



From one master of survival to another: a tardigrade's plea for NATO2030

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A microscopic creature whose size reaches that of a grain of rice at the utmost could teach NATO more survival lessons than one would think. The tardigrade has survived all five mass extinctions and is over 500 million years old. Like NATO, the tardigrade survived the nuclear challenge and even outer space. It is hard to find a more resilient animal from which NATO can draw inspiration for its ability to adapt to and withstand the most extreme conditions.

To remain relevant and powerful in a dynamic threat landscape NATO needs to do what it has always been doing: adapt. Yet by 2030 NATO not only needs to adapt. Just like the tardigrade, it needs to hyper adapt. Four areas are key: redefining defence and deterrence; agreeing on the math; internal renewal; and rebuilding public support. Money, politics and nostalgia are not enough to keep the Alliance alive. It is time to get creative.

REDEFINE WHAT NEEDS TO BE DEFENDED AND DETERRED

Adapting its *raison d'être* is no new task for NATO. It [refocused its mission](#) from territorial defence and deterrence during the Cold War to crisis management and out-of-area operations after 9/11. Since 2014, Russia's attack on Ukraine, [airspace provocations](#), offensive [cyber](#) operations and [foreign influence operations](#) have seen the Alliance multitasking and combining its original and its expeditionary missions.

However, new conventional threats such as malicious disinformation campaigns and electoral interference taking place in the framework of great [power](#) competition between the US and China are in a different league. NATO is expected to act on issues such as climate change, ensuring technological superiority, and no least, [pandemics](#), on which traditional instruments of territorial defence and crisis management have little to offer. Here's where the tardigrade would get creative.

The first step is to intensify cooperation with the European Union (EU). There is no need to duplicate. The commitments in two EU-NATO

declarations (2016 and 2018) already encompass most of the above challenges. The EU's leverage in areas such as sanctions, geoeconomics, research, digital, climate, and, most recently, defence, are wholly complementary to NATO's hard power. A nascent joint approach [to hybrid warfare](#) is one example. Improving [military mobility](#) is the example par excellence and can serve as a blueprint for policy-specific cooperation. If anything, the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated the value and the urgency of civil-military approaches. This cooperation can extend to making the armed forces more environmentally sustainable, stimulating greater public-private partnerships to access cutting-edge technologies, strategic communication, cyber-sanctions – and more.

These are low-hanging fruit. At the top of the tree is dealing with China. Increasing the Alliance's resilience to Chinese sharp power requires the EU's [geoeconomic](#) and regulatory heft. NATO needs to work out how China's military build-up and a potential blockage of access to the global commons would affect its core mission and mandate. Does NATO's 'area of responsibility' extend as far as Asia?

Both organisations are engaged in hard thinking about their future: the NATO2030 process and the EU's [Strategic Compass](#). These strategic considerations for the future should be more than compatible; they should be complementary. EU and NATO leaderships should prevent them from developing in isolation from each other. To get around political sensitivities European NATO members could set up informal frameworks, as they did with the 1968 Eurogroup or the 1976 Independent European Program Group, to coordinate a common approach. A stronger European pillar in NATO is in line with EU ambitions for [strategic autonomy](#). For its part, NATO can further polish its information-

sharing reflexes and practice trust-building instead of box-ticking. Appointing director-level counterparts or special representatives in the EU and in NATO to deal specifically with the relationship would help with the ownership of the portfolio. A Foreign Affairs article on NATO's future, penned during the author's month and year of birth, argues what scores of thinkers argue still today: "a new transatlantic bargain must be based on the new political imperatives on both sides of the Atlantic". The above actionables would require minimal political capital but bring substantial political gains, substantiating the transatlantic optimism stemming from the new Biden administration.

AGREE ON THE MATH

Metrics for measuring Allies' contributions to collective defence are out of date. Contributions should reflect the new threats the Alliance is facing. The (in)famous 2%-of-GDP, agreed after Russia annexed Crimea, is both myopic and increasingly obsolete. It does "[little to indicate the effectiveness](#) of the output it enables", [the simplistic connection to the GDP](#) fails to account for economic downturns, and the metric is blind to actual defence output.

The merit of the 2% is that it [focuses politicians' minds](#). That's a keeper. But to fulfil its Secretary General's ambition for a 360° [military, global and political](#) strength, the Alliance must do better. Contributions should be assessed holistically and include efforts to decarbonise the defence sector and to fight disinformation, investments in societal crisis management, resilience-boosting programs, women, peace and security, cyber defence measures and critical infrastructure safety, as well as civil-military capability development, including military mobility.

