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NATO'S "MACRONIAN" PERIL

Real or Exaggerated?

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Introduction: The (Brain) Death of NATO?

In November 2019, France's president, Emmanuel Macron, granted an interview to the British journal, *The Economist*. That last pre-COVID-19 autumn was a season in which many Western leaders' thoughts were on the future of the transatlantic alliance, seen by quite a few of them to be experiencing more than its usual amount of turmoil. There were four reasons for this heightened alliance angst (discussed below), so there could be nothing terribly surprising about the French president giving voice to what was thought to be wrong with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Nor was there anything surprising about the media outlet to which he unburdened himself. *The Economist* had been Macron's biggest cheerleader since his surprise election some two years earlier. Indeed, such was his rock-star appeal to the magazine's editorial team that they had accorded the youthful president no fewer than three cover-page appearances during the second half of 2017 alone.¹

Macron was hailed by *The Economist's* "small-l" liberal editorialists as a breath of *air frais*. For he was regarded as being one of those rare French leaders who had a reputation as an atlanticist who is "fully committed to NATO and knows that the United States is France's and Europe's natural ally" (Tiersky 2018, 94).² Moreover, he was known to be a reformer who would brook no nonsense from those in France bent on nourishing the sacred cows pasturing in the overly protectionist and *dirigiste* French political paddock, one where liberals had long been routinely taken to task for being the closest thing this secular republic could have to devil worshippers (see Julienne 2001; Leterre 2000). What Macron happened to be thinking meshed well with what *The Economist's* editorialists were thinking: All agreed that when thoughts turned to the current state and future prospects of the venerable transatlantic alliance, there was ample cause for worry.

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Even though COVID-19 had already begun its sinister spread from its epicenter in Wuhan, China, no one had an inkling of what was to come in the very near term. Instead, leaders could vent their anxiety about other matters, which, in light of what was shortly to befall their countries, can now seem almost quaint. What so upset Macron, judging from his remarks in the interview, was the perception of grave danger facing a Europe whose integrative juices had been steadily desiccated by a myriad of economic, political, and demographic challenges that had arisen over the past decade. The challenges were such as to lead some analysts to fear that the European Union (EU) itself was in danger of falling apart (Kirchick 2018). Brexit was an obvious portent, but the problem was far more serious than just the British exit that *The Economist* and Macron had both deplored. Something far worse loomed: Europe itself risked being left to its own devices by a United States (US) that had, since World War II, installed itself as an omnipresent fixture in its regional security but was now, under President Donald J. Trump, showing signs of wanting to decamp from the Old Continent.

It was in this context that Macron commented on NATO's geopolitical health that will go down in history as among the "frankest" things ever said about the alliance by a leader of one of its member states. NATO, asserted the French president, was suffering from "brain-death." He coupled this lugubrious diagnosis with an equally dramatic call to action from Europeans, who now, more than ever, would have to set about "autonomously" erecting their own security and defense structures because, as Macron put to his interviewer, Europe was sitting "on the edge of a precipice" and needed, above all, to "reassess the reality of what NATO is in light of the commitment of the United States" (as quoted in *The Economist* 2019, 9).

Many of France's European allies, otherwise in reasonably general accord that the consequences limned by Macron could be dire, nevertheless were shocked by the blunt diagnosis delivered by the good doctor. Brain death equals death, whether for individuals or institutions, and for most allies, a world from which NATO had disappeared was not a comforting place in which to be living. Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel, was particularly unsettled by what she took to be this gratuitously astringent description of NATO's current status because, for Germans, it can still be said that the alliance remains the "indispensable guarantor of German, European, and transatlantic security" (Schmidt 2019, 17).³ It was reported that Merkel had become "uncharacteristically furious" with her French counterpart, a reaction that a few commentators alarmingly (if prematurely) took as heralding an unstoppable deterioration in the level of Franco-German cooperation (Erlanger 2019, 8). Elsewhere in the alliance, others grumbled about Macron's choice of imagery. Even Trump, who had himself earlier in his mandate never shied away from heaping dispraise upon an alliance he liked to claim was "obsolete," saw fit to use Macron's word choice as an opportunity to *defend* NATO! Not only had the alliance ceased being obsolete—thanks to, as the president saw it, his own enlightened leadership—but it now "serves a great purpose," and thus it was being unfairly slimed with the "very, very nasty" term of opprobrium Macron had hurled in its direction (as quoted in Wintour and Sabbagh 2019).

