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Common Sense

In November of 2023, I attended the Berlin Security Conference. I, a lowly graduate student, recall having looked forward to listening and meeting with various characters of knowledge and wisdom in the world of security affairs. World leaders, defense ministers and military officials were scheduled to speak and interact for this conference. They were to speak of concise problems and solutions to the current dire straits we, as an alliance, found ourselves in. What I experienced instead was a clear signal from figures that we were behind in many areas needed to maintain an alliance under threat. Frustratingly, there was an air of disappointment among members in the crowd as many speakers failed to convey any satisfactory response to the drastic security challenges we faced. Much of the goals stated were those that should have been accomplished years ago. In response to this, I deliver this essay as a contrasting yet intentionally discomfoting reminder, insisting the reader grasps the situation at hand with urgency.

The reader should know that I have long desired for the greatest cohesion and strength for NATO and its members. In many ways, NATO has achieved its goals in accessions and collective defense. We were able to survive and outlast the colossal struggles from the Cold War, bringing a sweeping wave of democracy and capitalism to states that have since greatly benefited. States that have suffered from essentially, millennia of war and destruction now thrive under the security of NATO with investments and inclusion into the Western economic system. These prior accomplishments though, have not and will not keep us from the jaws of conflict in Europe and it is by our own faults.

With that being said, I must address the question at hand: Is NATO strong enough to defend *all* European member states against *any* security threats and deter *all* potential aggressors? In many senses, NATO is a highly formidable alliance. The organization and collective actions brought about during its tenure has been nothing short of an unprecedented success. In the scenario of a conventional war, we likely have the capabilities to defend ourselves properly. However, I assert that the greatest defensive alliance in history, our NATO, has often failed in adapting to an ever-changing geopolitical climate. In turn, this has developed an internal environment characterized by, at best, stale policy implementations. Time and time again, leaders of member states have found themselves playing catch up to ever-growing security challenges from actors both within and outside of NATO. This complacency in geopolitical reactions has translated into a further complacency in policy initiatives and their implementations. What has resulted in recent years is a continuous struggle to address complex security issues under a façade of pacification and peace, with danger waiting at the doorstep. Unsurprisingly, I do not believe we are currently ready to defend *all* member states against *any* threat.

For the sake of avoiding war, alliance states effectively failed to suppress the affronts to peace committed by authoritarians in Europe, especially by the Russian Federation. At worst, member states failed to adequately address invasions in Moldova, Georgia, Georgia *again*, and Ukraine in 2014. At best, the decisions to intervene in Bosnia and Kosovo were taken with an extensive amount of deliberation. Of course, direct action would have been highly consequential in any case and would have led to a greater European war. But how did NATO states in Europe prepare or deter in a response to these aggressions against their neighbors so close? Many even now have yet to adapt to the new reality of this series of crises so close to home, leading to further internal issues. Until the full invasion of Ukraine, many states seemed to have actually regressed in their defensive capabilities and shuttered at the thought of militarization. (NATO, 2023)

I highlight these failures to show the lack of adaptability, not in strategic or tactical values, but in the overall zeitgeist of security challenges. Our militaries may strive for cutting edge technology, or the most cunning of tactics, or peak synergetic interoperability, but our very identification of security challenges or potential issues and divisions seem to be considerably lacking. Thus derives the symptoms of failures in military funding or overreliance on “Big Brother”. Leaders now identify existing external threats to NATO states yet have failed to implement the urgency required for the challenge. This is a common talking point among many circles, including our adversaries’. They see this as a weakness that can be exploitable in the arenas of open and hybrid warfare. Additionally, when the leaders of member states have failed in identifying security threats in a timely manner, the public remains in a decrepit state of civil preparedness.

What has resulted is a set of deficiencies from this that have yet to be resolved. Member states have complacently relied on American military power to protect itself. Since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, many states have failed realize the 2 percent GDP spending goals for defense budgets. (NATO, 2023) Further, many European member states are straggling behind in many areas of defensive capabilities, especially those further insulated in the Western areas of the alliance. (Hartley, 2023) These are major issues that are most definitely present and can most definitely lead to the destruction of so much dear to us. However, these are among the many symptoms, rather than fundamental causes. State leaders strive to treat these symptoms eagerly, though they often fall short. But they don’t seek a cure as a doctor does; they don’t deal with the causes.

