

NATO as a community of values and its new political role

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In a context inevitably marked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept risked being exclusively focused on the Russian threat and the collective defense of the Eastern flank of the Alliance. Fortunately, recognizing that the current and forthcoming strategic environment includes a multiplicity of other complex and often interconnected threats, risks and challenges, the new Strategic Concept approved on June 29 at the Madrid Summit includes several other relevant aspects for the readaptation of NATO to a new era. We highlight here two particularly decisive ones: the reaffirmation of the Alliance as a community of values and the strengthening of its political role.

NATO AS A COMMUNITY OF VALUES

What characterizes a true “security community” – and, at the same time, distinguishes it from strictly “collective defense” alliances or from “collective security” and “cooperative security” frameworks – is the communion of values among its members, which is why membership is also more restricted and demanding. Since its inception, NATO was conceived as more than a military alliance. As stated in the Preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty, Allies “are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law...”.¹ As such, over its more than 73-year history, NATO has consolidated itself as a transatlantic community of shared values, underlined in all its Strategic Concepts, including the previous one, from 2010, where it is stated that “the Alliance remains an unparalleled community of freedom, peace, security and shared values” and “NATO member states form a unique community of values”.²

However, democratic values and the “liberal world order” eroded and started to be contested and disputed again, due to the expansion of authoritarianisms, nationalisms, protectionisms, populisms, and “illiberal democracies”.³ For example, the 2022 Freedom in the World report by Freedom House

is, significantly, subtitled “The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule”, recording “16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom”.⁴ This dire picture is confirmed by the Economist Intelligence Unit, whose 2022 edition of its *Democracy Index* recorded the worst state of global democracy since the index was first published in 2006.⁵

Democracies are being undermined from within by illiberal, nationalist and populist forces. Freely elected leaders and parties from Brazil to India, but also from NATO countries such as Turkey, Hungary, Poland or even the United States at the end of the Trump presidency, took or threatened to take a variety of anti-democratic actions. The consequent breach of shared values among democracies led to a weakening of these values on the international scene. At the same time, autocratic regimes have expanded power and influence in the international system, becoming more effective in cooperating with or circumventing norms and institutions designed to support basic freedoms, and in helping others who wish to do the same. In particular, Xi Jinping’s China and Vladimir Putin’s Russia have actively challenged liberal political values, exported authoritarianism, and encouraged more authoritarian approaches to governance. Many of the freest states have seen their democratic norms challenged and fractured, and



In particular, Xi Jinping's China and Vladimir Putin's Russia have actively challenged liberal political values, exported authoritarianism, and encouraged more authoritarian approaches to governance. Pictured are Putin and Xi Jinping during a video conference in December 2021 (photo: Kremlin.ru / CC BY 4.0)

countries that have wavered between democracy and authoritarianism, meanwhile, are increasingly leaning towards the latter. Indeed, it is impossible to ignore the damage done to the reputation of democracy, as well as to the liberal international order.

Therefore, it is vital that NATO assert itself as a community of values, with its mission continuing to be closely associated with the defense and promotion of democratic values and a liberal international order. This is reaffirmed in the Madrid Summit Declaration, with the Allies “united in our commitment to democracy, individual liberty, human rights, and the rule of law... We are committed to upholding the rules-based international order”.⁶ Likewise, the new Strategic Concept “underpins our efforts to safeguard our nations, societies and shared values”, stating in its Purpose and Principles that the Allies “are bound together by common values: individual liberty, human rights, democracy and the rule of law”. It offers an open-door policy “to all European democracies that share the values of our Alliance”.⁷

Second, the 2022 Strategic Concept recognizes that “Authoritarian actors challenge our interests, values and democratic way of life” and “promote authoritarian models of governance”. It highlights the Russian Federation - whose “willing-

ness to use force to pursue its political goals undermine the rules-based international order” – and China, whose “stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values... It strives to subvert the rules-based international order, including in the space, cyber and maritime domains.”. It further adds that the strengthening of the strategic partnership between China and Russia “and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests”.⁸

Thirdly, therefore, the new Strategic Concept reaffirms the Allies’ willingness to “stand up for our shared values and the rules-based international order”. On the other hand, the world order is at a turning point, and if defenders of democratic values do not work together to help ensure a liberal order, the authoritarian model will prevail. Hence the relevance of the Strategic Concept’s underlining that “Partnerships are crucial” not only to protect the global commons and enhance NATO resilience, but also to “uphold the rules-based international order”.⁹

