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The Dominance Dilemma: The American Approach to NATO and its Future

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Executive Summary

- Despite the Biden administration's push to revitalize U.S. alliances, U.S. relations with NATO are due for a reset. The United States should incentivize European members of NATO to take on additional responsibilities for their defense.
- Encouraging the European allies to take initiative will help the United States focus on its other domestic and international priorities and may facilitate improving relations with Russia. This approach will also prove attractive to European states concerned about the future direction of U.S. foreign policy.
- Recalibrating the U.S. role in Europe would conform with the United States' post-World War II efforts to stabilize European security — and stand as the fruit of Washington's success in this regard.

Introduction

Since its creation in the early days of the Cold War, American policymakers have been of two minds about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Seeking to project American power and influence in Europe and gain legitimacy for U.S. ambitions, policy planners have seen NATO as a useful vehicle for organizing Europe in ways conducive to broader American interests. At the same time, the United States has proven reluctant to pay or risk too much to achieve this result. For a country that is secure at home, influence in Europe is desirable for some but of dubious necessity.

These contradictory impulses have been reflected not only in the variety of America's approaches to the alliance over time, but also in the attitudes of different policymakers. Now, having successfully helped to foster an unprecedented level of European stability and security, and facing growing pressure to reduce America's strategic burdens,

American strategists in the years ahead must be prepared to revisit the fundamentals of the U.S. presence in Europe and devolve authority to local actors.

The Cold War era: Defending, dominating, and dodging Europe

Among American policymakers, both of the tendencies just outlined were on display during the Cold War. Despite later claims that NATO emerged almost naturally from a sense of trans-Atlantic solidarity, the reality is that the United States was divided over its commitment to NATO during much of its contest with Moscow. American leaders did not want the Soviet Union to dominate Europe, of course, but the path that would be taken to obtain this result, and the risks this entailed, were never clear.

In the late 1940s, this tension was reflected in vocal debates among officials skeptical of the need for a multilateral security commitment to Europe, including George Kennan, and advocates of a more robust U.S. overseas presence, such as John Hickerson. Even with Communist parties on the march in Western Europe and much of the region vulnerable to military assault, officials – alongside influential senators such as Robert Taft and Arthur Vandenberg – feared that a permanent U.S. commitment would foul relations with the USSR, entangle the United States in foreign disputes and conflicts, and impose unsustainable burdens on the U.S. public. Kennan and other skeptics largely lost the debate when the Truman administration sided decisively with those seeking a more robust U.S. commitment. Thus the United States agreed to shape and join what became NATO in the Washington negotiations of 1948 and 1949. Nevertheless, the concerns skeptics raised – for the scope, content, and broader domestic and international implications of a trans-Atlantic alliance – never disappeared from the U.S. policy debate. In fact, the skeptics' concern over a permanent commitment to such an alliance was embraced even by the Truman administration, whose leaders – at least in their public remarks – declared that the United States' commitment to Western Europe

would be temporary. The U.S. military, the Truman administration emphasized, should stay in Europe only until stability and a rough balance of power was restored.¹

Even after NATO was founded in 1949, U.S. leaders tried to limit America's ties to the organization. Into the 1950s, this translated into efforts to encourage Western Europe to take primary responsibility for the region's defense so that America's commitment would be temporary and states in the region could provide for their own security. To this end, the United States limited its military commitment primarily to the use of its nuclear first-strike capability to deter Moscow from sending the Red Army into Western Europe. By the early 1960s, it was clear that steps to encourage Western Europe to stand up independently so the United States could draw down its presence had faltered, due to intra-European divisions as to the shape of a common defense structure and an eroding U.S. nuclear advantage. America's aversion to costs then reappeared in perennial debates about whether the U.S. would truly risk a nuclear exchange with Moscow to protect Western Europe.²

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This thorny question persisted to the end of the Cold War. Due to the growing vulnerability of the U.S. homeland to a Soviet nuclear strike, America's commitment to Western Europe's strategic defense remained in limbo even though the United States agreed by the early 1960s to assume primary responsibility for Western Europe's conventional defense. Advocates of a firm U.S. pledge to Europe sought to work around this tension by doubling down on the U.S. military presence in Europe, embracing nuclear warfare options, and coupling these steps with diplomatic outreach aimed at reassuring the allies. Nonetheless, American ambivalence remained an underlying

¹ Ireland, Timothy. *Creating the Entangling Alliance*. Greenwood Press. Westport. 1981; Mark Sheetz. "Exit Strategies: American Grand Designs for Postwar European Security." *Security Studies* 8, no. 4, Summer 1999, 1–43.