As we will see, Trump was obviously one of the reasons for Macron's (and other allied leaders') trepidation. Indeed, it might be tempting to conclude that now with Joe Biden dwelling at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, all will be well once more in the transatlantic alliance. No doubt, there is something to this tempting thought, for NATO has unquestionably demonstrated a remarkable degree of "resilience" in the past, leading to the assumption that it will muster enough of this same quality in the future to sustain itself as the preeminent institutional feature of transatlantic defense and security affairs. Still, the alliance does, these days, face a set of real challenges, most of which would exist even if Trump had never come to power in January 2017. Those challenges are fourfold and will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

The first of these concerns the ability of the US, no matter by whom led, to continue to support the globalized economic and security order—call it the "Liberal International Order" (LIO)—to anything like the same extent as it had in the years since that order's creation in the aftermath of World War II. The second challenge concerns the long-running saga regarding the prospects and consequences of the European "autonomy" aspiration touted by Macron and some other Europeans (most but not all of them French) over the decades. The third challenge is associated with the evident rise of "illiberalism" in many NATO states, carrying with it the risk that a growing values divergence will redound negatively for interest-based cooperation between the allies. And the fourth, and perhaps most intriguing, challenge will be how NATO positions itself in respect to the return of great-power competition as the principal menace to international peace, a question addressed in this chapter's concluding section.

The Trump Experience: Cause or Symptom?

The biggest question in transatlantic security over the past several years has involved the US's ability or desire (or both) to continue to function as a central—indeed, *the* central—organizer of European security affairs, working through NATO. A facile judgment regarding this question would hold that it received its definitive answer in the November 2020 US presidential election when the American electorate fired Trump. Some believe that with Joe Biden now at the helm of foreign policy, the US will live up to its (or his) promise to be "back" and that it will recommit to bolstering the LIO and the Western alliance by resuming the mantle of leadership of the community of like-minded states, at whose core has been, since 1949, the transatlantic alliance. It is far too early for anyone to know the extent to which it will be "back to business as usual" for NATO. Partly, of course, this is merely to say that none of us are preternaturally gifted when it comes to discerning the outlines of even the near-term future, which despite what some like to call it, is hardly ever a "foreseeable" one; if the pandemic has taught us nothing else, then surely it has taught us this. However, our inability to fathom NATO's future also inheres in our amnesia about its *past*.

Simply put, it is not clear what, in the NATO context, "back to business" would mean. The best we can do is to say what it does *not* mean. It does not imply

returning to a blissful time when all the allies sang from the same hymn book, and the unison of their voices was sweet harmony, indeed. Such a construe would overlook just how much chronic squabbling has *always* taken place among the Western allies, with France and the US never being too far from the center of the rhetorical action, hence the sobriquet given to them two-dozen years ago, the “feuding hillbillies” of the West (Grantham 1998, 58).

Perhaps an anecdote from the Cold War best illustrates the fundamental difficulty with romanticizing NATO’s past. The anecdote involves a comment made during the Carter administration by the secretary of defense, Harold Brown, as recounted a decade or so later by a French analyst, François Heisbourg. At the time of Heisbourg’s retelling in 1987, NATO was witnessing another spike in intra-alliance bickering, this round of carping being over the merits of the recently signed Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty between Washington and Moscow, which some in Europe feared would “de-couple” US and European security. In this heated environment, Heisbourg did well to instruct his readers on the “same-old, same-old” quality of alliance debates, drawing their attention back to an afternoon, ten years previously, when a breathless aide burst into Brown’s office to convey the distressing news that NATO had just fallen into disarray, only to be met with this nonchalant response from the defense secretary: “Tell me,” Brown calmly asked, “when has NATO ever been in *array*? [emphasis in original]” (as quoted in Heisbourg 1987, 111–12).

For the US, one constant source of this lack of array has involved “burden sharing,” taken to mean, with some rare exceptions, that Washington was growing fed up with European allies (and Canada) not spending enough on defense. Trump did not invent this US grievance. It has a lengthy pedigree, having upset Democratic as well as Republican presidents alike, dating back almost to the very origins of the Atlantic alliance. The first public staging of the burden-sharing drama occurred with the alliance’s Lisbon Summit in 1952, when the Truman administration called on the allies to so step up their contributions to the alliance’s conventional defenses as to be able to, within two years, field 98 divisions and 7,000 combat aircraft for the European theater (Ratti 2017, 52)! Needless to say, the allies showed themselves incapable of meeting this ambitious conventional-force goal. Yet, the alliance proved resilient and, in the short run, was able to benefit from a decision by the Eisenhower administration to prioritize nuclear rather than conventional deterrence with its “New Look” strategy. In the longer run, alliance resiliency was mightily boosted by the fortuitous ending of the Cold War, followed by the demise of the Soviet Union itself (see Schwartz 1983).

