



Research Division

NATO Defense College

# NDC POLICY BRIEF

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## The strategic argument for a political NATO \*

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The 1949 Washington Treaty is a remarkably brief document consisting of a preamble and 14 articles. The Treaty describes only the political commitments and obligations of the signatories. It does not articulate a requirement for NATO members to spend a certain amount of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defense nor does it specify the military capabilities that a NATO member must possess to defend the Alliance.

From 1949 to the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO was *the* singular locus of geopolitical discussion between North America and Europe. These were not easy discussions, yet the Alliance weathered strident policy and geopolitical policy differences. NATO also endured its members temporarily ceasing to be democracies due to military coups or concern about Communist influence on NATO governments. With a political body standing on the shoulders of a credible military deterrence, Allies were able to deploy creative problem-solving skills to bridge political differences, such as the policy innovation of deterrence and *détente*, while pursuing other, quieter methods, such as the temporary suspension of sharing sensitive

intelligence from compromised NATO governments.

Unfortunately, NATO's centrality as a political forum greatly diminished after the Cold War as the Alliance reduced its political consultations in a less demanding geopolitical environment. Despite occasional interruptions of intense political discussion related to conflict in the Balkans and the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, US retrenchment, combined with Europe's inward focus, minimized NATO as a political forum. NATO was increasingly consumed by tactical decisions on out-of-area operations and transatlantic policy divisions over the Iraq War which fueled both Europe's desire for greater autonomy and America's questioning of the military utility of its Allies. NATO leaders substituted tactical – albeit important – military decisions regarding troop contributions, placement, and caveats as a substitute for political discussion. This political drift has now become so great that NATO members have begun to withhold support for the defensive planning of other Allies and new disputes between NATO members have the potential to escalate.

### Keywords

[Political NATO](#)

[Cohesion](#)

[Democratic deficit](#)

[North Atlantic Council  
Consultations](#)

### A return to NATO's founding articles

What bound the original 12 NATO members and what binds the 30 Allies today is still the preambular language of the Washington Treaty: NATO members resolve to “unite their efforts” not only for their collective defense but also “for the preservation of peace and security”.

In his NATO 2030 reflection process, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has advocated for an “increase in political coordination between Allies”

\* This *Policy Brief* on the *political* dimension of the Alliance is the first of a series of three texts that the NDC releases in relation to the NATO 2030 process. The other two texts will look at the *military* aspects and at the *global* dimension of NATO's future.

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and “more consultations on issues including economic matters related to security” noting “we have the procedures in place [...] but what we need is political will to use them”.<sup>1</sup>

What would the political will look like? First and foremost, NATO members must view NATO and the North Atlantic Council (NAC) as the principle and singular political forum for the discussion of all regional and global political and security matters which impact North America and Europe. While it is indeed more challenging to conduct such high-level

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discussions at a table of 30, the end result of those deliberations has the potential to be thirty times as powerful.

Restoring NATO's centrality after such a prolonged political drift will be no easy task, notwithstanding the Biden administration's welcomed enthusiasm for NATO. In practice, this means that Washington would have to initiate, likely delay and

ultimately conclude most major geopolitical decisions at the NATO table.

The US would use the NAC on a near constant basis with frequent interventions at very senior levels (which may be easier to do in a virtual environment – although less satisfactory) for comprehensive discussions on a broad range of regional and functional challenges. The US would thus have to place a senior ranking official as the next Ambassador to NATO with significant geopolitical gravitas (such as a former Secretary of State or Defense or National Security Advisor). The US would also need to be willing to share detailed intelligence briefings and conduct painstaking diplomacy to bring Allies along on key geopolitical issues while accepting that it will be unable to do so on all its policy preferences. Decades-long practice of the US controlling, ignoring or forcing NATO to do or not do things will have to be resisted. In other words, the US will need to better manage and more selectively deploy its overwhelming military strength and economic power. It must subdue its preferences for more flexible and broad “coalitions of the willing” for the conduct of military operations outside of NATO. Because the US-Europe military

asymmetry is so great, however, the US political instinct to dictate and direct NATO will be difficult to overcome.

