factory of merchandise goods and it needs to import many raw materials from abroad because it is a resource-poor country. If China wants to benefit from its growing economic relations with other countries, for instance through the Belt and Road Initiative, the message that Chinese leaders have long been giving should continue to resonate:

China's rise also means the rise of others. For China's 'no-strings attached' development aid policy not to be seen as imperial, China's economic rise should continue to benefit others as well as itself. The improvement of the infrastructural capacities of the countries on which China is dependent for raw materials and to which China exports goods is, in the final analysis, in China's national economic interests.

China's challenge to the liberal world order closely correlates with its civilizational state identity and the core values of Chinese society, such as the father-like status of the state in the eyes of the people, unitary state identity, territorial integrity, realpolitik security culture, societal cohesion, primacy of family bonds over individuality, primacy of state sovereignty over popular sovereignty, the state's unquestioned involvement in economics and social life, the primacy of responsible and ethical statesmanship over electoral legitimacy, resolving conflicts through societal mechanisms and trust relationships rather than legal instruments, the primacy of hierarchical relations within the society over egalitarianism and the primacy of shame culture over guilt culture.

Another key characteristic of China's rise is that despite all counter-allegations that Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive and aggressive over the last decade, Chinese leaders seem to have been following a low-key foreign policy orientation by avoiding rigid positions on global issues unless its core national interests are at stake, as they are in the status of Taiwan, Tibet, the Uighur region, the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Chinese leaders also avoid taking on global responsibilities. This is a challenge, mainly because the costs of maintaining global stability and preserving global commons will dramatically increase without Chinese contribution. Yet this reluctant approach to global governance might suggest that China is not resolved to replace the U.S. as the global hegemon.

That said, the financial crisis that severely hit Western economies in 2008 seems to have turned everything upside down. The crisis not only weakened the EU's likelihood of becoming a global power, both in the economic and normative sense, but also made it abundantly clear that the success of the American economic model is to a significant extent tied to the interdependent economic relations developed with the non-Western world, most notably China. The crisis and its aftermath have made it unavoidably clear that the U.S. is today the most indebted country on earth, whereas China is the number one creditor country. Majorities across the globe seem to believe that China, the aspiring hegemon, is on the rise, whereas the U.S., the incumbent hegemon, is in terminal decline. The relative failures

of the Trump administration to manage the Covid-19 disease at home and to offer credible global leadership abroad seem to have encouraged Chinese leaders to pursue more assertive foreign policies, not only in China's neighborhood but also globally.

While Chinese leaders view China's spectacular rise in global politics as a direct consequence of the end of the age of humiliation, the U.S. sees in China a strong competitor bent on ending the decades-old American global hegemony. While the Chinese see the end of the 'age of humiliation' as China's legitimate return to its glorious past and the normalization of world history, quite a number of Westerners feel aghast at the prospect of China hollowing out the roots of Western dominance in global politics. In Chinese thinking, China had occupied the center stage of global politics for centuries by the time Western nations outpaced China in terms of economic output, technological innovations and military capabilities in the nineteenth century. Many Chinese believe that China is not an ordinary country, but a civilization-state, whose spectacular rise will surely produce tectonic effects in global politics.[18]

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An Alliance in the Making? Decoding Russian-Chinese Cooperation

Recent years have seen Moscow and Beijing come closer to each other. Is an alliance now in the making between Russia and China? This article asserts that Russia's recent strategic rapprochement with China cannot be understood without taking into account the dramatic, negative turn in Russia's relations with the West. Russia's relations with the U.S. reached their nadir following the alleged claims that Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential elections by overtly working for the success of one candidate, Donald Trump, at the expense of the other, Hillary Clinton. Despite all the intentions of President Trump to help improve relations with Putin's Russia, both Congress and the majority of the American public alike have now adopted a negative tone toward Russia. Despite Trump's transactional approach toward European allies and extremely critical stance toward the value of NATO, America's contribution to NATO's deterrence and reassurance capabilities has dramatically increased over the last five years.

Russia's strategic rapprochement with China has also been driven by the worsening of relations between China and the U.S. over the last decade. According to Graham Allison, it is highly likely that a war will occur between the established global power and the rising power because the established power will not want to lose its hegemony and privileges within the system emanating from its unrivalled power status.[19] According to this logic, if the U.S. does not want to see its global hegemony under threat in the years to come, it would do well to help contain China's rise now. Therefore, the downward spiral in American-Chinese relations can be attributed to the meteoric rise in China's material power capabilities relative to those of the U.S., and the fear this has instilled in American decision makers.

