

ISSUE BRIEF

NATO's Hollowing Values Agenda

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When NATO leaders convene for the Warsaw summit this July, their agenda will be dominated by external threats—from an aggressive Russia, to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), to the refugee crisis that has spread from the Middle East and North Africa throughout Europe.

Yet an equally important issue, though not explicitly on the agenda, will be the internal health of the Alliance. NATO faces unprecedented challenges to its values, cohesion, and effectiveness, all integral to dealing with these external threats.

The transatlantic alliance was uniquely established on a foundation of values, a key reason it has been able to adapt to dramatically different threats to its member states since the Cold War. However, it has been difficult to reconcile the values NATO and the Euro-Atlantic community espouse with competing strategic power considerations and certain member states' deviations from healthy democracy. This remains as true today as it has been throughout the history of the Alliance.

What Is the Value Foundation?

NATO's foundational values are integral to its success and long-term health as the most powerful political-military alliance in the world. They are clearly articulated in the preamble of its founding document, the North Atlantic Treaty. The treaty is an elegant document. It conveys from the outset that values and shared ideologies of the signatories are the crux of the treaty. NATO's main adversary at the time of its founding—the Soviet Union—was never mentioned in the treaty, demonstrating that the Alliance was based on defending shared values as well as responding to security threats.¹

The Brent Scowcroft Center's **Transatlantic Security Initiative** brings together top policymakers, government and military officials, business leaders, and experts from Europe and North America to share insights, strengthen cooperation, and develop common approaches. Through high-profile public conferences, off-the-record strategy sessions, and content-rich publications, the initiative provides practical, relevant, and bipartisan solutions for transatlantic leaders, as they navigate this tumultuous inflection point in the history of the world's most important political-military alliance.

¹ The treaty's preamble reads in part, "The Parties to this Treaty reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments. They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the princi-

The treaty also importantly “protected the sovereign decision-making rights of all members, and was written in sufficiently flexible language to facilitate adjustments to accommodate changing international circumstances.”² This paved the way for NATO’s viability and strength as a post-Cold War alliance.

During the Cold War, the commitment of the treaty signatories to defend “democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law” occasionally took a back seat to geopolitical necessities when autocratic governments in NATO remained Alliance members until democratic conditions were restored. For instance, regimes in Portugal, Greece, and Turkey—on separate occasions—did not meet the standards outlined in the treaty, yet were not excluded from the Alliance. However, militarily important Spain was denied membership until Generalissimo Francisco Franco’s authoritarian regime was replaced with a democratic government. At the time, there were those in the United States who thought that Spain’s strategic importance should override objections to the Franco regime. But, in this case, European members of the Alliance stood by the values in the treaty.

Throughout its history, the transatlantic alliance has faced differences and even crises over how best to define and defend both its values and interests. In spite of such difficulties, the allies have always decided that remaining united around the basic purposes of their alliance was worth whatever compromises were required to do so. The dynamic facing the transatlantic alliance today, then, is nothing new. It came into play, for example,

- when the United States opposed the French and British attack on Egypt and their attempt to seize control of the Suez Canal in the 1950s,
- when thousands of Europeans protested the deployment of nuclear missiles on European soil in the 1980s, and

- when the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003 produced one of the gravest splits the Alliance had known since its founding.

The fact that NATO has survived long after the end of the Cold War is a testament to the strength of its members’ shared values as well as to a common interest in transatlantic cooperation. These same factors, combined with the perceived need for a security link to the United States, have made NATO membership attractive to most of the newly independent former Warsaw Pact members and some former Soviet republics. New potential members must demonstrate strong liberal democratic institutions with market economies before they are accepted in the Alliance.

The question now is whether these values remain strong enough to preserve NATO’s strength.

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In a show of unity, the NATO allies catalogued their threat perceptions at the Alliance’s 2014 summit in Wales. The list included a resurgent, expansionist Russia seeking to carve out a bigger role in its neighborhood and beyond, and ISIS, which threatened to attack Western countries from its growing base in the Middle East, Africa, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Given the economic and military potential of the NATO allies and their partners, neither of these threats presented challenges

that were impossible to counter. But the superficial level of agreement reached at that summit masked internal divisions within member states on a number of fronts. NATO’s stark internal divisions could combine with its external threats to form a “perfect storm” that blows away transatlantic unity.

The internal challenges that are fraying the transatlantic community’s strong democratic institutions send a stark signal to fledgling democracies, from Afghanistan to Iraq to Ukraine, that even “model” democracies are not as strong as sometimes thought.