The old burden-sharing disquiet would prove, like NATO itself, to have remarkable survival skills, managing to outlive the ending of the Cold War. The alliance’s gradual assumption of new security obligations outside of its traditional “area,” starting in the Balkans in the 1990s and continuing in the “greater” Middle East in the early twenty-first century, witnessed a ramping up in the volume of the traditional refrain, as US presidents, no matter their names or their parties, implored allies to do more, with the metric for assessing “more” typically being

the percentage share of gross domestic product allocated to their respective defense budgets. In the event, 2 percent has come to be the magic figure that attests to an ally's doing "enough" to carry its share of the burden, but it is not a metric that flatters most alliance members, with only a third of them managing to have hit that target before the arrival of the pandemic, which will certainly put further strains on the capacity of member states to increase spending on the military (Webber, Sperling, and Smith 2021, 71).

Before Trump, presidential finger-wagging was just that. Few "underspenders" really sensed there to be much if any downside risk of their choosing to allocate relatively larger shares of public finances to budgetary envelopes other than defense. In the words of three eminent alliance watchers, what Trump did was "criticize NATO in a manner unparalleled among previous American presidents" (Webber, Sperling, and Smith 2021, 3). In so doing, he injected a new and disturbing element into their calculations, predicated upon the thought that perhaps he was serious when he warned that unless they spent more, the US *itself* might leave NATO. Although no ally has ever seriously entertained the option of invoking Article 13 of the Washington Treaty and exiting the alliance—not even France in 1966, when Charles de Gaulle kicked NATO's headquarters out of his country and pulled France's forces out of its integrated command structures—with Trump, there spread a suspicion that the US's commitment to the alliance it had created and sustained could no longer be taken for granted.

Trump certainly managed to elevate the tension associated with this eternal dispute by debasing the quality of debate, resorting to his hallmark trait of insulting, and demeaning those with whom he happened to disagree. Not surprisingly, many allies (though not all) responded by elevating their criticism of the US president. This resulted in stirring up anew the old "anti-American" bogey that always seems to sleep with one eye open within the confines of the transatlantic region, a phenomenon that one analyst, writing a decade and a half ago, astutely labeled "friendly-fire" anti-Americanism (Sweig 2006).⁴ Between 2017 and 2021, the fire was coming fast and furiously, as attested to by survey data that measured Trump's (and by implication, his country's) favorability in the reckoning of allies.⁵

Lost in the emotionally charged atmosphere of the Trump years, though, was an *attitudinal* change afoot in the US, one for which Trump served much more as consequence than cause. The conviction was growing that the multilateral international order, the LIO, that had for so many years been the cynosure of US grand strategy, was no longer working in the US's interests. Many drew the alarmist conclusion that if the US was retreating from the LIO, it might also step back from NATO. Although the US public still seems supportive of the latter, there can be no question that the belief in an all-virtuous LIO has suffered a reversal in wide swaths of public opinion and has important champions in the Biden coalition, many of whose members believe (perhaps correctly) that today's LIO has been built on illusions. One of those illusions concerned the relative painlessness of globalized free trade, such that in increasing overall global wealth (which it did), it could also ensure that the fruits of greater prosperity could be more ethically and equitably

shared (which it did not). Another of those illusions was that a liberal power of such vast capacity—in the event, the US—could be counted upon to understand that as it was the principal beneficiary of the multilateral order, it must fall to it to become *and to remain* the order's leading champion. Quite a few analysts have been moved to suggest that for the US, the appropriate role to adopt had to be that of “hegemon,” even if it remained unclear what the concept of hegemony was actually supposed to mean in practice (see Foot, MacFarlane, and Mastanduno 2003; Ikenberry 2020).⁶ However, whatever it might have meant, the “h-word” (Anderson 2017) implied one certainty: There could be no “Amerexit” from the task of overseeing the liberal international order.⁷ Or so it was thought.

One astute critic of US foreign policy has given this post-Cold War mindset a metaphorical label, the “Emerald City consensus.” Andrew J. Bacevich (2020), retired US Army colonel-turned-university professor, and a self-declared conservative, invoked this trope to identify that magical place to which the yellow brick road led in *The Wizard of Oz*—a place where everyone's dreams could come true. For Bacevich, this post-1991 consensus rested upon three core assumptions, all of them critically dependent upon US superintendence. These assumptions were (1) that “unfettered” capitalism worked best for Americans and everyone else; (2) that “unabashed” American military domination of the system worked best for Americans and everyone else; and (3) that the purpose of life after the Cold War had become, for Americans and everyone else, to enjoy to the fullest individual liberty while taking on as few as possible civic responsibilities.