Russia and China are both realpolitik security actors that believe in the primacy of hard power capabilities and tend to define security from the perspectives of territorial integrity, national sovereignty and societal cohesion. Both countries believe that the unipolar era between the early 1990s and the second half of the 2000s was a historical aberration, and that a multipolar environment is required to maintain global peace and stability. Similarly, Russian and Chinese leaders share the view that both Russia and China are entitled to wield geopolitical influence in their neighborhoods and curb American penetration into their regions. A common view shared by both countries is that Western claims to universal human rights, and universal standards of political legitimacy and morality are wrong and, should they be pursued at the point of a gun, the end result will be global instability and war.

Russia and China are both realpolitik security actors that believe in the primacy of hard power capabilities and tend to define security from the perspectives of territorial integrity, national sovereignty and societal cohesion.

The growing rapprochement between Russia and China is more a growing strategic partnership of convenience than a well-orchestrated initiative to help bring into existence a NATO-like collective defense alliance. To be precise, the growing strategic cooperation between Russia and China within the UN, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS is an example of soft balancing.[20]

Both Presidents Putin and Jinping see each other as best friends and have taken pride in visiting each other more than thirty times since Xi Jinping's coming to power in 2012. China is Russia's number one trading partner, and the volume of bilateral trade is a little more than one hundred billion

U.S. dollars. Yet Russia is not among China's top trade partners. Russia mainly sells oil and gas to China, whereas China predominantly exports manufactured merchandise goods to Russia. The Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Chinese-led BRI have merged with each other as parts of the "Greater Eurasian Partnership." Both countries are the two most powerful members of the SCO and the so-called BRICS community. Their military cooperation is also noteworthy. Russia is the number one arms exporter to China, and Chinese military modernization has been made possible, among other factors, by Russian technology transfers. Both countries organize joint military exercises in different locations across the globe. Their diplomatic cooperation within the UN and other international settings is also remarkable.

However, it is still the case that both countries define their relations with the U.S. as more vital to their security and economic interests than their own bilateral relations. It seems that neither Russia nor China would accord the other the big brother role in an emerging alliance relationship.

America and the World

Since the foundation of the U.S., its leaders have not shown strong enthusiasm to pursue ambitious policies abroad to institutionalize American dominance unless other continents, most notably Europe and Asia, came under the domination of anti-American power blocks or any global power threatened U.S. national interests by trying to establish a strong presence in America's near abroad.[21] However, since the early years of the Cold War era, the U.S. has shifted toward an 'internationalist' mentality and an active promotion of its values to other places in the name of its national security interests. Despite the fact that 'realists' and 'isolationists' have traditionally abhorred adventures abroad and argued against the use of force unless vital national interests were at stake, they have nevertheless sided with liberal internationalists in defining the U.S. as an exceptional country in terms of its norms and values.

The end of the Cold War era paved the way for strengthening American primacy across the globe, as no other power was in a position to shake up the foundations of this unipolar era for about fifteen years. The 1990s and much of the 2000s demonstrated that the U.S. was the indispensable power on earth. The enlargement of NATO and EU toward former communist countries bolstered U.S. primacy in Europe, whereas the percolation of the so-called Washington consensus across the globe solidified the capitalist and liberal-democratic principles in other locations. Hence, the

famous 'End of History' thesis of the prominent American scholar Francis Fukuyama.

Yet the steady increase in the material and ideational power capabilities of non-Western powers, the growing costs of military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq, the abject failure of American nation-building projects across the globe and the economic crisis that hit the Western world severely in late 2008 have led Americans to go through a soul-searching process over the last decade.

Both the Obama and Trump administrations recognized that the U.S. should no longer play the role of global hegemon in maintaining peace and security. If not rejecting the role of playing the role of the leader of the liberal international order outright, the U.S. now wants to share the costs of maintaining this order with its traditional allies in Europe and across Asia. The main message given by Washington over the last decade is that American support to the security interests of traditional European and Asian allies should be earned, rather than taken for granted.