Finding the political will to restore NATO's political centrality may be even more difficult for some European NATO members. It is hard to imagine that a French President would acknowledge that NATO is the leading transatlantic geopolitical forum and security provider and that European security and defense efforts are either subordinated to or closely coordinated with it. Although it has been well over a decade since France returned to NATO's integrated military command and President Macron does “believe in NATO” and supports a “more political approach”, he also repeatedly emphasizes the need to “rebalance transatlantic relations” away from overdependence on the US. This is so because the US and Europe do not have the same “level of priority” on each issue, including the need to “protect Europe's borders”.<sup>2</sup> While both sides rationalize and justify their decisions, these views underscore the depth of the challenge.

### Addressing NATO's democratic deterioration

While it is essential for NATO to be the key geopolitical discussion forum, it is time for the NAC to become a forum for discussion related to those NATO members who fail to “safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law”, as described in the preamble of the Washington Treaty. Several NATO members currently violate the spirit of the Washington Treaty with impunity. The Alliance has been neither willing to acknowledge these violations nor has it viewed this democratic deterioration as a fundamental challenge to NATO's security on par with acts of Russian aggression.

The uptick in anti-democratic behavior of a growing number of NATO members must be discussed at the NATO table. 2020 marked the 14<sup>th</sup> year of a global “democracy recession” as 11 Allies have been cited as having deteriorated in upholding the rule of law, media freedom and the functioning of government as consolidated democracies, to include the United States for the first time by the Freedom House “Freedom Index”.<sup>3</sup>

The economic recovery of many NATO members following the global pandemic is likely to be anemic

1 J. Garamone, “NATO Defense Ministers to discuss future of Alliance during ministerial”, US Department of Defense, 15 February 2021.

2 All quotes are from “Intervention du Président Emmanuel Macron dans le cadre de l'édition spéciale de la Conférence sur la sécurité de Munich 2021”, 19 February 2021.

3 S. Repucci, “Freedom in the world 2020: a leaderless struggle for democracy”, Freedom House, 2020.

and uneven. Europe's diminishing economic vitality will be further exacerbated by its demography, fueled by the pandemic and an aging population. These negative demographic shifts may heighten anti-migration sentiment and xenophobia at a moment when a generational change in European leadership brings forward new voices who likely have no particular or strong interest in or attachment to military alliances or transatlantic security.

The presence of these centrifugal forces by 2030 is not to suggest the futility in restoring NATO as the essential transatlantic political forum, but to underscore the urgency of the task. Internal issues must be discussed to strengthen NATO cohesiveness before these forces so weaken the Alliance's resolve and unity that its defense and deterrence posture are fatally compromised.

The depth of this internal NATO political challenge makes the recent recommendation of creating a "code of conduct" by NATO members who derogate from their democratic and treaty-based principles (as noted in the NATO 2030 Experts Reflection report) understandable, but insufficient in relation to the challenge posed. Due to longstanding Alliance inaction, NATO members have understood that there are no costs to anti-democratic actions or actions that jeopardize NATO's deterrence and defense capabilities. Some even receive additional political attention which may further serve their domestic agenda with little cost to their standing in and receipt of security benefits from the Alliance.

This democratic deterioration has increased tensions between NATO members. As domestic political environments within NATO members grow more polarized, nationalized, fragmented or democratically fraught, one observes an uptick in intra-NATO tensions. In some cases, NATO's response has been to deploy the good offices of the Secretary General and to create mechanisms for de-confliction. But NATO staff will need to allocate more time and resources to managing these growing internal tensions as they are exploited by NATO's strategic competitors.

NATO should turn to the Washington Treaty to address its democratic deficit. Under Article 4, a NATO member can "consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened". Political independence can be threatened from within. Although Article 4 is rarely and typically used when a NATO member's territorial integrity is threatened, invoking it is a sobering occasion due to its proximity to Article 5. But in dire circumstances, an Article 4 consultation could raise issues regarding a member's political independence

from a strategic competitor's malign influence. Article 8 (on the compatibility between the Washington Treaty and other international engagement) could also be invoked when members "enter into international engagements in conflict with" the Washington Treaty, if such engagements undermine international peace and security.