In light of this trio of assumptions, Bacevich found it easy to understand the US's defection from the liberal multilateral order: They simply ceased to believe that it continued to work to promote their interests. Instead, it had become a menace to those interests. Bacevich and former president Trump, with whom he stood in fundamental disagreement on many issues, did share at least one important quality: Membership in the same—Baby Boom—generation:

During the period stretching from the mid-1940s through the 1980s, as [Donald Trump] and I passed from infancy and childhood into adolescence and then manhood, most Americans most of the time nurtured the conviction that the three versions of postwar freedom to which they subscribed could coexist in rough equipoise. That their nation could be simultaneously virtuous *and* powerful *and* deliriously affluent seemed not only plausible, but also essential [emphasis in original].

Bacevich 2020, 15–16, 88

Somewhere along the road, however, the wheels began to fall off the cart that was supposed to lead to Emerald City.

One clear implication of this has been a greater reluctance than in previous decades for Americans to, in the words of John F. Kennedy, “pay any price, and bear any burden” for the defense of freedom (Kennedy 1961). We have seen already, with the Biden administration's decision to put a quick end to the experiment with

nation-building in Afghanistan, one immediate consequence of the abandonment of the Emerald City vision. This does not mean, as some want rashly to conclude, that the US is returning to "isolationism," for it is very unlikely to do this, as I discuss below. However, it does mean that observers in the alliance who have been querying the US's willingness to backstop their security have some reason to be anxious, as they sense an implicit identification between supporting the LIO and supporting NATO. This anxiety will have obvious implications for the alliance; in the first instance by reinforcing, in some allies' imagination, the perennial yearning for a more "autonomous" European security and defense capability.

"Huntingtonianism" Revisited

It is of more than passing interest that Macron should have been intoning the mantra of "autonomy" in his many addresses and other interventions on security and defense topics in the past three years. For autonomy has represented, in France, what elsewhere in the alliance can often be considered, at best, a will-o'-the-wisp, and in some places can be regarded as downright suicidal. Thus, if US resolve constitutes one important challenge to NATO, the prospect of a French-led autonomy drive that "widens" the Atlantic is a second. Importantly, the two problems are interrelated, as we discover in this section. And once again, neither can be said to have come into existence because of Donald Trump. Nor will either vanish because of Joe Biden.

In fact, it was while Biden was serving as vice president to the popular (among public opinion in Europe and North America) Barack Obama that French security and defense analysts resuscitated what had been a familiar concern about the US's perceived willingness to stay committed to Europe, one that long predated Charles de Gaulle's decade in the Élysée, having its roots in France's feeling of abandonment during the interwar era (Martin 1999; Nelson 1975). French analysts considered Obama to be too fixated on parts of the world other than Europe, or simply too fixated on "nation-building" at home, to be counted upon.⁸ As one of these commentators observed, apropos the growing disenchantment of Americans with international leadership so evident during the 2016 campaign, there was a common thread linking such otherwise disparate members of the US's political class as Trump, Ted Cruz, Bernie Sanders—and yes, even Barack Obama: All had been promoting the idea that the US's role in the world needed to be reduced (Kandel 2018, 174–75).

If this indeed was the problem—if a US defection was considered possible—then it behooved Europeans to think more constructively about their collective defense than they had been accustomed to doing. Failure to step up their game, some feared, would soon result in their confronting serious threats to their security they would be incapable of handling. Of course, most European countries did not share this French pessimism regarding US staying power as a fixture of the Old Continent's security. Still, the French critique was worrisome, representing as it did the latest instantiation of an older worry that we might refer to as "Huntingtonianism."

The above eponym is a reference to the late Harvard professor and well-known commentator on foreign policy, Samuel Huntington. So fecund was this scholar that it is possible to associate his name with any number of policy orientations, and it is probably the case that he is mainly recalled for his celebrated and much-debated “clash of civilizations” thesis from a quarter-century ago. Early in the first post-Cold War decade, indeed as an integral part of his “clash” thesis, Huntington had waxed enthusiastically about the ability of the civilizational grouping whose roots were “Euro-American” to withstand the challenges of a new era in which cultural identity would come to supplant political ideology as the dominant cleavage in global politics. He was positively upbeat about this prospect, sure that, in moments of crisis, the Western allies would find it within themselves to engage in successful “civilization rallying.” His optimism about Western resilience compelled him to debunk the rising tide of skepticism regarding the alliance’s survivability during the immediate aftermath of the Cold War’s end, which left the allies bereft of a Soviet enemy around which to coalesce. To the growing legion of NATO critics in those early post-Cold War years, Huntington (1996) offered the rebuttal that

if North America and Europe renew their moral life, build on their cultural commonality, and develop close forms of economic and political integration to supplement their security collaboration in NATO, they could generate a third Euroamerican phase of Western economic affluence and political influence.