This leads me to an uglier truth that has not been so openly confronted. Make no mistake and do not “put your head in the sand”: authoritarianism is on the rise within NATO and is causing significant political division. This has negatively affected our ability to act in a unified foreign policy. Though in many states, democracy prevailed and fostered a new era of prosperity with protection and coordination of other member states. We however, failed in wielding influence to maintain a united Europe under democracy and are now reaping the rotten crops of that era. We have since seen multiple failures in protecting democracy within the power vacuums of

authoritarians. With this increase in authoritarian power, comes the natural sympathies or even collusion with our adversaries.

The most glaring example of this is, of course is in Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Orbán has made it clear on multiple occasions that his vision of NATO member participation vastly differs from others. He made a solo effort for a “peace mission” that, in all intensiveness, was an appeasement signal to Vladimir Putin among other authoritarians around the world. (Spike & Cook, 2024) He made it clear that he is against sufficient military aid to Ukraine. (Gozzi, 2024) Finally, there are even some members of the Hungarian parliament that have expressed support in reclaiming lost territories in Ukraine’s Transcarpathia. (Kalan, 2022) In a similar fashion, Slovakia’s Prime Minister Robert Fico has expressed major concerns for further support to our allies and presented similar alternatives for the future of NATO. These are nothing short of inconsistencies in a general foreign policy of NATO members. Of course, no country has the same individual goals, but these actors bring forth inconsistencies with a peaceful Europe. These goals brought forth by the more rogue actors of NATO should be combated with high priority. Divisiveness and possible goals of irredentism can be easily exploited by adversaries and can lead to internal crises if not addressed promptly and swiftly.

Another concern is the lack of explicit mechanisms to quell war between two member states. In cases such as Greece and Türkiye it would be ludicrous to assume there would be war between the two countries at the moment. However, this doesn’t exclude a potential breakdown in relations barring some major political changes in the near or distant future. Though Articles 1 and 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty encourages member states to maintain friendly relations and settle international disputes peacefully, there is no structural functions that actively prevent war between two states. (NATO, 1949) I assert this needs to be amended as soon as possible. A crisis such as this between two member states would decay the fabric of the alliance as no clear methods of solution would possibly lead to a dissolution of guarantees. In both cases of incompatible foreign policies and inter-member conflict, insistence in peaceful negotiations are the only ways to resolve such issues. But they must be backed by legitimate, encoded and enforceable measures.

With even greater urgency, I address the issue regarding many European members’ overreliance on the United States’ military-industrial complex. It is undoubtable that the United States has a critical interest in the security of all European nations, regardless of membership. This coupled with American preferences to have a large standing military for decades has given a (perhaps false) sense of security for many Europeans. With recent electoral news highlighting Donald Trump’s possible return to the White House, many pundits have expressed the fear of a more isolationist foreign policy after 2024 which could bring the possibility of an American withdrawal from the alliance.

But again, why was this possibility not addressed and resolved years ago by European members? There has always been a consistent, albeit sparse, ebb and flow of isolationist movements throughout American history. Before each world war, there were major surges in

support of American isolationism from European wars. (Klein, 2017) Even now, there is only marginal efforts to properly militarize after the presidential nominee said of Russia that he, “would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You got to pay.” (Sullivan, 2024) Here Trump refers to the lack military spending in European NATO states has indeed led to a significant amount of either resentment or concern from the American public that has some merit. Unfortunately, this has generated factions within the American political scene that European security is not vital to their interests. Instead of viewing the situation as it is, with a threat of a Trump-led America either reneging on security guarantees or pulling out of NATO outright, European political leaders have evidently still yet to grasp the situation at hand. They have not adapted to the changing political landscape, even with their own allies. In fact, this American sentiment of resentment partly stems from European members’ policies of pacification and has subsequently been inadequately responded to.