The reaffirmation of the Atlantic Alliance as a “community of values” is crucial for the Allied countries, their political forces and societies; candidate and putative candidate countries for NATO membership; partners interested in strengthening

or creating cooperative ties with the Atlantic Alliance; and also autocratic regimes, starting with China and Russia, thus faced with a NATO committed to defending and promoting democratic values and a liberal international order. Strangely, in this Strategic Concept, NATO never refers to the “liberal international/world order”, preferring the term “rules-based international order”.

NATO’S NEW POLITICAL ROLE

During the Cold War, in addition to the collective defense of the Allies and the containment of the expansion of the USSR, NATO consolidated itself as the main political forum for transatlantic dialogue and cooperation, playing a decisive role in maintaining peace between the countries of Western Europe. It promoted the economic and commercial interdependencies between the two sides of the North Atlantic, stimulating mutual development and prosperity. It encouraged the European integration process and the expansion and consolidation of democracy in Western Europe. With the end of the Cold War, this political role of the Atlantic Alliance was reinforced, contributing decisively to the expansion of liberal democracy to Eastern European countries. It fostered “European reunification” by embracing former adversaries and supported the EU’s CFSP/CSDP and the Union’s enlargement and deepening processes. NATO helped to globalize the liberal order and “universalize” shared values around Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law, and it promoted cooperative security mechanisms with external partners. Through its political role, NATO has been transformed and has adapted to new geopolitical realities, consolidating itself as a security and defense organization and a cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security.

However, whereas the military dimension has remained robust, the political role of the Alliance has been relatively undervalued and underused. This role is decisive today, perhaps more important than ever, due to the combination of multiple intra-NATO and external factors. Within the Alliance differences have accumulated between European and transatlantic Allies, some of which may worsen again. The Alliance faces a new geopolitical context generated by BREXIT (with support from Trump’s US), now with not one but two large European countries (Turkey and UK) that are not EU Member States but are NATO members. On the other hand, the forthcoming accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO reduces the number of EU member states outside the Atlantic Alliance to four and considerably increases the direct border with the Russian Federation. NATO needs to take into account the will and efforts of the EU to advance its “strategic autonomy” (of course, vis-à-vis the US and NATO) and European fears regarding the American commitment to European security in light of the Asia/Indo-Pacific priority in US foreign and security policy. The desire of several countries to join NATO can create new dividing lines between “included” and “excluded”

and also between Allies. And finally there is the continuing issue of American pressure towards “burden-sharing” and the difficulties and resistance of numerous European countries in meeting the agreed commitments with regard to Defense expenditure.

In addition, there are important “external” dynamics and factors that require political monitoring and coordination: an international system undergoing rapid mutation and uncertain evolution; a great variety and complexity of threats, risks and challenges, making it difficult to establish priorities and define common strategies and approaches; the divisive potential of Russia and China and the maneuvers of Moscow and Beijing to divide the Allies; and the diversity of partner actors and potential partners, with their respective agendas and concerns, making it more problematic to establish productive and coherent partnerships. In a context of deconstruction and regression of the liberal international order, it is imperative that NATO assume a central role as an Alliance of democracies and as a platform to establish and coordinate both policies based on common values and cooperative security strategies.

For all these reasons, it is vital to relaunch and strengthen the political role of the Atlantic Alliance¹⁰, and the Madrid Summit and the 2022 Strategic Concept were important steps in this direction. From the outset, the Summit provided an image of cohesion between Allies that had not been seen for a long time, highlighted in the decisions taken and in the Madrid Summit Declaration: the start of the process for Finland and Sweden joining the Alliance, the vehement condemnation of Russia and the unequivocal support for Ukraine, the references to China’s challenge, and the approval of the new Strategic Concept.