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By the late 1990s, and continuing into the following decade, his mood would darken, as he sensed a looming conflict *within* the West itself, fueled by a French-led desire to effect greater autonomy for the US’s European allies. Nor was he alone in having this sense of foreboding.⁹ Hence, my invocation of Huntingtonianism in this section’s heading; for what would come to consume Huntington’s fears was the suspicion that France had defected from universalistic Western undertakings it had once espoused and henceforth was going to throw itself wholly into the project of building an exclusionary Europe. This Europe, once constructed, would be bound to widen the Atlantic—not in any geographic sense, obviously, but certainly in an affective one, and likely even a strategic one.

As a result, just a few short years after expressing himself so exuberantly through the clash thesis, Huntington now saw the solidity of Western civilization to be under dire threat; only this time, it was not the “rest” from beyond the pale who were the problem. Far worse, the source of the trouble was internal. All the evidence, according to Huntington, pointed in France’s direction. The French, he claimed, were determined to forge an “antihegemonic” coalition intended to balance US power. Whether they would succeed in this objective depended upon their ability to entice Germany to slip from its traditional pro-NATO, pro-Washington, moorings. The stakes could not be higher, Huntington warned. The future of world order depended upon which way “Europe” would lean, for, at a

time when it was still possible to miss the geostrategic significance of China's rise, only Europe was said to be capable of making or breaking that dispensation some knew as US hegemony. The latter, to function, required others to want to follow US leadership—exactly the thing that a rebarbative France was contesting. Thus, to Huntington, the way to preserve hegemony, and thereby stave off the loneliness of the US's "superpowerdom," was obvious. France would have to be blocked from winning Germany over to its side because "given the pro- and anti-American outlooks of Britain and France, respectively, America's relations with Germany are central to its relations with Europe" (Huntington 1999, 48).

Much would happen over the years since Huntington expressed himself in such a worried manner. For the alliance, there was for a time good news on the autonomy front, associated with France's "return" to NATO in 2009, under Nicolas Sarkozy (see Bozo 2008). It seemed to some as if the risk of transatlantic rupture had well and truly been put to rest, with NATO and the EU apparently developing into mutual admiration societies, committed to working together in as seamless a manner possible. Yet, the old autonomy itch never did, or could, disappear, such that one impact of the Trump presidency, revealed in recent Macronian initiatives to rally Europe, was to set some policymakers once more to scratching furiously.

Ironically, the French response to Trump, while not exactly a welcoming one, was less hostile than was the response of other allied publics. The so-called anti-American French actually thought better—or to phrase it more accurately, "less worse"—of Trump than did publics in many other Western allied countries. The main reason for this was that, in France, it was possible to see him as facilitating that which many elsewhere in Europe (and in Canada) feared might well happen: The attainment of greater (as in *genuine*) European autonomy in security and defense policy. This is why Alain Frachon, perhaps tongue in cheek, could scold Europeans on the manner in which they had treated the 45th president. Shortly after Biden's victory, Frachon, an editorialist in the Parisian daily, *Le Monde*, called Europe's numerous Trump-haters a bunch of "ingrates," who did not understand the remarkable gift that the defeated president had bestowed upon them. For he had given Europeans the impetus needed to complete the job of building that "more perfect" Europe that continually gets touted as an obviously necessary policy goal. Trump accomplished this, wrote Frachon, by showing the Europeans the "world as it is." Force is the ultimate ratio in that world, and Trump's gift consisted in demonstrating to the Europeans that they needed to enhance their own military capabilities. For doing this, he deserved to be acknowledged as the "obstetrician" (*accoucheur*) facilitating the birth of that new, and autonomous, Europe (Frachon 2020).

The Rise of Illiberalism

If there was something familiar about the first two challenges facing NATO, the third challenge really did manifest itself in something new, as undesirable as it was novel. It is the challenge subsumed under the label of democratic "backsliding," otherwise known as the rise of illiberalism within countries thought to be established liberal

democracies (see Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). NATO has been conceptualized over the years in different ways. At one extreme can be found those who regard it as a collective-defense entity conceived *solely* to safeguard its members from the threat of great-power aggression. At the other extreme are those who see it as something truly new under the global security sun, that is, a community of like-minded states held together far more by shared liberal-democratic values than by traditional security worries. According to this second way of looking at things, NATO has always been much more than a marriage of security convenience between partners possessed of interest-based reasons for cooperation; it is a community of shared values, the foremost of which are human rights, the rule of law, and especially, democratic governance.

