

NATO's Struggle for Relevance

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(Anadolu Agency)

This policy outlook examines the crises NATO faces today and aims to analyse the alliance's future and relevance in world politics. In its seventy-one-year history, NATO has passed significant tests and maintained its relevance through important transformations. Faced with scepticism from key member-states, most notably the US during the Trump presidency, a rising China and what arguably amounts to a strategic overreach, NATO's cohesion and unity appear to be diminishing. Although Joe Biden's victory in the recent US Presidential Elections has increased optimism for NATO's future, its relevance in world politics seems to be contingent upon the extent of China's challenge and the ability and willingness of the US to sustain its commitment to the alliance.

Introduction: The History of NATO's Transformation

NATO was established in 1949 as a collective defence organisation against the Soviet threat. Article 5 of the NATO charter is the most important provision as it required all member states to join efforts to defend an ally in case of attack. During the Cold War, protecting Western Europe from Russian aggression was one of the main [rationales](#) behind the formation of NATO. The US [strategy](#) in Europe was to prevent the emergence of a continental hegemon that could threaten the security of the US by harnessing the continent's resources. Hence, keeping Western Europe within the American orbit not only defended the region but also served the security interests of the US.

With the end of the Cold War, a new debate was sparked regarding NATO's purpose. The US continued to view NATO as the [key](#) to the preservation of peace and stability in Europe even without an obvious threat. As such, President Bill Clinton was set to enlarge NATO by including new members, particularly countries in Central and Eastern Europe close to Russian borders. NATO's expansion became the main strategy for the US with President Clinton [stating](#) in 1994 that "now the question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members but when and how". By 2020, the number of NATO member-states had [expanded](#) from the original 12 to 30 through eight rounds of enlargement. The enlargement process began during the Cold War with the inclusion of Greece and Turkey in 1952, West Germany in 1955 and Spain in 1982. This was followed by the entry of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1999. Seven new members, from Central and Eastern European countries; Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, joined the alliance in 2004. Albania and Croatia joined in 2009 and Montenegro in 2017. The Republic of North Macedonia is the most recent addition, having [joined](#) the alliance in March 2020.



Soldiers stand at attention during a military parade on the occasion of 10th Anniversary of Albania's membership in NATO (North Atlantic Alliance) in Tirana, Albania on March 29, 2019. (Olsi Shehu- Anadolu Agency)

In parallel with the enlargement process, NATO has undergone a process of transformation to adapt to the new security environment that emerged with the demise of the Soviet Union. Early steps for redefining the purpose of the organisation were taken during the George Bush presidency as the Rome Declaration [introduced](#) the "new strategic concept" that embraced a broader understanding of security that incorporated political, economic, social and environmental issues. President Clinton followed suit by initiating an enlargement process that required candidate states to fulfil specific political and military criteria, something that was particularly relevant for post-Soviet states. As such, a functional democracy and free-market economy, resolution of ethnic conflicts and civilian control of the military became the standard for candidate countries. This step transformed NATO from a military organisation to one promoting democratisation. Hence, securing and [stabilising](#) newly emerging democracies in Eastern Europe became one of the central concerns for NATO. Additionally, with the revision of military guidelines, NATO expanded its scope of activities to [include](#) peace enforcement missions. With these transformations, NATO turned into an organisation that was able to address different kinds of security problems. Another great transformation came in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks where transnational terrorism began [dominating](#) the organisation's agenda. Although NATO already considered terrorism as a security risk, the 9/11 attacks contributed to actively engaging with terrorism threats, particularly as Article 5 was invoked for the first time in the alliance's history. In the ensuing period, counter-terrorism [became](#) NATO's primary focus and the organisation's force and command structure were revised accordingly.

With the help of enlargements and transformations, NATO has continued to play a critical role in world politics and US foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War. NATO's involvement in the Bosnian War in 1992, which was mostly symbolic at the onset, heralded its growing significance to international politics. NATO's involvement dramatically increased in scope in 1994, with air strikes marking the first combat operation in the alliance's history. NATO's role increased further with the deployment of around 60,000 soldiers as part of a peace implementation mission in 1995, which [marked](#) NATO's first land operation conducted outside of allied territory. NATO's mission in Bosnia [continued](#) until 2004. In 1999, NATO intervened in Kosovo by [launching](#) large-scale air campaigns, marking the alliance's second major combat operation. The operation was conducted without authorisation from the United Nations Security Council, which triggered a debate regarding its legitimacy as the UN Charter does not allow the use of force outside of the Security Council's approval or for self-defence purposes. Currently, NATO is [engaged](#) in operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan and the Mediterranean and provides the African Union with logistic support, and carries out disaster relief operations and assists civilian efforts in the fight against Covid-19.

Is NATO's Survival in Question?