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In the Obama and Trump administrations, America's focus turned to the focus is now on great power politics and competition. Dealing with China and Russia now appears to be more important than focusing on humanitarian interventions, counter-terrorism and democracy promotion. The latest National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, adopted in late 2017 and early 2018, respectively, testify to this new mentality. An introverted approach and increasing aversion to military engagements abroad seem to have strengthened the realist, pragmatic and isolationist tendencies in U.S foreign policy. Hence growing calls for grand strategies that adopt restraint, retrenchment or offshore balancing.[22]

Americans appear to have rediscovered that their nation is now more an Indo-Pacific than a transatlantic one. Whereas today's America seems to adopt a mixture of containment and engagement strategies vis-à-vis China – 'congagement' – Putin's Russia is viewed more as an anti-American headache than an existential global security threat. Americans do not put Russia on an equal footing with China; Russia is a regional power in decay, whereas China is a global power on the rise.

With Donald Trump's election in late 2016, bilateral relations between the

U.S. and Russia turned extremely negative. Despite Trump's intentions to improve relations with Russia on a transactional and pragmatic logic, as well as his sympathy with Putin's strongman rule in Russia, there is now a bipartisan consensus in the U.S. Congress that Russia deserves to be punished for its illiberal authoritarian turn and overt political interference with the American presidential elections.

A sizable number of American troops have now been deployed to Poland, and American efforts to fortify NATO's military presence in Central and Eastern Europe have tremendously increased.

From the American perspective, NATO would do well to acquire a non-European character during the post-Cold War era by adopting more global missions both as a collective security organization and an expeditionary military machine. Despite the fact that the U.S. had in the 1990s objected to the idea of the EU replacing NATO as the prime security organization in Europe, the Bush and Obama administrations gradually reversed this attitude and the U.S. has encouraged the European allies to take on more security responsibilities since 9/11.

The European allies should both speed up their integration process within the EU and contribute more strategic and military capabilities to NATO. Dealing with the challenges arising from a resurgent Russia, instability in the Balkans and growing anarchy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is first and foremost the responsibility of the European allies. What happens in these locations affect Europe more than the U.S. It is now abundantly clear that the U.S. does not want to channel too much of its attention and capabilities to European and Middle Eastern security challenges. Rather, it would like to see its European allies pay much of the bill in such theatres.

For example, the U.S. is not opposed to a reinterpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, which forbids both the Japanese use of force in contingencies other than self-defense and Japan's participation in collective defense cooperation with third countries. In American eyes, the rise of China and its alleged military assertiveness in East China and the South China Sea is not a threat solely posed to the U.S.: Traditional American allies in the region also feel threatened. Therefore, Washington is keen on the point that defensive security cooperation among American allies in the region is vital. Similar to allies in Europe, East Asian allies should not take it for granted that the U.S. will come to their aid automatically.

Moreover, the gradual replacement of postwar generations on both shores

of the Atlantic by millennials, who are more inclined to take the peace dividends of the globalization process for granted, is likely to hollow out the alliance from within. The power of the security elites within the alliance, particularly in the U.S., who had first-hand experience with the horrors of the Second World War and the psychology of the mutually assured destruction of the Cold War era, has been in decline. New elites in the U.S. have been for a while looking to the Pacific as the new epicenter of global politics, whereas their European counterparts focus their attention on salvaging their post-modern peace project in the face of new-age challenges. That is to say, NATO has not been front and center in transatlantic politics for some time.

European Union, Wake Up!

The EU of today is far from fulfilling the desired goals that its founders set decades ago. At stake now is the EU's ability to deal with emerging modern challenges while remaining true to its post-modern aspirations. Despite all its intention to help midwife a post-modern polity at home and become a role model for others abroad, the EU appears to have underestimated how influential a role traditional power politics would continue to play in Europe and abroad.

The EU has to a great extent failed to deal with the emerging security problems in its near abroad because of its over-reliance on American security protection. The American commitment to European security has long enabled European allies to direct their resources to economic development and the integration process, indirectly diminishing their ability to stand on their feet. Freeriding on American security protection has not only made it difficult for Europeans to develop their own distinctive approaches to many global security issues, but also led them to believe that they could continue underinvesting in their security capabilities. Even though America's favorability rates have declined sharply in recent years, Trump's harsh treatment of allies might push Europeans to coordinate their foreign and security policies more than ever.