This is why, once the end of the Cold War removed (temporarily, as it turned out) concerns about Russia as a threat, some analysts could be confident that NATO was not destined to go out of existence, for as one of them put it at the start of the 1990s, “it is a fair bet that the values engendered in Western cooperation in security affairs will be maintained in the years ahead, based on the assumption that these values have become internalized in the systems of Western alliance nations” (see Boyer 1993). Now, it has always been true that the community-of-values argument needed to be taken with a grain of salt, given the charter membership in the alliance of António de Oliveira Salazar’s Portugal, to say nothing of the occasional democratic “lapses” experienced during the Cold War by the first pair of new members, Turkey and Greece. But *la nécessité oblige*, and sometimes during the Cold War, it was imperative to overlook a bit of value “straying” for the greater sake of security against the Soviets.

What was *not* so easily acceptable is what came as a result of NATO’s great post-Cold War experiment with enlargement. That experiment was intended to contribute to spreading the democratic “zone of peace” eastward in Europe; in the first instance (in 1999), by the incorporation into alliance ranks of three former Soviet allies: Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Subsequently, eleven other new members were added, between 2004 and 2020, so that today’s NATO is made up of 30 member states. If what was intended was to spread liberal values, the experiment has been a bust, nowhere more so than with respect to two members of the expansion class of 1999, Poland and Hungary (the court is still out on the third, the Czech Republic).

Despite what so many today, and not just in Russia, seem to want to believe about NATO’s expansion, initial enthusiasm for it had *far* less to do with containing Russia than it did with spreading liberal democracy. That latter objective was obviously valued in and of itself, but it was also intended to serve as a means to another end. Many advocates of enlargement saw that end as being the safeguarding of NATO’s very existence, on the good logic that for the alliance to remain viable in an era when the “threat” of yore had disappeared, it needed other ambitious projects to keep it from lapsing into irrelevance. At its inception, enlargement was the most important of those projects, one that was a political experiment more than it was a strategic one (see Asmus 2002; Goldgeier 1999; Maddox and Rachwald 2001; Sayle 2019; von Hlatky and Fortmann 2020).¹⁰

And herein arises the contemporary irony. There is today, in many (though not all) of the earlier NATO member countries, a growing sense of disquiet regarding what some construe as the unintended consequences of the alliance's decision to enlarge a generation ago—disquiet reflected in a February 2019 report written by two former US ambassadors to NATO, Douglas Lute and Nicholas Burns, who did not mince words in underscoring what they called “a potentially cancerous threat from within.” The threat, they said, arose from three particular allies, two of the members of the first enlargement class of the post-Cold War NATO and the third a member of the first enlargement class of the *Cold War* NATO:¹¹

Three allied governments—Poland, Hungary and Turkey—have undermined their own democracies in varying degrees by suppressing free speech and a free press and limiting the independence of the courts. As NATO is, first and foremost, an alliance of democracies, the actions of these governments threaten the core values—democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law—to which each ally is committed in the North Atlantic Treaty.

Lute and Burns 2019, 4¹²

The ex-ambassadors' commentary reflected a general mood among alliance-watchers, troubled by the retreat from liberal democracy appearing to gather momentum within the alliance—and not just among its newest members (see Krastev and Holmes 2020; Larsen 2019; Sloan 2018; Wallander 2018). This somber mood was reflected in early April 2019, when NATO held a subdued ceremony in Washington to mark its 70th anniversary, at the site of its founding. One European attendee quipped that the ersatz celebration resembled a wake more than a birthday party, such was the current funk enveloping the transatlantic community, a malaise with several causes, not least of which is the worry that allies who once had been Soviet client states were busily “turning authoritarian” (McDougall 2019; Sanger 2019).

Conclusion: Back to the Future?

If one of the big surprises between the ending of the Cold War and today has been the retreat of liberal democracy in so many alliance member-states, another surprise has been the *return* of great-power competition as the central issue in international security. It had seemed as if it was just yesterday that such competition had been authoritatively declared “obsolete.”¹³ And now it had come roaring back, with anxieties being fueled by the deeds and declarations of two particular countries.