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many [expected](#) NATO to wither away or lose its significance in international affairs. This view largely reflected a realist approach to international politics and alliance behaviour, one of the dominant paradigms at that time. The realists contended that in the absence of an external threat, NATO would cease to exist since, according to the realist perspective, alliances are temporary military coalitions formed to counterweight power or external threats. Additionally, they predicted that disagreements among members would emerge over the burden-sharing and leadership roles as members would be less likely to make concessions to maintain the alliance structure when there was no immediate menace. Furthermore, it was asserted that since unchecked power creates worries for states regardless of the speciality of the relationships, the unrivalled primacy of the US in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War was expected to be [perceived](#) by the European allies of the US as a potential threat to their security, paving the way to intra-alliance tensions and scepticism. Some analysts even expected the [formation](#) of a counter coalition by other states including European countries to check US dominance. However, as the prediction that NATO would become obsolete proved wrong over the time, realists [contended](#) that NATO survived because the US transformed the organisation in a way to advance its interests both in Europe and around the world.

Regarding the survival of NATO in the aftermath of the Cold War, others suggested that NATO's demonstrated

ability to [facilitate](#) cooperation on security issues among member states was the key to its survival. The main assumption was that institutions help facilitate cooperation primarily by [reducing](#) certain costs, providing information and increasing trust through transparency. Hence, as long as the benefits of institutions outweigh the costs of its absence, they are expected to survive. Additionally, it has been asserted that once [institutions](#) are established, they take on lives of their own and become independent from their members and their respective preferences. Moreover, states prefer to maintain existing institutions as it is less risky to adopt an existing institution than create a new one. From this point of view, it has been suggested that the prevention of Soviet aggression was only one of NATO's missions. In the face of newly emerging threats including security risks stemming from political instability, economic crises and social upheavals, NATO's transformed institutional structure has continued to play a critical role in [addressing](#) these new challenges by providing a platform for security cooperation and defence coordination. Another approach highlighted the fact that although NATO was established as a temporary security coalition reflecting the preferences of its members, over time it began developing characteristics of a permanent and formal organisation consisting of a large bureaucracy and staff whose lives and future are contingent upon the maintenance of the organisation. Thanks to the granted autonomy and budget, career NATO officials are able to put forward their own agendas and interests which might or might not match with those of member states. Hence, according to this perspective, with the resources at their disposal, these officials working at NATO have played a crucial role in redefining the [purposes](#) of the organisation by engaging in public



Leaders of NATO member states pose for the 'family photo' during the NATO summit at the Grove Hotel in London on December 4, 2019.
(Mustafa Kamacı - Anadolu Agency)

relations, creating bulletins and reports and carrying out lobbying activities in member states. Another point of view stressed the importance of NATO as an institution that created a transatlantic [security community](#) that share similar values and interests. The [assumption](#) was that institutions do not merely reflect the interests of states, rather they are able to change state preferences and redefine state interests by way of changing their identity. Accordingly, NATO as a security community was comprised of like-minded states that share democratic values, a commitment to the market economy, rule of law and peaceful resolution of disputes. Hence, NATO's survival and transformation beyond a military alliance [became](#) possible thanks to shared values and interests that turned the organisation into a security community. Although these approaches spotlight different aspects of the NATO and its survival in the post-Cold War period, one of the common points that constitutes a basis for these analyses was the role of the US leadership and material capability that allowed for the formation and maintenance of the alliance.

NATO's Crises

In its seventy-one-year history, NATO has faced several serious internal challenges. For instance, during the heightened rivalry with the Soviet Union, two major NATO members – France and the United Kingdom – were [pitted](#) against the US in the Suez crisis of 1956. In 1966, France [withdrew](#) from NATO's military structure and asked all non-French troops deployed in the country to leave, a situation that lasted until 2009. During the Vietnam War, NATO members failed to demonstrate [solidarity](#) with the US as European allies were unwilling to bandwagon with US policy. In 1974, two NATO allies -Turkey and Greece - confronted each other over Cyprus. Greece subsequently [withdrew](#) from the alliance's military structure as a result. The most imminent challenge after the end of the Cold War was the lack of a clear threat and purpose that would sustain the alliance. However, with the revision of mandates and missions, NATO managed to survive and maintain its relevance with the help of US leadership. Today, NATO faces yet another crisis. However, this time the US appears to be lacking both an ability and willingness to maintain its leadership role within the alliance. With the emerging multipolarity, the rise of China and perceived waning of the US power coupled with the Trump administration's negative attitude towards multilateral institutions, NATO is facing a crisis that might have far-reaching implications for world politics. Biden's electoral victory might resolve some of these problems, particularly the ones pertaining to the increasing doubts about the US commitment to the alliance. By demonstrating a willingness to revitalise transatlantic relations, the Biden administration might attempt to restore solidarity within the alliance by assuaging concerns. However, this may not be sufficient in the face of structural challenges stemming from the shifting dynamics of international politics.