² Sayle, Timothy. *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* Cornell University Press. Ithaca. 2019.

theme. Not only did many American policymakers continue to doubt whether the United States would “go nuclear” for Western Europe; starting in the mid-1960s, allied leaders worried that their U.S. counterparts would recognize that American security could be harmed as much as helped by commitments to Europe. European allies feared that American presidents might reach an array of strategic understandings and tacit agreements with the Soviets that would reduce threats to the United States at Europe’s expense.³

America’s aversion to cost and risk also impacted NATO’s internal politics. Reluctant to tie the U.S. too firmly to Europe’s defense, American leaders demonstrated a proclivity for working behind the scenes to set alliance policy with individual allies. This often meant determining the alliance’s agenda separately with each of the so-called Big 3 – France, Britain, and West Germany – rather than allowing NATO, with its “one state, one vote” procedures, to determine U.S. policy. At the same time, U.S. leaders began objecting to allied “free-riding” starting in the 1960s. These protestations were present even in the 1950s, when no less a figure than President Eisenhower complained of “having the whole defense burden placed on U.S. shoulders” and charged the Western Europeans with nearly “making a sucker out of Uncle Sam.”⁴ Assertions of this kind were increasingly frequent during the second half of the Cold War.

By that time, not only had Western Europe effectively recovered from the deprivations of World War II; the United States also faced mounting economic problems and political dislocations at home. Combined, these developments spurred a growing domestic debate over the necessity and wisdom of American patronage of states that seemed able to assume greater responsibility for their own defense. The net result was a sustained American drive throughout the 1970s and 1980s to push Western European states to assume greater burdens. U.S. officials threatened that the United States might

³ Trachtenberg, Mark. “The Structure of Great Power Politics, 1963–1975.” *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 2: Crises and Détente*. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 2010. 482–502; Marshall D. Shulman. “The Future of the Soviet–American Competition.” *The Adelphi Papers* 10, no. 66, March 1, 1970, 1–10; Robert Litwak. *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969–1976*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1984.

⁴ Trachtenberg, Mark. *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963*. Princeton University Press. Princeton. 1999. 153.

abandon NATO if the allies did not spend more on their defense. Starting in 1981, Congress required the Defense Department to issue an annual report on allied contributions to the “common defense” so as to monitor, and potentially penalize, free-riders and those falling short of their obligations. In 1984, a group of senators led by Sam Nunn, the Georgia Democrat, proposed withdrawing substantial U.S. forces from NATO on an annual basis if European members of the alliance did not increase their military budgets. A bipartisan congressional panel in 1988 bluntly concluded that “our allies are not sufficiently aware of the strong political pressure in this country to reduce our defense commitments to our allies unless they are willing to shoulder more of the burden. This view is shared by the Congress. Therefore, the panel states in the strongest possible terms that Europeans had better be prepared to defend their own territory without a large-scale U.S. ground commitment, because that commitment cannot be guaranteed forever.”⁵

So long as Soviet and Warsaw Pact military forces sat across the internal German border, America’s ambivalent attitude toward NATO could be papered over.

In short, while the United States committed itself to Europe’s defense after World War II, it was never clear just what this commitment entailed. Article V of NATO’s founding treaty – often presented as imposing a Three Musketeers-esque “all for one, one for all” pledge – obliged the United States (and each member state) to render only “such action as it deems necessary” to protect the North Atlantic area. In principle, the United States could well deem no action to be necessary, however grave the crisis. Still, so long as Soviet and Warsaw Pact military forces sat across the internal German border, America’s ambivalent attitude toward NATO could be papered over. Under such conditions, it was at least plausible that U.S. leaders could claim sufficient interest in

⁵ Sloan, Stanley R. “Managing the NATO Alliance: Congress and Burdensharing.no hyph here?” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 4, no. 3, 1985, 396–406; *Report of the Burden Sharing Panel of the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives*. 100th Congress, 2nd session. GPO. Washington. 1988. 58.

keeping Western Europe out of Soviet control that the United States might risk war, up to and including a nuclear exchange.⁶

Preeminence on the cheap: The United States' post–Cold War mission

Once the Cold War ended, the absence of a common adversary cast America's divided impulses into starker relief. After 1991, American leaders continued to place significant stock in NATO. Indeed, ensuring the alliance's post–Cold War health became perhaps the core element of America's European policy. Just as dramatically, NATO was ritualistically presented as an alliance based on and espousing common values – an alliance anchored in democracy. Behind the scenes and in practice, however, America's concerns were more nakedly self-interested.