Should a NATO member take an action that reduces the collective defense and deterrence capabilities of the Alliance, NATO must take steps to defend the Alliance. When a NATO member acquires military equipment or technology from a country against which the Alliance is actively defending its members, NATO operational and defense capabilities are compromised, weakening the defense of the entire Alliance. In response, NATO might seek to suspend NATO classified material to that Ally as well as suspend it from NATO defense planning processes. A NAC meeting would be held to discuss the action of the NATO member, allowing that member an opportunity to explain its decision and any remedial actions it has taken. Should the action of the member state continue to endanger the security of NATO, an emergency NAC could be held under Article 8 to determine what additional steps could be warranted to include temporary suspension of membership.

When NATO members actively take steps to degrade democratic institutions to such an extent that they cease to meet their obligations under the Washington Treaty and/or become so susceptible to adversarial influence that the situation is a threat to the integrity of the Alliance, an Article 4 consultation might arrest the most egregious behavior as other steps are considered, such as temporary suspension from receiving NATO classified information (this already happens on a national level without formal acknowledgement) and attendance at select NATO functions. Should democratic standards continue to worsen, while extraordinary, temporary suspension of membership should be considered. Bilateral initiatives by NATO members (e.g., economic sanctions, reduced bilateral engagement) with the member in repeated violation of the Washington Treaty would further supplement NATO's response.

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## A renovated and reconstructed NAC

The use of the NAC, as prescribed in Article 9 of the Washington Treaty, is to “consider matters concerning the implementation of this Treaty. The Council shall be so organized as to be able to meet promptly at any time”. The NAC is the guardian of the Treaty and it must ensure all members are held accountable to the Treaty. And while it would be controversial and

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put Alliance unity at risk to conduct such internal reviews, it would reinforce the centrality of the NAC and the Washington Treaty to all external and internal matters – and the increasingly blurred lines in-between. If NATO is to be restored as the premier forum, the NAC's agenda must be completely renovated, reconstructed and made relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Just as the NAC can be used to address internal division, it can equally embrace internal division on external policies by anticipating and confronting emerging challenges early and often, such as the Arctic region or problematic security dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean. The more the political instinct to keep an item off the NAC agenda because it is divisive or there are Alliance sensitivities, the quicker the item must go on the agenda. While it is true that all of NATO's 30 members do not share the same threat perception or assessment, all members must share the responsibility of addressing these threats (internal as well as external). Political unity does not have to be achieved with agreement by all 30 members, but a comprehensive political discussion can. In other words, NATO must practice, exercise, encourage and nurture difficult policy discussions, all under the auspices of the Washington Treaty.

Not all NATO political discussions should occur at the NAC-level though. NATO International Staff should promote more off-site, “away days”, and informal discussions among both Allies and partner countries. Opportunities should also be sought to incorporate NATO Parliamentarians in some of these informal discussions to strengthen public policy and political discourse. There could be a series of *ad-hoc* and permanent regional and functional policy groups. NATO members could rotate chairing these groups to develop deeper expertise and greater insights in areas such as North Atlantic/Arctic/High North; Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant; Africa (with special focus on the Sahel); Iran; China and the Indo-Pacific; Space; Arms Control; and New developments in cyber capabilities.

To more fully support and sustain NATO as a geopolitical forum, consideration should also be given to restructure the NATO Assistant Secretary Generals and their immediate staff to better support the creation of such *ad hoc* and semi-permanent working groups. The expert, think-tank and academic community could also be called upon to provide support as well analysis. The chairs of these working groups should be encouraged to brief the NAC frequently and interact with the NATO Parliamentarians.

## The essential political dimension of the Alliance

Transforming and reorienting NATO as a political organization as well as restoring the NAC as the premier guardian of the Washington Treaty will be an incredibly difficult and fraught task; but it is essential. There are clear risks that NATO's unity may be compromised in the process, but NATO inaction will only intensify its disunity and ultimate diminishment. It is much preferred to have a future NATO Secretary General's spend her or his time strengthening NATO's unity, collective defense and deterrence capabilities rather than de-escalating tensions between NATO members.



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