From Brain-death to heart-attack?

How NATO 2030 should incorporate the normative foundation of the alliance

Normative principles lie at the heart of NATO's grand strategy. However, the values of rules-based conduct, democracy and even human rights no appear longer to be seemingly self-evident forces of history. For NATO's cohesion and security, three sub-dynamics of this global trend are especially threatening. Firstly, the value-consensus within NATO has become increasingly precarious. Political tendencies in some member states revive memories of authoritarianism and even raise doubts about the internal value of friendly relations, a trend which other member states are increasingly unwilling to tolerate. Secondly, foreign adversaries are both undermining the democratic decision-making in NATO member states and seek to directly gain leverage over their respective governments. Lastly, the strategic legitimization of authoritarian governance models and erosion of global norms outside of NATO's borders will inevitably erode cooperativeness, thereby multiplying existing dangers to the Euro-Atlantic security in the long run.

Faced with a threat aimed at its heart from these three angles, NATO must approach normative principles as both a vital asset and a strategic imperative. Here, the current effort to align NATO member states' divergent threat perceptions into a common strategy for 2030, a remedy for a symptom once famously summarized as "brain-death", provides a valuable opportunity to simultaneously forestall a potential cardiac arrest. A proactive therapy would be to first ensure coherence in NATO's grand strategy by finding a more precise consensus on its shared values, clearly separating what they entail and what not. The next step would be to factor these guidelines stronger into NATO's internal functioning, to incorporate them into its defensive stance across all concerned domains, as well as to pursue more proactive diplomatic engagements with like-minded partners outside the treaty area.

Internal democratic erosion: strategic coherence through more precise definitions

As a first priority, NATO should set its own house in order. NATO's values are both a vital asset and a strategic end in themselves. Posing as a greater good that excels special interests of individual member states, these ethical principles are the *sine qua non* that hold the alliance together when geostrategic or material interests temporarily diverge. It has to a considerable degree been due to this normative cohesion that NATO survived the collapse of its main strategic threat in 1991 and is today still able to reconcile the increasingly diverging threat-perceptions of its member states. But the current handling of this value canon on the political level of NATO does not do this justice.

The Brussels Communiqué mentioned the desirable values of "*individual liberty, human rights, democracy*", adding "*human rights*" versus the undesirable challenges to the "*rules-based international order*". But what are the definitions of these loaded terms and where are the red lines that cannot be crossed? Notably, the imprecision of its principles is not a recent problem in NATO-history. The preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty already offered language about *democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law*. Nevertheless, that did not stop states with then clearly undemocratic polities from joining NATO more than half a century ago.

In an alliance where the standardization of military procedures and organizational structures is everyday business, the tedious diplomatic work of specifying political terms is often being avoided. Of course, it would be naïve to hope for an exact definition of the word "democracy" in an alliance of states whose historical paths to democratic governance were so strikingly different. But could a member state still claim the moral high ground of defending the rule of law or democracy against foreign adversaries while it undermines its own citizens' basic human rights or abolishes its independent judiciary at home? And what would be a principled position once a NATO-ally begins to officially question the territorial sovereignty or territorial waters of another member state? And even more important: Would the populations of other NATO member states still be willing to commit their lives to the protection of that supposed ally against external threats?

Just as with other strategic goals, an imprecise definition of the objectives brings about incoherent policies, which in turn becomes extremely problematic once *matters of principle* are concerned. Recognizing values as an integral factor of NATO's strategy would therefore necessitate not only the already promised political emphasis on them but also their more precise definition. The first step to better integrating values into NATO 2030 would therefore require delineating as precisely as politically possible what NATO's values necessarily entail and what not, potentially even including basic structural and procedural operationalizations. Additionally, this would allow the member states to *draw a clear line in the sand* how far one of their own can deviate from the consensus.

Regarding specific instruments to safeguard its values internally, the policy-recommendations by the NATO Reflection Group include a voluntary pledge of good conduct as well as a Centre for Excellence of Democratic Resilience. But would these voluntary measures seriously tempt the same political elites that profit politically and economically of the democratic backsliding in their home constituencies to change course? The non-bindingness of these recommendations highlights the limitations of NATO's toolkit to address this vital threat internally. The key problem is that the collective of NATO finds itself with barely any carrots and virtually no sticks when it comes to preventing individual members from

veering too far off the agreed normative agenda. Although more bold ideas to solve this problem exist, including the introduction of a *minus-one rule* for major decisions, most appear unfeasible for now, given the fact that they would likely be vetoed down by the very unanimous decision-making mechanisms which they seek to amend. Thus, NATO member states interested in protecting the value consensus should first aim to create an impartial supervisory mechanism or position and then supply it with the necessary carrots, maybe adding even some realistic yet effective punitive measures. The escalating measure of this principled approach would then be to set up an "emergency brake" in NATO's decision-making bodies. For this measure, countries that are unwilling to let their core values be undermined by their allies should consider making votes on NATO's infrastructure investments, locations of facility placements, exercise opportunities and leadership positions for other allies dependent on their adherence to NATO's basic normative principles.