After the Cold War ended, members of the first Bush administration focused on keeping NATO intact as a way of anchoring the American presence in Europe. Doing so, the logic went, would hedge simultaneously against possible Russian revanchism and possible assertiveness by Western European states newly interested in playing a larger international role via the European Union. Put simply, sustaining NATO would help preserve what Brent Scowcroft (George H.W. Bush's national security advisor) called "America's world leadership role."⁷ It would keep both Russia and the allies down.

Under the successive Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations, this geopolitical claim morphed into a broader aspiration that NATO could serve as a springboard for domestic transformations in an enlarging Europe and, in turn, strategic stability across the continent.⁸ Rather than hedging against post–Cold War uncertainty, NATO could now create a more integrated Europe by facilitating the spread of liberal democracy in former members of the Soviet sphere of influence and by linking Eastern and Western European

⁶ Posen, Barry R. *Inadvertent Escalation*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca. 1991.

⁷ Shifrinson, Joshua R., "Eastbound and Down: The United States, NATO Enlargement, and Suppressing the Soviet and Western European Alternatives, 1990–1992." *Journal of Strategic Studies*, April 2020, 1–31.

⁸ Poast, Paul, and Alexandra Chinchilla. "Good for Democracy? Evidence from the 2004 NATO Expansion." *International Politics* 57, no. 3, June 1, 2020, 471–90.

states in a common security framework.⁹ This became the impetus behind U.S. backing for NATO enlargement, an idea first developed in the George H.W. Bush years but pursued in earnest in the mid-1990s. Successive administrations attempted to use NATO as the primary vehicle for shaping post-Cold War politics on the continent, although the EU was also repurposed as a vehicle for Eastern European reform and integration.¹⁰ Within three decades, the NATO alliance nearly doubled in membership, from 16 members in 1991 to 30 in 2020.¹¹

As the 1990s and 2000s unfolded, American leaders also turned to NATO as a tool for structuring and lending legitimacy to an array of “out-of-area” military adventures. Operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan all fall into this category. With the Soviet threat removed, the United States increasingly used NATO as a way of organizing European security in ways that sustained and reinforced American geopolitical preeminence. Inverting America’s early approach toward NATO, however, U.S. leaders looked askance at hints that Europe sought autonomous military options that might attenuate the U.S. role in European security affairs. As Secretary of State Madeline Albright described, the United States opposed European efforts that might de-link allied states militarily from the United States.¹²

As before, however, the United States was reluctant to risk too much for the privilege of its European dominance. Tellingly, the U.S. Senate agreed to ratify NATO enlargement only after receiving assurances that an expanded NATO would be a net gain for U.S. security and would not impose any new burdens on the U.S. military. This pledge was mostly a fiction: Unless the United States would never fight on behalf of other NATO allies (or would fight irrespective of NATO), then admitting states such as Poland, Lithuania, and Hungary to the alliance increases the risk of the United States going to war. Nevertheless, the pledge indicated that Congress did not wish to increase the U.S.

⁹ Goldgeier, James M. *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO*. Brookings Institution Press. Washington. 1999.

¹⁰ Colbourn, Susan. “NATO as a Political Alliance: Continuities and Legacies in the Enlargement Debates of the 1990s.” *International Politics* 57, no. 3, June 1, 2020, 491–508.

¹¹ On the resulting difficulties for alliance management, see Moller, Sara Bjerg. “Twenty Years After: Assessing the Consequences of Enlargement for the NATO Military Alliance.” *International Politics* 57, no. 3, June 1, 2020, 509–29.

¹² Van Hooft, Paul. “Land Rush: American Grand Strategy, NATO Enlargement, and European Fragmentation.” *International Politics* 57, no. 3, June 1, 2020, 530–53.

burden in Europe. The Senate also required the United States to forgo permanently stationing forces in member nations added to NATO following the Soviet collapse — a restriction that continues today.

European free-riding might have seemed unsurprising considering America's drive for preeminence and its opposition to autonomous European security provisions. Why pay retail for what the company supplies at discount?

