



ARGUMENT

An expert's point of view on a current event.

Which NATO Do We Need?

Four possible futures for the trans-Atlantic alliance.

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A soldier of the Polish Army sits in a tank as a NATO flag flies behind during the NATO Noble Jump military exercises of the VJTF forces on June 18, 2015 in Zagan, Poland.

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In a world of constant change, the endurance of the trans-Atlantic partnership stands out. NATO is older than I am, and I'm no youngster. It has been around even longer than Queen Elizabeth II reigned in Britain. Its original rationale—to "[keep](#) the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down"—is less relevant than it used to be (Russia's war in Ukraine notwithstanding), yet it still commands reflexive reverence on both sides of the Atlantic. If you're an aspiring policy wonk hoping to make your mark in Washington, Berlin, Paris, London, etc., learning to praise NATO's enduring virtues is still the smart career move.

This longevity is especially remarkable when one considers how much has changed since NATO was formed and the idea of a "trans-Atlantic community" began to take shape. The Warsaw Pact is gone, and the Soviet Union has collapsed. The United States has spent 20-plus years fighting costly and unsuccessful [wars in the greater Middle East](#). China has risen from an impoverished nation with little global clout to the world's second-most-powerful country, and its leaders aspire to an even greater global role in the future. Europe itself has experienced profound shifts as well: changing demographics, repeated economic crises, civil wars in the Balkans, and, in 2022, a destructive war that seems likely to continue for some time.

To be sure, the "trans-Atlantic partnership" hasn't been entirely static. NATO has added new members throughout its history, beginning with Greece and Turkey in 1952, followed by Spain in 1982, then a flurry of former Soviet allies beginning in 1999, and most recently Sweden and Finland. The distribution of burdens within the alliance has fluctuated as well, with most of Europe cutting their defense contributions drastically after the end of the Cold War. NATO has also gone through various doctrinal shifts, some of them more consequential than others.

It is therefore worth asking what form the trans-Atlantic partnership should take in the future. How should it define its mission and distribute its responsibilities? As with a mutual fund, past success is no guarantee of future performance, which is why smart portfolio managers seeking the best returns will adjust a fund's assets as conditions change. Given past changes, current events, and likely future circumstances, what broad vision should shape the trans-Atlantic partnership in the future, assuming it continues to exist at all?

I can think of at least four distinct models going forward.

Model 1: Business as Usual

One obvious approach—and given bureaucratic rigidity and political caution, perhaps the most likely one—is to keep the present arrangements more or less intact and change as little as possible. In this model, NATO would remain primarily focused on European security (as the phrase "North Atlantic" in its name implies). The United States would remain Europe's "first responder" and unchallenged alliance leader, as it

has been during the Ukraine crisis. Burden-sharing would still be skewed: America's military capabilities would continue to dwarf Europe's military forces, and the U.S. nuclear umbrella would still cover the other members of the alliance. "Out-of-area" mission would be deemphasized in favor of a renewed focus on Europe itself, a decision that makes sense in light of the disappointing results of NATO's past adventures in Afghanistan, Libya, and the Balkans.

To be fair, this model has some obvious virtues. It's familiar, and it keeps [Europe's "American pacifier"](#) in place. European states won't have to worry about conflicts arising between them as long as Uncle Sam is still there to blow the whistle and break up quarrels. European governments that don't want to trim their generous welfare states to pay the costs of rearmament will be happy to let Uncle Sam bear a disproportionate share of the burden, and countries closest to Russia will be especially desirous of a strong U.S. security guarantee. Having a clear alliance leader with disproportionate capabilities will facilitate more rapid and consistent decision-making within what might otherwise be an unwieldy coalition. Thus, there are good reasons why die-hard Atlanticists sound the alarm whenever someone proposes tampering with this formula.

Yet the business-as-usual model has some serious downsides as well. The most obvious is opportunity cost: keeping the United States as Europe's first responder makes it hard for the Washington to devote sufficient time, attention, and resources to Asia, where threats to the balance of power are significantly greater and [the diplomatic environment is especially complicated](#). A strong U.S. commitment to Europe may dampen certain potential causes of conflict there, but it didn't prevent the Balkan wars in the 1990s, and the U.S.-led effort to bring Ukraine into the Western security orbit [helped provoke](#) the current war. This is not what anyone in the West intended, of course, but results are what matters. Ukraine's recent successes on the battlefield are extremely gratifying, and I hope they continue, but it would have been far better for all concerned had the war not occurred at all.

Moreover, the business-as-usual model encourages Europe to remain dependent on European protection and contributes to a general complacency and lack of realism in the conduct of European foreign policy. If you're confident the world's mightiest power will leap to your side as soon as trouble starts, it's easier to ignore the risks of being overly dependent on foreign energy supplies and overly tolerant of creeping authoritarianism closer to home. And though hardly anybody wants to admit this, this model has the potential to drag the United States into peripheral conflicts that may not always be vital to the security or prosperity of the United States itself. At the very least, business as usual is no longer an approach we should endorse uncritically.

Model 2: Democracy International

A second model for trans-Atlantic security cooperation highlights the shared democratic character of (most of) NATO's members and the growing divide between democracies and autocracies (and especially Russia and China). This vision lies behind the Biden administration's efforts to emphasize shared democratic values and [its openly stated desire](#) to prove that democracy can still outperform autocracy on the global stage. Former NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen's [Alliance of Democracies Foundation](#) reflects a similar conception.