A twin reform should target the NATO Defence Planning Process to reflect up-and-coming challenges and to be better linked with the EU's own instruments, particularly the Capability

Development Plan and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence. Burden-sharing could thus become a more effective division of labour, matching capabilities with Allies' domestic priorities. This would be a win for NATO and a win for Allies at home.

INTERNAL RENEWAL

NATO should think about emulating the substance responsible for the tardigrade's 500th birthday: the damage suppressor. This protein offers protection in the most extreme of circumstances by preventing its DNA from [snapping apart](#). The name seems tailor-made for NATO. The Alliance's DNA is part solidarity and part liberal values - Articles 2 and 5 of the Washington Treaty.

NATO's values are both its strength and its weakness. While NATO should remain faithful to upholding and embodying liberal democracy, respect for the rule of law and human rights, it should not let itself be undermined from within. If not in the name of the values themselves, then for security. As experts point out, "less democratic countries [are] more [vulnerable](#) to the threats posed by information manipulation and election interference" and [military interoperability](#) stands to suffer. Suggestions include an accountability mechanism when Treaty-based principles are in danger of being violated or a special [ombudsperson](#) responsible for NATO's core principles.

Since all NATO decisions are taken by consensus, solidarity is embodied in the one-for-all and all-for-one principle. While Allied disagreements are normal and healthy, they should be uncompromising when it comes to upholding solidarity.

As in September 2020, when Secretary-General Stoltenberg [brought](#) Allies around the NATO table to (successfully) help deescalate the Eastern Mediterranean crisis, the Alliance's role as a political consultation forum should be expanded. Former US President and NATO's first Supreme Allied

Commander Eisenhower himself [said](#) that NATO's "real strength rests in our union", while Dean Acheson emphasised the need for "full and candid discussion in NATO – even if informally conducted" – to solve the Alliance's internal crises during the 1950s and 1960s. With an Atlanticist President once more in the White House, the United States can use its leverage to bring leaders to the NATO negotiating table – formally as well as informally.

NATO should think more holistically about Article 5. As Mira Rapp-Hooper [argues](#), "the time has come to consider the conflict thresholds that might reasonably apply to nonmilitary domains" but escape the Alliance's current understanding of an armed attack. A credible deterrent against information-warfare and offensive cyber operations could be in the form of new collective-defence triggers. Rapp-Hooper rightly points out that NATO "should define which kinds of nonmilitary attacks rise to the level of major aggression and thereby trigger security guarantees". The response can equally be non-military but backed up by a possibly looming threat of military retaliation. This is a task not only for the NATO2030 process but also for the EU Strategic Compass, particularly as the latter has finalised its [threat analysis](#). This is the type of thinking needed to create a robust damage suppressor.

REBUILDING PUBLIC SUPPORT

Donald Trump's election in 2016 has shown multilateralists that international organisations cannot be taken for granted. The public no longer grasps NATO's role and purpose intuitively. Ironically, NATO's mission was more clearly communicated to the public before the advent of the internet than it is now. As Rapp-Hooper puts it, politicians "need to tell the alliance story differently so that policymakers and the public understand the continuing promise of collective self-defense". NATO should avoid being a victim of its own success – it might not be obvious to younger generations that Euro-Atlantic security is partly responsible for peace and prosperity. This

means moving away from an elite *langue de bois* and avoiding communication efforts that [millennials and GenZ-ers](#) immediately sniff out as promotional.

Engaging youth is an existential concern. Not only do these people vote but they become leaders and influencers themselves. While millennials and GenZ-ers care about transatlantic ties and are concerned about the *new conventional threats*, it is not a given that they understand how NATO serves them. Initiatives such as the [NATO2030 Young Leaders](#), of which the author is fortunate to be a part, are a great start but these efforts must go beyond the ‘new global elite’ of well-travelled International Relations graduates. One suggestion could be introducing pilot-projects in schools across (and even beyond) the Alliance aimed at increasing crisis awareness, cyber-hygiene and digital literacy. This would benefit everyone. Another is making room for a youth representative at NATO’s adult table to directly feed into future policy and decision-making.

The tardigrade’s evolution has demonstrated that resilience is a moving target. It is not an end but a continuous process. Rethinking the future of the Pax Atlantica means thinking outside the box about

becoming more inclusive, more accountable, more relevant and more sustainable. Nostalgia is not what will keep the Alliance alive in the next century, but creativity just might.

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