More pointed were concerns about European defense spending. Even during the Kosovo War, senior members of the Clinton administration criticized America's European partners for letting their military capabilities atrophy. By the Obama years, these frustrations boiled over. Many allies were letting the United States bear most of the costs of providing military power on behalf of the alliance. No less of a trans-Atlanticist than Robert Gates declared in his final speech as Secretary of Defense in 2011 that there was a “dwindling appetite... to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources...to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.”¹³ Barack Obama echoed the complaint, charging in 2016 that “free riders aggravate me.” He singled out Britain for not contributing its “fair share.”¹⁴ But European free-riding might have seemed unsurprising considering America's drive for preeminence and its opposition to autonomous European security provisions. Why pay retail for what the company supplies at discount?

¹³ Shanker, Thom. “Defense Secretary Warns NATO of ‘Dim’ Future.” *The New York Times*. June 10, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/11/world/europe/11gates.html>.

¹⁴ Goldberg, Jeffrey. “The Obama Doctrine.” *The Atlantic*. April 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

Trump as avatar

All of which led up to the Trump administration. Over the past four years, critics feared that Trump was undermining American ties to Europe. Among the Trump administration's many sins, so the story goes, was its tendency to coerce allies, engage Russia, threaten to pull the United States out of NATO (not least if member states did not increase their military contributions), and ignore NATO's democratic values. Despite the undeniable churn in trans-Atlantic politics, however, these criticisms do not pass muster.

For one thing, not only did U.S. criticism of allied defense spending long precede the Trump administration; so, too, did allied concerns over the strength of the U.S. commitment to Europe's defense. For another, far from pulling out of NATO or vitiating the U.S. role in the alliance, the Trump administration deepened the U.S. military presence in and commitment to Europe in important ways. During the Trump administration, NATO added Montenegro and North Macedonia as new members, beefed up rotational forces in Eastern Europe, contemplated permanently stationing assets near Russia's border, and continued flirting with the idea of adding Ukraine and Georgia to the alliance.

The reality is that the main shift under Trump came in the style of U.S. relations with NATO, rather than the substance of the approach. The Trump administration represented an avatar of America's baser alliance instincts. The United States has always sought preeminence on the cheap. And that is exactly what Trump espoused: On his watch, the United States sought to enjoy decision-making prerogatives within NATO while benefiting from allied subsidies. The major break with past practice came in how U.S. leaders pushed this contradiction. Before Trump, blunt remarks such as Gates's were seen as a major departure from the bonhomie and diplomatic niceties that defined NATO relations. Under Trump, however, language that laid bare the self-interested nature of the U.S. commitment came the fore. Public spats on matters ranging from

defense spending to great-power politics became normalized in ways that would have been anathema just a few years earlier.¹⁵

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Trump's approach understandably frustrated American allies and may have been self-defeating. No one likes being pressured or criticized, let alone in public. Paradoxically, however, the adjusted American attitude also suggested that trans-Atlantic relations were not quite as brittle as public tensions might have suggested. Previously, any one of Trump's rhetorical broadsides against NATO — on its imbalanced defense spending, its questionable usefulness against China, and so on — would have triggered a flurry of reports heralding the death of the trans-Atlantic relationship, to say nothing of frenzied diplomacy to patch over differences. Yet not only did NATO soldier on during the Trump years; leaders on both sides of the Atlantic found ways of operating and collaborating. America's rhetoric was crude, but the alliance endured.

NATO's contested future

Although Trump has now left office, NATO is nonetheless in for difficult times, as strategic circumstances change and China's rise draws American attention toward East Asia. Though some European NATO members now express interest in helping to counter Beijing, and the alliance itself is working to stake out a position on China's rise, as the NATO Reflection Group Report underscored in November 2020, the United States will inevitably be more invested in Asian developments than will other NATO members.¹⁶

¹⁵ Shifrinson, Joshua R. "H-Diplo Policy Series: Trump and NATO: Old Wine in Gold Bottles?" September 29, 2017. <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5ba-nato>.

¹⁶ NATO. *NATO 2030: United for a New Era*. November 25, 2020. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

The net result presents two possible avenues for deeper, substantive divides in the alliance. First, if competition with Beijing escalates, the United States may be impelled to devote fewer resources and attention to European affairs. This would invert the Cold War experience, creating the potential for the alliance to wither away as American attention moves elsewhere and NATO's European members seek alternatives for their security. Alliances, after all, usually change as new threats appear; as American priorities change, NATO cohesion may decline as well. Then, too, European actors might also be expected to complain about prospective American "abandonment."