The Europeans have long dreamed that the post-modern values of the EU integration process, such as cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, secular universalism, multiple interdependencies and soft-power oriented policies abroad, would help them leave modern practices of balance of power politics, realpolitik security strategies, self-other distinctions and the prioritization of hard power instruments in interstate relations far behind. However, the revival of realpolitik security challenges in Europe's neighborhood, such as Russia's actions in Ukraine, Syria and Eastern Europe and growing

instabilities in North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, undoubtedly demonstrate that its non-realpolitik security understanding and practices are now, still, on shaky ground.[23]

It is also now the case that illiberal, populist, anti-integrationist, anti-immigrant and anti-globalist parties have become quite powerful across Europe. This makes the task of preserving the EU's post-modern values even more difficult. If many center-left and center-right parties fail to provide credible solutions to the current problems of many European people and continue to lose elections to fringe parties, this might further erode the legitimacy of Brussel-based EU institutions as well as the idea of Europeanness. As the ongoing efforts to defeat Covid-19 crisis have demonstrated, Europeans have increasingly adopted solutions at national and local levels. This might inadvertently hollow out the legitimacy of European institutions and make it difficult for the EU to transform into a credible global actor speaking with one voice.

The UK's exit from the EU struck a fatal blow to the EU's credibility as a strategic actor on a global level. Neither Germany nor France can steer the European ship in the uncharted waters of the emerging century. The EU now suffers from a lack of leadership problem.[24] It is still far from certain that Germany has accepted the challenge of providing leadership inside the union, and we also do not know whether France, one of the two engines of the integration process, and other members would acquiesce to German leadership. Doubts still exist about whether Germany might turn out to become the European behemoth in the UK's absence. The specter of Germany evolving into a normal foreign policy actor adopting a realpolitik worldview in dealing with emerging challenges at the European and global levels still irks many member states, while majorities in Germany are still lukewarm to the idea that Germany should prioritize a realpolitik international identity at the expense of its hard-won civilian and normative power identity.

Far from having established itself as a credible actor speaking with one voice, the EU now appears as a weak geopolitical actor in the eyes of other global actors. The U.S., Russia and China all continue to employ the time-tested strategy of divide-and-rule in their relations with EU members. All see the EU as a playground in their geopolitical games. Partnership with European countries inside NATO and

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the EU is a must for the U.S. to defeat the Russian challenge in Eastern Europe and contain the Chinese challenge in East Asia, while courting the pro-Russian EU members and supporting the pro-Russian social and political groups across the continent is Putin's preferred strategy in helping create fissures inside the transatlantic community. Last but not least, China is also courting friendly countries inside the EU, the latest being Italy, in the hope that this will not only deprive the U.S. of strategic partners but also enable China to help materialize its One Road One Belt project in the emerging connectivity wars.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, one can now argue that the last decade has witnessed five important geopolitical developments, of which three might potentially help rejuvenate the alliance, whereas two might further dilute its cohesion and legitimacy. To start with the developments that might offer NATO members new justifications to rejuvenate the alliance, one could mention the resurgence of Russian revisionism in and around Europe, the growing Chinese challenge to the primacy of the liberal international order across the globe and the negative consequences of the lack of good governance in the larger MENA region on European security.

Despite the fact that there is not a common view within the alliance on the nature of the challenge that Putin's Russia poses to the transatlantic security environment, nor how to deal with it, Russian assertiveness in Ukraine and the Middle East seems to have led NATO allies to conclude that today's Russia is living in the age of nineteenth century balance of powers politics and condones the use of military means to secure geopolitical ends. NATO summits convened over the last decade attest to the fact that deterrence and reassurance have once again become vital to the preservation of the Alliance. Despite the critical rhetoric of the Trump administration, American military presence in Eastern Europe has increased and NATO allies have conducted more military exercises than ever since the early 1990s. Russia's political meddling in Western democracies and increasing reliance on cyber-warfare tactics seem to have united the allies around the common purpose of redesigning the alliance as a bulwark against a potential Russian threat.

The negative consequences of the post-Arab spring developments on European social peace and economic prosperity are also well-documented. For European allies to deal with the challenges of terrorism and immigration,

which one can confidently link to developments in the MENA region, cooperation within NATO has once again proved to be of vital importance.

What is unique about the threats posed by Russian revisionism and the developments taking place in the MENA region is that such threats endanger European interests more decisively than American ones. It is Europe, rather than the U.S., that should see NATO as vital to its security interests in this context. This is also to say that if the European allies want to see the U.S. remain committed to the Alliance and help Europeans meet such challenges successfully, they should increase their military contributions to the alliance budget and undertake more security responsibilities than ever.

