



Contribution

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***At the NATO summit experts said: NATO is
becoming more European. What does this
mean?***

**Finally coming of age: Europe's
process of maturity**

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Dear Members of the Selection Panel,

I would like to thank you for the unique opportunity you are giving engaged and interested European students through this competition. I hope you will enjoy reading the essay as much as I enjoy participating. It anecdotally sketches the parallel developments of NATO and the European Union. The essay outlines a process of maturity, of the EU gradually coming of age and growing into its new role within NATO.

With best regards,

Amelie Sieber

NATO is becoming more European - does it, conversely, mean that Europe becomes more NATO? Critics of the North Atlantic Treaty use this ecological fallacy as instrument for spreading the narrative of militarization, polarizing pacifism against individual perceptions of threat, and scrutinizing the base of societal cohesion which lies in the consensus and defense of common democratic values. As the Munich Security Conference revealed, these enemies not only attack directly from well-known flanks like Putin's Russia – but also from actual allies such as Trump's America. As Vice President Vance stated, the threat to “worry the most about vis-a-vis Europe is not Russia, it's not China, it's not any other external actor [...] it's the threat from within, the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values, values shared with the United States of America”¹.

Facing these attacks from allies, Europe must realign its position in the realigning world order to answer Putin's full-scale invasion in Ukraine in 2022 which is a result of the insufficiently answered Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014². This does not necessarily mean that Europe must quit NATO and separate from the US³ – but rather set up complementary pillars that do not undermine NATO's origin conception but explicitly strengthen its origin aim of collective security⁴. Therefore, Europe is confronted with reunifying its polarized societies, reframing its own role in NATO, providing the alliance's ability of defense and deterrence besides the US's contribution as well as anchoring NATO in the institutional framework of the CSDP. This requires a comprehensive approach of collective security that widens beyond the transatlantic structures while simultaneously addressing and aggregating transeuropean frames at smaller levels. Such a rethinking of NATO carries risks, takes high efforts – but also opens enormous spaces of creation, participation, and inclusion.

Evolutionary phases

NATO's longevity and resilience arise out of its dual structure⁵. Using this as an organizational strength, the community oscillated between whether a value-driven community or a military alliance, depending on the respective global challenges. Counterintuitively, the NATO survived after the Cold War's end – which results from the internal strength of bundling and translating partly diverging interests of heterogeneous members within a common narrative.

Simplified, the NATO experienced alternating phases of stabilization and transformation. The alliance emerged out of threat by the Soviets and the nuclear confrontation. Mainly serving for military defense and deterrence postulating liberal and democratic values in contrast to the communist East, the groundbreaking Dual-Track decision in 1979⁶ initially opened a dialogue on deep-rooted political beliefs, national values, and ideological convictions rather than solely on common strategic interests. This shift into the dual structure of the alliance led to the first transformation in the Post-Cold War period in the 1990s. While the existential threat posed by the USSR disappeared with its collapse in 1991⁷, the alliance was confronted with regional conflicts, the emergence of ethnic warfare and its own expansion to Eastern Europe. As a result, common values became increasingly relevant. Therefore, peacekeeping missions and

interventions dominated the NATO's actions in the late 1990s. Entering the 2000s, the "War on Terrorism"⁸ as collective and new global threat led to a further internal consolidation that expressed in ideology-driven interventions promoting democracy in fragile states. This period reveals the alliance's hybrid identity balancing between ideological quests and rational security interests. Until 2014, a comprehensive strategy focusing on collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative partnerships dominated the NATO's rationality⁹. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the full-scale war in Ukraine 2022 caused a fundamental shift from US-centered military interventions in fragile regions to a direct confrontation at the European continent. Hence, Europe got into the reticle of renegotiating global peace. The US's claim of China as systemic rival further underscore the clear direction of NATO's most recent transformation: towards Europe. Be it the aggression of Russia, be it the ambiguous relation with China, be it cybersecurity, be it climate change, be it (forced) migration or be it the internal insecurity of the alliance caused by Trumps' presidency – nowadays, Europe is more than ever confronted with multiple threats that need to be responded to. Therefore, it is inevitable that NATO as security provider becomes more European. But what is "more European"?