The first of these was the traditional NATO adversary, Russia, which, under Vladimir Putin, has made earlier visions of working “cooperatively” with Moscow through a variety of NATO institutional mechanisms seem like pipe dreams.¹⁴ The debate over just who or what “lost” Russia to the prospect of cooperation with Western countries can be expected to continue, but few imagine, especially after Russia's seizure of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and its continued

meddling in the eastern portion of that former Soviet republic, a return any time soon to a good working relationship with the Russians. But, so long as Russia does not aggress against any of the current NATO membership, its recent bellicosity can be, and has been, regarded as providing a boost to NATO's resilience, by reminding the allies—old and new alike—what it was that led to the original formation of the alliance. In that sense, we are reminded once again of the truth in the apothegm of that remarkable English proverbialist of the sixteenth century, John Heywood, about “an ill wind that bloweth no man to good” (quoted in Bartlett 1968, 185b).

If some can clearly discern the good that might come from the alliance's being forced to retrench from its post-Cold War “overstretch” and concentrate once more on its core objective of providing collective defense within the transatlantic community, less obvious is what the implications might be for NATO of the emergence of a new cold war between the US and China. Delusionary, in retrospect, as the earlier visions of spreading liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe through institutional enlargement of NATO (and the EU) may have been, even more delusionary were those early assumptions about China's being brought within the embrace of liberal democracy as a result of its deepening ties with the Western capitalist world (see Wright 2017). China's economy did in so many ways become capitalist, but in no way, shape, or form has the Chinese polity evolved in a liberal-democratic direction. Just the opposite has occurred, making us wonder today how anyone could possibly have thought “engagement” was going to be an important first step leading to China's eventual democratization. Instead, it has represented an essential component in China's growth into a peer competitor of the US.

Interdependence between the West and China has served as the equivalent of the Western countries giving China the rope from which they, rather than it, would someday find themselves dangling. For in making China richer and more powerful, globalization and the engagement mindset that accompanied it have combined to foster, more than anything else has done, the return of what its erstwhile champions once thought it could prevent—great-power competition. This is a worry that has been especially pronounced among analysts who take seriously the supposedly ineluctable implications embedded in what is called “power-transition theory” (PTT), among whose most celebrated recent adherents has been Graham Allison (Allison 2017). But PTT scholars are far from the only experts who foresee trouble ahead between the US and China. Nearly everyone does, though the trouble need not take the form of military conflict between the two.

Nevertheless, China's well-commented “rise” of recent years may turn out to provide a tonic for US-European ties, strange as the thought might otherwise seem on first encounter. This is because of two trends. The first is that, in the US, China is one of the few issues in foreign policy (indeed, it may be the only one) capable of engendering a semblance of bipartisanship (see Sanger et al. 2021). It is hard to detect much difference between the China-averse Republicans and the similarly

inclined Democrats. The second trend is the recognition that is setting in in the US, namely that allies might just be useful things to have vis-à-vis China. And, with respect to the latter, in US thinking, nothing tops the utility of NATO allies.¹⁵

The question that cannot be answered, and the one on which this chapter concludes, is whether China will prove a unifying or divisive force within the transatlantic community. It used to be argued by some European policy intellectuals that, unlike the US, "Europe doesn't do China" (Danchev 2005, 433). Recently, however, there is evidence that Europeans themselves are growing aware that if they do not "do" China, then China may well "do" them.¹⁶

In the end, there is some irony in the quondam pessimist John Mearsheimer's speculation that China may yet prove to be the allies' *deus ex machina*, quieting their fear about an American defection from European security and defense. This concluding section's title is an obvious allusion to Mearsheimer's (1990) very pessimistic (and very inaccurate) prognosis about NATO's resilience at the beginning of the post-Cold War decade when the Chicago professor worried about the resurgence of a German challenge (!) to Western security. Thus, it is fitting to leave the last words to him, as, this time, he may possibly get it right.

For Mearsheimer, the demise of the LIO need not lead to the demise of NATO and likely will not do so. Instead, what will replace the LIO will be two fairly strong but "bounded" orders, one managed by the US and the other by China. (There will also be a weaker, global, order for dealing with second-order concerns.) Mearsheimer foresaw most European states adhering to the US-led order, "although they are unlikely to play a serious military role in containing China." That is not what the US wants from them, in any case. Instead, what it seeks is to "keep European countries from selling dual-use technologies to China and to help put economic pressure on Beijing when necessary." That will be the European allies' side of the evolving arrangement. As for the US, its commitment to the Europeans will be militarily to

remain in Europe, keeping NATO alive and continuing to serve as the pacifier in that region. Given that virtually every European leader would like to see that happen, the threat of leaving should give the United States significant leverage in getting the Europeans to cooperate on the economic front against China.