Second, the 30 Allies met in Madrid with many of NATO’s partners: the Heads of State and Government of Australia, Finland, Georgia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Sweden, and Ukraine, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission, as well the Foreign Ministers of Jordan and Mauritania, and the Defense Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Particularly significant, the four Asia-Pacific partners (Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand) participated for the first time in an Atlantic Alliance Summit. A paradigmatic example of the new political role of NATO and the necessary political cohesion between Allies is the reference to Russia and China in the new Strategic Concept. Russia is no longer seen as a partner and is defined as “the most significant and direct threat”, so NATO “will enhance resilience against Russian coercion and support our partners to counter malign interference and aggression”.¹¹ China is referred to in a NATO Strategic Concept for the first time, described as a “challenge” that poses “systemic challenges”, before which the Allies “will boost our shared aware-



With the end of the Cold War, the political role of the Atlantic Alliance was reinforced, contributing decisively to the expansion of liberal democracy to Eastern European countries. Pictured is the accession ceremony of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to the North Atlantic Treaty in 1999 with the Prime Ministers of those countries and NATO Secretary General Dr. J. Solana and Mr. G. Goetze (Deputy Executive Secretary) (photo: North Atlantic Treaty Organization)

ness, enhance our resilience and preparedness, and protect against the PRC's coercive tactics and efforts to divide the Alliance".¹²

The new Strategic Concept expressly states that NATO is "the unique, essential and indispensable transatlantic forum to consult, coordinate and act" and that it will continue to reinforce a "political unity and solidarity and to broaden and deepen our consultations to address all matters". It is also significant to define the EU as "a unique and essential partner for NATO", either because "NATO Allies and EU members share the same values" or because "NATO and the EU play complementary, coherent and mutually reinforcing roles in supporting international peace and security", stating the predisposition to "enhance the NATO-EU strategic partnership, strengthen political consultations and increase cooperation on issues of common interest.". At the same time, NATO recognizes "the value of a stronger and more capable European defence that contributes positively to transatlantic and global security", while underlining the determination of all Allies to "meet the commitments under the Defence Investment Pledge, in its entirety" and "to ensure that increased national defence expenditures and NATO common funding will be commensurate with the challenges of a more contested security order".¹³

In addition to the partnership with the EU, the 2022 Strategic Concept underlines that NATO will strengthen "political dialogue and practical cooperation" with other partners, from the UN to regional organizations such as the OSCE and the African Union, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia or Ukraine and regions of strategic interest to the Alliance, including the Middle East and North Africa, the Sahel and, for the first time, Asia/Indo-Pacific. Significantly, the document reaffirms the decision taken at the 2008 Bucharest Summit with respect to Georgia and Ukraine. Also noteworthy is the commitment to "strengthen our ties with partners that share the Alliance's values and interest in upholding the rules-based international order" and an approach that "will remain interest-driven, flexible...and able to adapt to changing geopolitical realities".¹⁴

NATO'S RAISON D'ÊTRE

The NATO community of values is not a panacea, and its political role is not always properly valued. But for NATO to successfully adapt to the new geopolitical and geostrategic realities these factors are crucial. Without communion and sharing of values, the Alliance would no longer be a true security community and it would be more difficult to establish common interests. Without political cohesion among the Allies, NATO's powerful defense capabilities are worth less. Without



The 2022 Strategic Concept underlines that NATO will strengthen “political dialogue and practical cooperation” with other partners, and regions of strategic interest to the Alliance and, for the first time, Asia/Indo-Pacific. Pictured are Anthony Albanese (Prime Minister of Australia); Fumio Kishida (Prime Minister of Japan); NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg; Jacinda Ardern (Prime Minister of New Zealand) and Suk Yeol Yoon (President of Republic of Korea) (photo: NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization)

political articulation, the Alliance’s three core tasks of deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security cannot be realized. Without constructive political dialogue, the differences between Allies cannot be overcome or mitigated. Without political articulation, it is not possible to formulate common and coherent strategies. Without political unity, the Transatlantic Alliance will not be able to: project security and stability to its periphery, either to the East or to the South, or to other areas of the globe; effectively address the many risks and threats; establish fruitful partnerships with external partners; or deal with major revisionist powers like Russia and China. Without shared values and political cohesion, it is not possible for NATO to be the pillar of democracy and the rules-based international order.

The new Strategic Concept ends by stating that NATO “guarantees our peace, freedom and prosperity. As Allies, we will continue to stand together to defend our security, values, and democratic way of life”.¹⁵ This is, and will remain, the true *raison d’être* of the Atlantic Alliance.

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15. *Idem*, paragraph 49.