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks to the media at a press conference held after the 2018 NATO Summit on July 12, 2018 in Brussels, Belgium. (Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

The Trumpian Challenge to NATO

US President Donald Trump's [transactional](#) approach to foreign policy coupled with his prioritisation of short-term gains has produced significant impacts on the US alliance strategy. Under President Trump, concerns over the future of NATO have increased thanks largely to his negative attitude towards the alliance. Trump has repeatedly questioned the value of the alliance, describing it as a Cold War relic requiring [transition](#). He even [claimed](#) that the alliance was "obsolete" as it does not fight against terrorism. President Trump also repeatedly criticized European allies for not meeting their pledge to spend a minimum of 2 per cent of GDP on defence. On several occasions, Trump labelled US European allies as free-riders and stressed that the US is paying too much money to protect Europe. He also [stated](#) that NATO allies "owe massive amounts of money from past years" to the US. Trump even put allied countries on notice should they fail to meet the level of expected military spending. For instance, before the last year's NATO Summit, Trump urged Germany to increase its military spending and [threatened](#) economic sanctions should they fail to do so. Recently, Trump [said](#) that the number of US troops deployed in Germany might be reduced if the latter continues to not to pay its share. President Trump also questioned the very foundation of NATO by raising concerns over the US commitment to the mutual defence clause of Article 5. In an interview, Trump appeared to claim that allies should meet their [obligations](#) if they are to receive US assistance in case of an attack. The [reports](#) that Trump might withdraw the US from the alliance have inflamed concerns over the future of NATO. Supporting this claim, former national

security adviser John Bolton [wrote](#) in his book that President Trump repeatedly expressed his desire to quit NATO. Amidst rising tension within the alliance, in 2019 French President Macron [called](#) NATO “brain dead”, noting the US’ decreasing commitment to the alliance and questioning the reliability of the collective defence clause. Macron further stressed that the Europeans could no longer rely on the US for their security. Since its establishment, burden sharing has been an [issue](#) of tension within the alliance as previous US presidents have also [asked](#) allies to contribute more. However, none of the previous administrations questioned the utility of the alliance nor created doubts about the US commitment to the mutual defence clause. President Trump’s negative attitude only served to the [undermining](#) of the alliance’s cohesion.

The Challenge of China

Under the Trump administration, the US has already [defined](#) China as “strategic rival” and set out to implement concrete economic, political and military measures to counter its rise. This has been followed by the EU, who recently [recognised](#) China as a strategic rival despite the divergences among member states on how to address this emerging challenge. NATO’s London Summit, which marked the alliance’s 70th anniversary, referred to China for the first time, demonstrating rising concerns within the alliance. The London declaration [stated](#) that “we recognise that China’s growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance.” In a similar vein, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg [said](#) that “one thing is clear: China is coming ever closer to Europe’s doorstep,” adding that “NATO allies must face this challenge together.” Yet, as the declaration revealed, there is no [consensus](#) as to whether China represents a threat that should be tackled in the same manner as the Soviet Union or an economic opportunity for alliance members to advance their interests through cooperation.

It is important to note that the [challenges](#) China poses to NATO demonstrate differences from those presented by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Unlike the Soviet Union, China does not pose a military threat to any member of NATO at present, rather, [challenges](#) mostly related to the economic and technological realms. China’s increasing foreign direct investments in Europe, ownership of critical infrastructures including ports and rails in Europe and the Western Balkans, inundation of European and American markets with Chinese-made products and its advancements in cutting-edge technologies are the key challenges identified by NATO. Additionally, China’s Belt and Road [Initiative](#) (BRI) is considered as a risk to the unity of the alliance given its potential to create divisions among member states on critical issues, particularly with regards to economic and energy policy. Furthermore, China’s growing [partnership](#) with Russia, which has been the main concern of NATO, particularly in the defence industry further increases NATO’s concerns. Despite these concerns and

the declared intention to develop a common strategy, as of yet, NATO members have not developed a [unified](#) China policy, something that has become particularly apparent with regards to debates on 5G networks as China-based Huawei appears to be the key and leading suppliers in this domain. As concerns increase regarding the security of the commercial and military communications within the alliance, member states have pursued [divergent](#) strategies. While some countries, most notably the US, have put strict restrictions on Chinese 5G providers, others, such as Germany, have signalled its intention to work with the Chinese companies. Additionally, some member states have already adopted Chinese 5G technology. Moreover, one of the difficulties facing NATO in countering the China challenge is that the organisation does not have appropriate [tools](#) and mechanisms to address these issues due to the fact that it is a military alliance by origin and design.