Unlike the business-as-usual model, which is focused primarily on European security, this conception of the trans-Atlantic partnership embraces a broader global agenda. It conceives of contemporary world politics as an ideological contest between democracy and autocracy and believes this struggle must be waged on a global scale. If the United States is "pivoting" to Asia, then its European partners need to do so as well, but for the broader purpose of defending and promoting democratic systems. Consistent with that vision, [Germany's new Indo-Pacific strategy](#) calls for strengthening ties with that region's democracies, and the German defense minister [recently announced](#) an expanded naval presence there in 2024 as well.

This vision has the merit of simplicity—democracy good, autocracy bad—but its flaws far outweigh its virtues. For starters, such a framework will inevitably complicate relations with autocracies that the United States and/or Europe have chosen to support (such as Saudi Arabia or the other Gulf monarchies, or potential Asian partners such as Vietnam), and expose the trans-Atlantic partnership to a charge of rampant hypocrisy. Second, dividing the world into friendly democracies and hostile dictatorships is bound to reinforce ties among the latter and discourage the former from playing divide-and-rule. From this perspective, we should be glad that then-U.S. President Richard Nixon and his advisor Henry Kissinger did not adopt this framework in 1971, when their rapprochement with Maoist China gave the Kremlin a new headache to worry about.

Finally, putting democratic values front and center risks turning the trans-Atlantic partnership into a crusading organization seeking to plant democracy wherever it can. However desirable that goal might be in the abstract, the past 30 years should show that no member of the alliance knows how to do this effectively. Exporting democracy is exceedingly hard to do and usually fails, especially when outsiders try to [impose](#) it by force. And given the parlous state of democracy in some of NATO's current members, to adopt this as the alliance's primary *raison d'être* seems quixotic in the extreme.

Model 3: Going Global vs. China

Model 3 is a close cousin of Model 2, but instead of organizing trans-Atlantic relations around democracy and other liberal values, it seeks to enlist Europe in the broader U.S. effort to contain a rising China. In effect, it seeks to unite America's multilateral European partners with the bilateral hub-and-spoke arrangements that already exist in

Asia, and bring Europe's power potential to bear against the only serious peer competitor that the United States is likely to face for many years to come.

At first glance, this is an appealing vision, and one could point to [the AUKUS agreement](#) between the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia as an early manifestation of it. As Michael Mazarr of the Rand Corp. recently [observed](#), there is growing evidence that Europe no longer views China as simply a lucrative market and valuable investment partner, and is beginning to [“soft balance”](#) against it. From a purely American perspective, it would be highly desirable to have Europe's economic and military potential lined up against its primary challenger.

But there are two obvious problems with this model. First, states balance not against power alone but against [threats](#), and geography plays a critical role in those assessments. China may be increasingly powerful and ambitious, but its army is not going to march across Asia and strike at Europe, and its navy isn't going to sail around the world and blockade European ports. Russia is far weaker than China but a whole lot closer, and its recent behavior is worrisome even if its actions have unwittingly revealed its military limitations. One should therefore expect the softest of soft balancing from Europe and not a serious effort to counter China's capabilities.

NATO's European members do not have the military capacity to affect the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region in any significant way, and they are unlikely to acquire it any time soon. The war in Ukraine may lead European states to get serious about rebuilding their military forces—finally—but most of their efforts will go to acquiring ground, air, and surveillance capabilities designed to defend against and deter Russia. That makes good sense from Europe's perspective, but most of these forces would be irrelevant to any conflict involving China. Sending a few German frigates to the Indo-Pacific region may be a nice way to signal Germany's stated interest in the evolving security environment there, but it is not going to alter the regional balance of power or make much difference in China's calculations.

Europe can help balance China in other ways, of course—helping train foreign military forces, selling weapons, participating in regional security forums, etc.—and the United States should welcome such efforts. But nobody should count on Europe to do much hard balancing in the Indo-Pacific theater. Trying to put this model into place is a recipe for disappointment and increased trans-Atlantic rancor.

Model 4: A New Division of Labor

You knew this was coming: the model I think is the right one. As I've argued before (including [most recently here in *Foreign Policy*](#)), the optimal future model for the trans-Atlantic partnership is a new division of labor, with Europe taking primary responsibility for its own security and the United States devoting much greater attention to the Indo-Pacific region. The United States would remain a formal member

of NATO, but instead of being Europe's first responder, it would become its ally of last resort. Henceforth, the United States would plan to go back onshore in Europe only if the regional balance of power eroded dramatically, but not otherwise.

This model cannot be implemented overnight and should be negotiated in a cooperative spirit, with the United States helping its European partners design and acquire the capabilities they need. Because many of these states will do everything in their power to convince Uncle Sam to stay, however, Washington will have to make it crystal clear that this is the only model it will support going forward. Unless and until NATO's European members really believe they are going to be mostly on their own, their resolve to take the necessary steps will remain fragile, and backsliding on their pledges is to be expected.

Unlike Donald Trump, whose bluster and bombast during his time as U.S. president annoyed allies to no good purpose, his successor Joe Biden is in an ideal position to start this process. He has a well-earned reputation as a dedicated Atlanticist, so pushing for a new division of labor wouldn't be seen as a sign of resentment or pique. He and his team are uniquely positioned to tell our European partners that this step is in everyone's long-term interest. Mind you, I don't really expect Biden & Co. to take this step—[for reasons I've explained elsewhere](#)—but they should.

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