Start as peace project

It is crucial to distinct the evolution of today's Europe to the United States and other partners. After the atrocities, brutalities, and crimes of WWI and WWII, the continent barely consisted of peaceful coexisting states. Nevertheless, this ground zero was the soil for the European idea to grow. Hereinafter, the European states managed to overcome the collective traumata of the war(s) and verbalized their common goal of pursuing peace. By translating the realistic risk of rearmament into strong economic relations, setting up bi- and multilateral cooperation and institutionalizing the shared goals in treaties, the project was further elaborated. Especially this continuous process of integrating different views makes Europe strong – but also forms its greatest target point. To realign Europe's position in NATO, thus, its crucial to acknowledge its history, its identity, and its internal constitution.

Solely meeting the former NATO commitment of spending 2% on military and defense seems to be insufficient regarding the priorities of European democracies that tend to focus more on social cohesion and welfare rather than on military expenditure¹⁰. As investing in defense and deterrence but also the identification with an European identity¹¹ is mostly driven by threat perception and geographical proximity¹², the storable "rally-around-the-flag-effects"¹³ caused by Russia's aggression should be used by politicians to develop European leadership. Hence, the establishment of a Europewide, whole-of-society rethinking is inevitable to formalize the diverging security perceptions from East to West, diverse democratic standards, and different societal perceptions of pacifism and militarism. An enlarged engagement in NATO reveals the enormous potential of polarization and incoherence due to the current security situation. The mentioned European leadership might revive the common idea of peace by creating a modern narrative of Europe that combines both a mindset striving for peace and a rational assessment of the treat situation, taking into account the urge of defense capabilities. The resulting debate

in the German society centered around Pistorius' highly contested terminus "kriegstüchtig"¹⁴ shows the urgency of a common ground for European security. Indeed, political quotes such as former German Chancellor Scholz's famous speech of "Zeitenwende"¹⁵ or the promise "whatever it takes"¹⁶ of his successor, Friedrich Merz, show that the necessity to act was recognized at the political level with Russia's war of aggression in February 2022, but was only partially reflected in the electoral preferences¹⁷. The fragmented public opinion indicates the need for a joint European effort to sensitize and mobilize the population. On the other side, political promises must be accompanied by acts. Overarchingly, a prioritized engagement of Europe in NATO requires a dual approach that targets *social cohesion*, e.g., through sensitive political communication, mutual tolerance, and responsive debates as well as *political action* (i.e. formulating common goals, developing new strategies, sharing responsibilities or meeting obligations). This includes a process of maturity at both the political and societal level.

Process of maturity

But how to achieve maturity at the broader political sphere and at the individual dimension in times of such great uncertainties, insecurity, and fundamental shifts of the well-established structures? Be it the whole global order, be it the transatlantic relation, be it the realignment of Europe's national party systems, be it the polarization within European societies. Both the EU and the NATO face unknown challenges that come along with a deep-rooted perception of loss¹⁸: loss of influence, power, stability, control. If this feeling remains unanswered, radical movements and ideologies will gain further ground. However, a strong response from the EU to its people, its (NATO-)allies but also out into the world requires three *C's*: *clarity*, *cohesion*, and *confidence*. Europeans must become *clear* about which strategic priorities and common goals they want to pursue in NATO. As community of different sovereign states, a *coherent* line within the NATO concerning capacities, responsibilities and willingness must be focused. Only if the actors are aware of their common goals and capabilities, Europe will be able to act more *confidently* in the global system. That is the core of the postulated European idea: to be a safe haven in the struggle for security.

Though, the sustainability of Europe's strength depends – following its democratic principle – on a deep-rooted societal conviction. The three dimensions, hence, must not be implemented top-down from a supranational decision-maker to subsidiary levels but evolve from bottom-up movements. For boosting the pillars of a strong EU that is ready to defend its values and to consequently foster its footprint within NATO, leadership is a key feature. Without the drive of charismatic, visionary, and courageous leaders, Europe is unable to articulate its interests and to catch its people for its own narrative. Besides, the EU must become aware of its initial powers that hitherto remain untapped¹⁹. Not solely focusing on the challenges but explicitly emphasizing the EU's immense potential – be it systemic, economic, institutional, idealistic – helps to reveal target points that might not only enhance Europe's position in the world but also its shaping power in NATO. The duality of leadership and democratic standards such as participation, debate, and sensitive communication is essential. Without stressing its own core

values, stronger European engagement in NATO would lack credibility and authenticity. At the first place, Europe was founded as peace project raised by huge external support and internal cooperation – but it never reached the state of maturity. In terms of NATO's and Europe's capacity, ability, and willingness to defend, the French President Macron diagnosed NATO to be "brain dead"²⁰. Since 2019, the Alliance and the Union faced many crises and went through a process of maturation leading to a political momentum not only in Brussels, Paris, or Berlin but all over Europe: *it's time to lead*. A more European NATO does not mean less transatlantic cooperation; it rather implicates that Europe must finally reach a state of (strategic) autonomy and maturity that complements the US's leadership.