Mounting Chinese–American competition may also encourage NATO's European members to distance themselves, perhaps dramatically, from the United States. During the contest with the Soviet Union, European allies regularly feared that Soviet–American tensions might entangle them in a conflict with Moscow at times and places beyond their control. A U.S.–China contest would carry even greater risks. With less at stake in Asia, NATO's European members can be expected to separate themselves from U.S. policy. If the United States were to respond by pressuring its European allies to assist against Beijing, an alliance rupture would become possible.

President Biden's path forward

Recognizing these limits, what are the options for the United States under the Biden administration?

Any policy must start from a recognition that America's postwar mission in Europe has reached a natural end-state born of overwhelming success. Great powers no longer pose threats to dominate the region's security or deny the independence of most countries therein. China, of course, is making economic and political inroads in the area, but is also encountering increasing opposition as it overplays its hand and, in any case, does not threaten the survival or sovereignty of European states. Russia, on the other hand, has notable military capabilities that can threaten neighbors along its immediate perimeter, but it lacks the wherewithal to imperil countries much beyond that. Moreover,

its force structure seems designed to raise the costs for any U.S.–led NATO operation near Russia’s own borders, just as Europe’s member states have the economic and military capacity to oppose any Russian designs. As a result, a stable European balance of power can exist. This is a sea-change from the postwar, or even post–Cold War periods. NATO’s original purpose has been vindicated; the victory is won.

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In addition, the United States faces diminishing returns, and several negative results, from continuing its present approach to NATO. The alliance has now been enlarged to the point where few strategically meaningful European actors exist outside of NATO’s orbit, even as those that exist, such as Ukraine, would constitute a net loss for U.S. national security by risking a direct conflict with Moscow. In short, little can be gained from continued expansion. Likewise, as European leaders continue pressing for greater autonomy from the United States and NATO, the U.S. will generate increased friction with its allies if it continues to suppress their initiatives in this direction. This tension, meanwhile, comes at a time when Europe itself is of diminishing relative importance to an American grand strategy increasingly fixed on Asia, as most of the actors involved recognize. As the U.S.–led alliance continues moving toward Russia’s borders, it may play some role in driving Moscow and Beijing to cooperate in international affairs. In short, U.S. policy in Asia complicates U.S. strategy in Europe, and vice-versa.

The United States requires a course correction. U.S. policy toward NATO now injects a large degree of instability and unsustainability into the region, which ironically possesses the preconditions for an unprecedented degree of stability thanks in part to prior U.S. efforts. In consequence, the Biden administration should consider proceeding along four tracks, with the goal of significantly reducing the U.S. security presence via NATO.

Ending enlargement

In coordination with its partners, the United States should credibly renounce further NATO enlargement. Whatever one makes of the merits of America’s post-1945 presence in Europe, the gains from further enlargement are few and the risks substantial. Several pathways exist to develop a policy of ceasing enlargement. Most directly, the U.S. government could simply declare it will not support the alliance’s further growth; thanks to NATO’s “one state, one vote” procedures, this would be enough to scuttle a further expansion push. Less unilaterally, U.S. planners could attempt to craft an intra-NATO consensus that expansion is no longer worth the costs. Given that many alliance members have long been skeptical of the merits of expansion — German policymakers, for example, were famously ambivalent over the Bucharest Declaration of 2008, which embraced Ukraine’s and Georgia’s interest in NATO membership — forging a broad front on this agenda ought not be difficult. Along the way, U.S. and allied diplomats should also seek to dampen the membership aspirations of those states still outside the alliance.

Cutting troop commitments

Second, the U.S. government should forgo permanently stationing combat forces in the Eastern European states admitted to NATO since the Cold War. Amid mounting calls to bolster the alliance’s presence along the so-called “eastern flank” due to collapsing relations with Moscow, the U.S. government should encourage European NATO members to bear primary responsibility for defense obligations east of the Oder–Neisse line. Not only have NATO’s European members taken an active role in the alliance’s ongoing “Enhanced Forward Presence” in Poland and the Baltic States; there is more than enough latent military capability in the European portion of the alliance to see this task through.¹⁷ For example, the former members of the Warsaw Pact (excluding Albania and the Baltic States) that have joined NATO since 1995 have nearly the same gross domestic product (\$1.55 trillion, measured in 2010 dollars) as Russia (\$1.76 trillion). Their population, 92 million people versus Russia’s 144 million, is also