Mearsheimer 2019, 48–49

This, in a nutshell, may be the shape of a new, to use Harlan Cleveland's well-known term from the late 1960s, "transatlantic bargain" (as quoted in Sloan 2020, ch. 1) one that keeps the US interested in Europe, if only because it is so interested in China. In other words, those in France and elsewhere who worried that the US's ballyhooed "pivot to Asia," starting in the Obama administration, signaled a retreat from the Old Continent, may not have considered fully the implications of China's emergence as a peer-competitor of the US.

Notes

- 1 The first appearance came in the 17 June issue, which featured a picture of Macron walking on water, in support of its editorial “Europe’s Saviour?” The second was on 30 September with Macron’s visage advertising a special nine-page report on France bearing the hopeful title “Regeneration.” The third appearance came in the year-ending double issue, which lauded France as the “Formidable Nation.”
- 2 Also favorably taking the measure of the French president is Drozdiak (2020).
- 3 Also see, on Franco-German differences over transatlantic and European security, Meimeth and Schmidt (forthcoming) and Vincze (2021).
- 4 Also see, for that era’s wave of criticism of American foreign policy, Katzenstein and Keohane (2007).
- 5 A useful metric for gauging the quality of ties between the US and its European allies is the “transatlantic scorecard” published quarterly by the Brookings Institution’s Center on the United States and Europe as part of a transatlantic initiative it co-sponsors with the Robert Bosch Stiftung in Germany. Recent quarterly scorecards all attest to the consensus view that transatlantic relations could benefit greatly from an upgrade. These quarterly scorecards are available at www.brookings.edu/research/trans-atlantic-scorecard-april-2020/?utm_campaign=Brookings%20Brief&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=86981260.
- 6 For a caution regarding potential misuse of this ill-defined term, see Wilkinson (1999).
- 7 As argued forcefully in Kagan (2018).
- 8 For reflections of this concern, exacerbated by worry about an Obama “pivot to Asia” redounding negatively for European interests, see Leparmentier and Lesnes (2010, 1, 6); Quessard and Kandel (2017); and Quessard, Heurtebize, and Gagnon (2020). For sure, it has not only been French defense intellectuals who have worried about recent US foreign policy signaling a lack of commitment to allies. Many US voices were getting raised, even prior to the Trump administration, about excessive strategic diffidence. See, for instance, the sarcastically titled critique penned by former Obama supporter Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (2013). The sarcasm inherent in Nasr’s paraphrase of Madeleine Albright’s well-known assertion about American exceptionalism, made while the secretary of state was being interviewed on NBC’s *Today Show* in February 1998, some ten months before Operation Desert Fox was unleashed against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq: “[I]f we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us.” In fact, Albright was merely repeating a phrase used by President Bill Clinton the year before in his second inaugural address in January 1997: “America stands alone as the world’s indispensable nation” (as quoted in Lieber 2012, 67).
- 9 Others included Pfaff (1998/99); Kupchan (2002); Glucksmann (2003); and Habermas (2006). And for an otherwise decidedly *non*-“Habermasian” perspective, see Buchanan (2002).
- 10 Also see Mearsheimer (2019). “NATO expansion into Eastern Europe,” wrote the prominent realist theoretician,

is a good example of the United States and its allies working to turn the bounded Western order into a liberal international order. One might think that moving NATO eastward was part of a classic deterrence strategy aimed at containing a potentially aggressive Russia. But it was not, as the West’s strategy was geared toward liberal ends.

Mearsheimer 2019, 23

- 11 Turkey joined the alliance in 1952, at the same time as Greece. Some analysts hold Turkey to be far more of a problem than either Hungary or Poland—or the two Visegrád delinquents combined. For one sharply worded criticism of the nominal “ally” Turkey, said to have embarked on a determined campaign to challenge the US, and to act generally as the “troll under the bridge to hell using his geographical position to blackmail the West,” see Lévy (2019, 147–48, 164). Also see the more restrained critique by Yegin (2019).
- 12 Sharing this downcast view is Flockhart (2019).
- 13 Most memorably by Mueller (1990). Testifying to the current “retreat” from this optimistic perspective are Loong (2020) and Layne (2020).
- 14 Those mechanisms were the Permanent Joint Council, set up in 1997 but undone by tensions resulting from the 1999 Kosovo War, and its successor, the NATO–Russia Council, created in the aftermath of 9/11 but rendered ineffective after the Russia–Georgia conflict in 2008. Webber, Sperling, and Smith (2021, ch. 4).
- 15 Stressing the value of allies as a “force maximizer” for the US, are Brooks and Wohlforth (2016).
- 16 For reactions to Chinese influence—attempts in Central and Eastern Europe, see Karásková et al. (2021).

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