Gaining autonomy

Relying on the US's help will neither improve integral European security concerns nor the often-postulated values: freedom, peace, and democracy. Instead, Europe must come of age and take over an active role in shaping its own future. It also applies to the engagement in NATO: solely upholding moral values negates the urge for a fundamental change in Europe's foreign policy and NATO's strategy²¹. Therefore, the "organizational overlap"²² between NATO and EU institutions plays an ambiguous role regarding the memberstates' sovereignty. While the European Commission accumulates more power in security and defense policy²³, the nation states might feel overlooked in their particular interests²⁴. As mentioned, this activates a sore point of the EU: delegation of sovereignty and (perceived) paternalism. For addressing this integration issue²⁵, a more European NATO must anticipate political participation by mediating national concerns and the credibility of the ally. Further, existing European concepts such as CSDP must be – at least partially – harmonized with NATO strategies.

It turns out that neither abolishing the CSDP, nor its full integration into NATO, nor the quest for European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) could minimize the strategic and conceptual tensions between NATO and Europe's CSDP. It hitherto crystalizes that the current "compartmentalized geographic approach"²⁶, i.e., overcoming institutional ruptures by strengthening the common aim of setting up a counterpart towards Russia, cannot fully eliminate the ambiguity between NATO and CSDP but rather evolve as a fruitful approach. Pursuing innovative projects in three dimensions targeting the inner European circle, the transatlantic alliance as well as building up new relations in Eurasia embodies both Europe's strategic quest for alliances as well as the NATO's doctrine of mutual defense²⁷. Further elaborating this approach, Europe should not only widen its relations to the geographical East and West – but also to the South. A region being stigmatized, marginalized, and colonialized over generations – but was never treated as equal partner. To overcome the reputation of "moral supremacy" Europeans should establish new relations with the Global South by avoiding to fall back in colonial patterns and to set up neocolonial structures. Clearly articulating own security interests and providing partnerships on an eye-to-eye level might start a new debate that is shaped less by moral convictions and more by honest cooperation offers. Therefore, acknowledging the existence of non-Western, outer-European conceptualizations of security, freedom, peace, or democracy is inevitable.

New horizons

Finally coming of age, Europe's role in international alliances should not solely focus on former partner- and relationships that revitalize the system before, during, and after the Cold War. Recognizing the shift from a bi- to a multipolar order begins with stepping towards the Global South²⁸. Apart from Eurocentrism, Neocolonialism, and Externalism, it is crucial to overcome former dependencies to enter new relationships with the heterogeneous countries Westerns summarize under the term "Global South". Coping with historic hierarchies may also partially prevent from reproducing postcolonial continuities in current conflicts, as in Ukraine²⁹. As side effect of the current polycrisis, Europeans and NATO start realizing that stable partnerships with states that have so far been sporadically included in strategic reasoning become more relevant in counterpartying the dominance of few hegemony. A new "strategic integration"³⁰ applies not exclusively to the establishment of common security interests (to add a fourth layer of security compartmentalization that enforces outer-European partnerships) but also requires multiple processes of standardizing, harmonizing, formulating, and delegating.

Europeans should enlarge NATO's purpose – while the alliance hitherto mainly served *against* a common threat, a realignment steers NATO towards acting *for* a common goal: security. The difference seems quite small but has enormous consequences: if NATO members adapted this narrative of not only acting against something but fighting for a common goal, the alliance would experience a whole new dynamic. Besides raising boundaries towards multiple threats and states, a more European NATO might focus on partnerships with the new actors – such as the Global South. It would attest to Europe's maturity: verbatim not to leave the countries that consent to a common canon of values, which want to be taken under NATO's protective umbrella, out in the rain. By pursuing this, Europe could return what made it so strong, so unique, so worth living in: the idea of *collective peace*.

Foot notes

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- ¹⁶ Interview with Friedrich Merz. *BBC News*, 05.03.2025.
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