¹⁷ Posen, Barry R. “Europe Can Defend Itself.” *Survival* 62, no. 6, November 1, 2020, 7–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1851080>.

significant. Add in the other European members of NATO, and the numbers shift decisively against Russia. Although non-U.S. military investments in NATO remain underwhelming, even limited growth in non-U.S. NATO defense capabilities could thus provide a significant force able to take the lead in Eastern Europe. The United States should promote this result, with the goal of shifting the defense burden in Europe to the highly capable states in the area to reduce U.S. defense obligations.

Rebalancing trans-Atlantic politics

The United States ought to prepare for a broader recalibration of political responsibilities in Europe. Precisely because the United States has other domestic and international obligations, and because NATO's European members are increasingly disenchanted with U.S. predominance, conditions are ripe to empower the European allies. The objective should be to strengthen intra-European solidarity and cooperation while the United States steps back from active management of European security. The United States should pivot toward becoming the pacifier of last resort rather than the manager of early squabbles.

The objective should be to strengthen intra-European solidarity and cooperation while the United States steps back from active management of European security.

There are reasons to believe this result is attainable. Many of NATO's major European players, especially France and Germany, have deepened cooperation in both NATO and non-NATO contexts such as the EU over the past several decades. Disenchantment with U.S. dominance and lingering concerns about Russia provide incentives for sustained cooperation even with a significantly reduced American presence. The United States ought to lean into these trends, returning to its vision of the early postwar years by reducing, limiting, and making more conditional the U.S. presence in the alliance. Over time, such steps could lay the foundation for a comprehensive American

withdrawal, providing that Europe remains stable and open to U.S. influence when U.S. interests are involved. Nor would such a retrenchment sacrifice long-term U.S. interests: Should intra-European tensions spike without an American pacifier, America's lingering connection to the alliance would enable the United States to reengage as needed.

Reengaging with Russia

The United States needs to find a path toward engaging Russia and stabilizing bilateral ties and NATO–Russia relations. This will prove no small feat. Any opening to Russia will inevitably encounter vigorous domestic political opposition in the wake of Russian meddling in U.S. electoral politics. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from engagement. Russia remains the most significant state against which the United States might feel compelled to go to war on NATO's behalf. The irony cannot be overstated: The Russian threat to European and American security is minuscule unless the United States and Russia are actively engaged in a shooting war. Given Europe's peacefulness, and its interest in sustained cooperation without American oversight, the United States can promote allied interests and serve its own security requirements by finding a way forward with Moscow. To be sure, the failure of President Obama's attempted "reset" with Moscow urges caution as to how much can be accomplished with Russia.¹⁸ Nevertheless, given the risks of continued tensions to both countries, the stabilization of flashpoints such as the Ukraine crisis over the last several years, the limits of deterrence and defense on NATO's eastern flank, Russia's mounting economic pressures, and America's evident desire to devote increased attention to Asia, U.S. outreach to Moscow is timely and could prove fruitful.

Conclusion

It is easy to get wrapped up in the rhetorical shifts and policy particulars of the moment, but the United States has consistently approached NATO through a combination of opportunism and geopolitics. Since the alliance's creation in the late 1940s, the United

¹⁸ On difficulties with the reset, see Stent, Angela E. *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.–Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* Princeton University Press. Princeton. 2015.

States has attempted to strike a balance between its own contradictory impulses. Going forward, the question is whether this balance is sustainable in practice, if not in declared intent, given the emerging shape of international politics. It is not defeatist to be skeptical. Alliance commitments tend to change when new threats appear and strategic priorities shift. As America's attention moves toward Asia, its longstanding attitudes toward European security should be reevaluated and accorded lower strategic priority.

Western Europe, and much of Eastern Europe, are secure. No European hegemon is on the horizon. A balance of power exists and ought to be allowed to mature.

This is good news. America's postwar commitment to European security went on far longer and became far more expansive than policymakers envisioned in the 1940s and 1950s. Now the mission is accomplished. Western Europe, and much of Eastern Europe, are secure. No European hegemon is on the horizon. A balance of power exists and ought to be allowed to mature. Seventy-two years after NATO's founding, America's role in the alliance can change fundamentally with little risk to U.S. or European security — and much to gain for both.

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