External threats: How to safeguard NATO's principles against authoritarian meddling

Simultaneously, NATO must prepare its defensive stance against adversaries with authoritarian motivations. The latter are increasingly sidestepping physical barriers of defense by using the trends of digitization and economic globalization to target the soft ideological underbelly of democracies. Such adversarial behavior includes either a democratic government being pressured through substantial leverage to pursue policies which are against the will of its people, or the easier tasks of influencing electoral processes and political communication to skew the expression of this will. Concerning the first threat, the tools not only include corruption but also a significant influence on supply chains or strategically placed foreign direct investments in politically connected firms. And with the requirement of unanimous decisions in NATO, influencing a single member state would suffice to paralyze the alliance. Hence, the potential sources of leverage an adversary could have over the political elites or government of a member state must be analyzed and reviewed internally. Subsequently, a first countermeasure would be the creation of binding screening guidelines for the trade of military and dual-use goods and for foreign investments in strategically vital infrastructure and key technologies, preferably in cooperation with the EU.

Regarding weaknesses of electoral and communicative processes associated to democratic opinion-forming, NATO should first substantially improve its defensive capabilities in the information- and cyberspace. Aside from increased financial contributions and more attractive schemes to avoid losing skilled personnel, this measure should also include a detailed cooperation program between member states, private enterprises, and academia to detect possible weaknesses in the cyber-infrastructure of NATO member states. The aim would be to increase the resilience against cyber-attacks and to set shared minimum-standards for cyber-security, not only for democratic institutions and parties, but

also to secure the software supply chains and network infrastructure on which the general population also depends. Threats to, for example, commercial satellites or telecommunication structures could easily undermine the most basic criteria for democratic decision-making: the ability to communicate with each other. Instead of making smaller countries feel like pawns in technological rivalry between two superpowers, as it has been the case in the discussion over global G5-infrastructure, this process should be as inclusive as possible to smaller and technologically not as advanced member states. Another measure should be strengthening inter-institutional cooperation with the EU to counter these hybrid threats and to more efficiently coordinate multilateral sanctions against foreign election-interference.

Beyond NATO's borders: From internal norm synchronization to global norm-setting

Finally, it should be the third priority to aid and stabilize states abroad that adhere to democratic norms and international laws. Of course, a regional defensive alliance is less suited for spreading norms globally than forums like the G7 and NATO can also not serve as a replacement for specific concepts such as "Alliance for Multilateralism". But, in a world where security threats are neither only kinetic nor limited in reach by physics, global non-military cooperation in selected policy-areas with like-minded partners is a must for NATO. Even the combined might of its member states will require additional diplomatic and political weight to sufficiently influence global standards in crucial policy fields such as cyber-security, communication infrastructure and space. The opportunity to use NATO for synchronizing member states' policies internally could be leveraged as a force-multiplier to engage like-minded countries and international institutions for global norm-setting. Two particularly acute sub-problems will be the question of the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in military systems and digital surveillance. As any reduction of the human "*in the loop*" will inevitably risk weakening democratic control of and executive accountability for military actions, the increasing automation of warfare is both directly linked to NATO policy and its core values. Meanwhile, the still developing *Pegasus-scandal* has shown the volatility of even key political figures in member states to mere commercial actors operating from a NATO partner country, highlighting the need for collective regulation.

However, if NATO members truly want to pursue a multilateral and rules-based world order, the need for reform of many other international structures cannot be ignored. A global order grossly underrepresenting many regions outside the Euro-Atlantic in the shared structures of global governance is itself already undemocratic and unjust. Such an order cannot be a viable long-term strategy for global cooperation, despite the benefits it might render to those currently favored by it in the short term. Openly addressing this imbalance in many international organizations both as individual member states and as a collective would also give greater credibility to NATO's policy of

reaching out to other democratic states like, for example India, which has viable arguments to claim its underrepresentation in the United Nations.

In conclusion, the gravest fear of the alliance should not be the internal disagreement on the question against *which* threat to unite against, but rather the decay of the shared agreement *why* they decided to unite in the first place. For a collective of genuinely democratic and peaceful states, defining its own strategic goals cannot depend solely on the indifferent calculation of how to maximize power at home and abroad. In a democracy, as the *"government of the people, by the people, for the people"*, that very people's collectively shared ideals and norms inevitably must be a pivotal factor in deciding what security policies its government pursues. The same is true for the strategy of NATO as it represents the shared pursuit of 30 countries not just for their individual survival but also a safer, rules-based, and freer world. Without a shared strategic vision on the threat landscape and common security objectives, NATO might appear brain-dead and paralyzed. But without a shared set of norms and a coherent strategy to safeguard them, NATO will become heartless. The alliance must not risk either of those two defects.

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