On the other hand, China's spectacular rise is *the* geopolitical development that will impact the future of the alliance most profoundly in the years to come. Despite the fact that Americans tend to interpret China's ascendancy through geopolitical and geostrategic lenses, while Europeans adopt a more economic perspective, the need to deal with China is growing more and more important with each passing day. Containing China's rise has already become the number one preoccupation of successive American administrations over the last decade. There is still a long way to go for European allies to view China from a more 'American' perspective. Yet China's attempts at shaping a more pro-Chinese attitude across Europe through the adoption of Russian style divide-and-rule tactics will likely help awaken European allies to the Chinese challenge. Unlike the Russian and MENA challenges, the Chinese challenge seems to preoccupy the U.S. more than the European allies. What this points to is that if the U.S. wants to see the European allies adopt the American perspective on China and help contain the rising dragon, it needs to reassure them of America's commitment to European security. All these trends suggest that NATO will be around for years to come because both the Americans and Europeans will continue to benefit from it, albeit for different geopolitical reasons.

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The factors that could contribute to the erosion of the cohesion and legitimacy of the alliance are the growing neo-isolationist trend in the U.S. and the rise of populist and nationalist currents across the European continent. Starting with Obama and continuing apace with Trump, the American public has gradually adopted a more skeptical at-

titude toward the liberal internationalism of the postwar era and the U.S. acting as the sole global security provider. When this is combined with the Trump era's nativist nationalism, one could even argue that America's NATO membership can no longer be taken for granted. Whether or not Trump used the threat of 'leaving the Alliance' solely to nudge the European allies to invest more in their armies, his misgivings about the liberal international order is likely to have a corrosive impact on NATO's future.

Brexit, combined with the growing salience of illiberal populist political movements across the European continent, suggests that NATO's future prospects are becoming even darker. Although the UK's membership in NATO will not be affected by its exit from the EU in a technical manner, Britain's departure from the EU will likely endanger the psychological bond between London and other European capitals. Continental Europeans have already given strong signals that, post Brexit, European allies will look more to the EU than to NATO in finding solutions to their security problems.

While many Central and Eastern European countries, as well as the three Baltic republics, view Russia as their key geopolitical challenge, many Western and European allies are predisposed to see both Russia and China more from a geoeconomic than geopolitical perspective. While they feel quite concerned about the challenges that China and Russia pose to the roots of the liberal international order, the Western European allies seem to share the view that adopting a tough geopolitical approach toward Russia and China would likely diminish any hope left to help revitalize multilateral global governance in the years to come. From a European perspective, it would not be possible to achieve long-term peace and stability across the European continent if Russia were to be excluded from the European security architecture as a legitimate player. Indeed, pushing Russia further into a corner would endanger European security. A similar situation prevails in the context of the Europeans' relations with China. China offers Europe immense opportunities to tap into. It is quite notable that Germany is not buying into American pressure to stop cooperating with Russia in the Nord Stream II project, nor are many European allies heeding the American warning that they would do well to prevent China from building the 5G telecommunication infrastructure across the continent.

Given that the U.S. is no longer as committed to European defense at it was in the past and does not want to act as the sole leader of the liberal international order any longer, it behooves the European allies to develop their own capabilities to survive as an herbivorous actor among such

carnivorous powers as Russia, China and the U.S. The willingness of the European allies to mantle such a role in the emerging global order is now more evident than ever, and the head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Layen has underlined that the EU will have to evolve into a geopolitical actor. This seems to explain why the EU has recently mentioned China in its documents as a systemic rival while signing off on NATO's latest communique in late 2019 that the rise of China and Russia now offer both opportunities and challenges.

European members of NATO would likely invest in building up their hard and soft power capabilities if this were the only way for them to protect their decades-old achievements alongside the EU-integration process. They need to acquire a more geopolitical vision in order to survive in the emerging great power competitions. It remains to be seen, however, whether they will build up their geopolitical identity within a NATO or an EU framework. It is also uncertain whether they view the U.S. as a committed believer in the liberal international order—or as a rouge global power that adopts a zero-sum perspective toward international politics and sees the world from a sphere of influence mentality. It is an open-ended question whether the transatlantic allies will be able to refashion NATO as a credible global security actor that meets the challenges of the emerging century.

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