Supplanting these issues is the mass wave of informational warfare that has overtaken NATO member states from actors like Russia and China. In many cases, it has fostered and fanned the fires of division within our respective political landscapes. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started, informational warfare waged by adversaries has further wedged the cracks within our alliance. This has been seen in all elements of media including television and social media. What has resulted is an even greater damaged civil preparedness and further contribution to pacification sentiments. (Jensen & Ramjee, 2023) It seems the response to this has been rather lackluster, conveying another symptom of inadequacy of adaptation.

Though we have attempted to prepare for the enemy at the gates, are we prepared for any possibility of danger, even if it may come from within? This essay suggests not. I understand hypotheticals are often an exhausting and pointless endeavor in many areas. But in the world of deterrence, suggesting hypotheticals, including those aforementioned, are critical in both preparing and preventing war. NATO is built on the premise of the hypothetical. How is it not? This has been the foundation of every defensive alliance in the history of mankind. The sooner we understand that the battles against foreign adversaries are taking place now, just not in outright conventional war, the sooner we can prepare and plan to engage against any adversary and defend any alliance member. The sooner NATO understands that it must take an active role in maintaining the stability and democratic standards of each member state, the sooner it can better defend against the conventional threats facing the alliance.

This essay outlines a just few of the many symptoms derived from the rigidity of policies of NATO members. Given the scenario of a large-scale conflict arising, I do believe that under pressure, it would bring rapid, sweeping changes that would eventually allow us to prevail. However, in the process of these adjustments, more than acceptable casualties would be likely. The symptoms of this sickness would be shaken off, but at the unnecessary expense of early failures.

Solutions to preventing a critical situation like this are available but must be taken now. The overall issue stated is the lack of adaptability in geopolitics. I have thus explained that NATO

has remained ignorant of its own standards, members' ambitions and foreign adversaries' ambitions. Policy recommendations are as listed:

1. NATO must coordinate more thoroughly with its members' respective national governments to emphasize geopolitical threats. More effective policy recommendations within timeframes would explicitly state shortcomings to policymakers and citizenry to establish a unified and harmonious foreign policy for NATO as a whole. Not only will policies be more effective, but so too will the overall civil preparedness of each nation.
2. NATO must take a more active role in each member's domestic political system. Missions such as democratic monitoring and lobbying would allow for a greater support of pro-democratic and pro-European parties.
3. Additional and more binding structural mechanisms must be added to NATO's framework to ensure greater accountability in the event of crises. This would be especially for conflicts arising from offensive actions by member states onto non-member allies, conflict between member states, and civil wars. This would include possibly mending more flawed or ambiguous language in treaty articles.
4. A much more substantial deterrence policy from NATO against hybrid warfare in each member state. Combating alternative methods to wage war or destabilize nations is crucial to maintaining cohesive member states and therefore, a cohesive alliance. NATO must coordinatively defend against threats like informational and propaganda campaigns in multiple media outlets, weaponization of immigration, and protecting critical infrastructure. Hybrid threats such as these should be treated the same as an armed threat: an attack against one is an attack against all.

It should be noted that the formidability of NATO itself is still second to none. These outlined criticisms are intended to bolster our position in the future. Taking criticisms into account is the very essence of the strength of this alliance and the democratic systems it protects. The answer to the original question is that NATO is not prepared for *every* threat to its member states, at the moment. The overarching reform needed for a defensive alliance such as NATO stems from greater adaptability in the field of geopolitics. Though these proposed reforms are intended as more specific guidelines, a much more powerful and comprehensive shift will still be required for those involved. All members of society including politicians, military personnel, non-governmental figures, and individual citizens must recognize the pervasive security challenges that presently face us. It is self-evident that these challenges can undermine, divide and destroy our Western system of security. If we come to acknowledge this reality as common sense and utilize our resources promptly, we can and will defeat *any* threats to *any* member state. If not, then we will lay in a future historical textbook as yet another example of history repeating itself in failure.

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