Strategic Overreach

NATO was established with the core mission of deterrence against potential Soviet aggression and protection of the North Atlantic region. Given the complexity of new challenges which have been presented not only by states but also a variety of transnational actors, NATO has undergone a series of transformations, adding new mandates and missions to its core duties after the demise of the Soviet Union. As a result of these transformations and adaptations, NATO is now concerned with a wide range of security issues thereby expanding its original core mission of defence against a threat emerging from a clearly defined state actor. As such, NATO is active in developing strategies to manage emerging [challenges](#) such as terrorism, migration and environmental issues. For some [analysts](#), the ability of NATO to adapt to new security environments and transform its main structures accordingly has been the key to keep the alliance relevant. As the argument goes, with these transformations, NATO became relevant in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, took an active role in the US ‘war on terror’ campaigns by sending troops to Afghanistan and participated in disaster relief operations during earthquakes and hurricanes. However, it should be



Macedonian soldiers attend a farewell ceremony at Skopje's Ilinden Barracks in advance of joining the NATO-led international peacekeeping force in Kosovo known as KFOR on October 17, 2020. (Umey's Sulejman - Anadolu Agency)



NATO Leaders' Summit in London, United Kingdom on December 04, 2019. (TCCB / Murat Çetinmühürdar - Anadolu Agency)

noted that NATO's expansion was only possible because of the relatively stable environment that emerged out of the US power preponderance and lack of counterbalancing powers during this period. Hence, NATO has been able to broaden its mandate because the alliance has found an opportunity to direct its resources and attention to other areas largely because it has faced no immediate threat requiring active deterrence and defence against an aggressor state. Furthermore, the available material capabilities of the US have facilitated the undertaking of additional missions even if member states have remained reluctant to contribute at similar levels. Hence, although it would be possible to take up new missions and sustain them under the leadership of the US, with the perceived waning of the US power and increasing threat perceptions with a resurgent Russia and ambitious China, overexpansion might become a key challenge for the alliance to maintain its core mission of deterrence and defence. Additionally, although NATO's credibility and deterrence primarily come from its material competence, this does not necessarily mean that NATO is the most appropriate platform to address diverse security issues. For instance, in the case of the global terrorism threat, other international organisations with more sophisticated intelligence gathering and sharing capacities might be more [appropriate](#) than NATO.

Whither NATO?

Facing growing challenges from within and without, NATO's future and relevance in world politics have once again become an issue of discussion and debate. The burden-sharing problem, which has long been a point of tension within the alliance, might become a real concern with the far-reaching implications of the Covid-19. With the growing economic challenges posed by the pandemic, European allies might opt to [reduce](#) their defence spending even further in the coming period in order to direct resources to fight the effects of the pandemic. Additionally, emerging trends in the structure of international politics might shape the future direction of the alliance. In particular, China's rise will be decisive. With the victory of Joe Biden in the US presidential elections, the new administration will likely attempt to [repair](#) transatlantic relations and ensure cohe-

sion among member states by demonstrating a firm commitment to the alliance and reassuming its leadership role. Yet, the increasing perception that US power is waning in conjunction with a rising China might undermine alliance unity by creating divisions among members, particularly concerning economic issues. As such, the unity of the alliance may still be challenged as the European members might opt to continue benefitting economic relations with China. Additionally, despite Beijing's [hope](#) for a change in the US strategy towards China under the Biden presidency, the new administration might pursue a more or less similar strategy of containing the rise of China since there has been a growing [consensus](#) within the foreign policy community in Washington regarding the China challenge which appears to be transcending the partisan boundaries. Hence, it is highly likely that changes in the US approach to China would be more style and rhetoric than substance. However, it is hard to claim that the European allies share similar threat perception with the US at present. Although it can be said that European countries have recently come to the [realisation](#) that China's rise poses certain challenges to their interests, given that they are not perceived existential threats, largely owing to the lack of a military dimension, they may be more drawn to pursuing soft strategies. Moreover, European members might also develop a sense of abandonment in the face of potential Russian aggression if the US prefer to direct its attention and resources to the Indo-Pacific as the region is defined as the [priority](#) theatre. Hence, the China challenge might alter the debate from one of burden-sharing to burden-shifting as the US might consider using its troops deployed in Europe in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, given that the challenges posed by China to the alliance are mostly economic and technological in nature, NATO as a military organisation might be less relevant and ineffective, which could require a new understanding of alliance strategy and security cooperation incorporating new measures and statecraft. After passing serious tests over seventy years, NATO has proved its relevance to international politics by undertaking critical transformations. Its future appears to be dependent on its ability to adapt to the new realities of the emerging multipolar international setting and the commitment of its members, most notably the US, to sustain the alliance.