Even before the Ukraine crisis, a potent mix of political, economic, and societal factors inside member states had begun to undermine the perception of shared values and interests. This mix has, in part, grown out of the economic crisis that has hammered Europe and the European Union (EU) during the past decade. Weak economic growth and high unemployment have

ples of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.” See *The North Atlantic Treaty* (Washington, DC: NATO, 1949), http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

2 Stanley R. Sloan, *Permanent Alliance? NATO and the Transatlantic Bargain from Truman to Obama* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), p. 6.

combined to fuel the rise of extremist parties and populist movements, largely on the far right, in many European countries. These parties share worrying commonalities, including

- opposing their countries' memberships in the European Union and NATO;
- favoring more autocratic forms of government; and
- sympathizing with Russian President Vladimir Putin's articulated perspectives on politics, religion, and strategic issues.

The mass exodus of refugees from Syria and elsewhere has intensified nativist political sentiments and has driven an additional wedge into European and Western unity. These mostly far-right parties have capitalized on a wide range of popular fears by opposing immigration, multiculturalism, and membership in the EU and NATO while pursuing closer ties with Russia.

And Russia is bankrolling their support in an effort to chip away at the foundations of Euro-Atlantic institutions it considers a threat. France's National Front received some 25 percent of the vote in the May 2014 European elections, and did very well in the first round of voting in the 2015 regional elections. This forced the French ruling and main opposition parties to collaborate in the second round to block the Front's potential gains.

Some ties between these parties and Moscow have become public. For example, the National Front reportedly received a 9.4 million euro loan from Russia in November 2014. Marine Le Pen, the party's leader, defended the transaction against charges that the loan was a reward for having supported Russia's annexation of Crimea earlier that year. Press sources at the time reported that Le Pen admired Putin as a "strong" leader.³

Leading officials of the government that came to office in Greece in January 2015—Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias from the majority far-left Syriza Party and Defense Minister Panos Kammenos from the rightist Independent Greeks Party—spoke warmly of ties with Moscow. They suggested that they opposed sanctions against Russia and favored a wide range of cooperation with the Russian Federation.

3 David Chazan, "Russia 'Bought' Marine Le Pen's Support over Crimea," *Telegraph*, April 4, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11515835/Russia-bought-Marine-Le-Pens-support-over-Crimea.html>.

As the negotiations in the 2015 Greek debt crisis approached a critical stage, Prime Minister Tsipras left for Russia to participate in the St. Petersburg Economic Forum and meet with President Putin. He returned to Greece with nothing of value in hand, but he warned his EU lenders, saying, "We are ready to go to new seas to reach new safe ports. . ." and that "Russia is one of the most important partners for us."⁴

Russia seized every opportunity after the beginning of the Ukraine crisis to try to create divisions among EU members that might mitigate or even block continued economic sanctions.

Putin's appeal resonated beyond Greece. Just after the Minsk agreement on a ceasefire in Ukraine was brokered in March 2015—an agreement in which Russia admitted no responsibility for the conflict—President Putin traveled triumphantly to Hungary, into Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's welcoming arms.⁵ Orbán, whose disdain for liberal democracy and admiration for Vladimir Putin are well-known, represents one of the EU's weak links, particularly regarding sanctions against Russia (although in December 2015 the EU did renew the sanctions for six more months). The EU's weakening front on Russian sanctions sharply manifests its internal divides.

Many European officials have lamented that trade sanctions imposed on Russia and Russia's retaliatory measures have slipped wedges into the cracks in Western solidarity.

Russia's high-quality propaganda outlets exacerbate this. In July 2015, Russian news agency Tass praised the comments of Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov who implied it was up to the "big bosses," meaning the United States and the European Union, to "figure everything out and lift sanctions."⁶ Borissov appeared to place no blame on President Putin for the situation.

Moreover, many German business interests and leading politicians had become dependent on doing

4 Larry Elliott, "ECB Staves Off Collapse of Greek Banking System with Emergency Funding," *Guardian*, June 19, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/19/ecb-greek-banking-system-emergency-funding-greece-creditors-monday-meetings>.

5 Andrew Byrne, "Orbán Defies EU to Host Putin in Hungary," *Financial Times*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/fc6c4590-b674-11e4-a5f2-00144feab7de.html#axzz3fQ2m8HU8>.

6 "Bulgarian Prime Minister Hopes Sanctions Will Soon Be Lifted from Russia," Russian News Agency Tass, July 8, 2015, <http://tass.ru/en/world/806976>.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister David Cameron, and US President Barack Obama talk during the 2010 G8 Summit. *Photo credit:* Number 10/Flickr.

business with Russian firms as well as the Russian government. This factor combined with incredibly effective propaganda emanating from Moscow led to a phenomenon in which many Germans became Putin *Verstehers*, or Putin “understanders,” serving effectively as apologists for Putin’s aggressive actions against Ukraine and threats against NATO allies.

Ironically, Turkey has a troubled relationship with Putin’s Russia but is the NATO ally most in danger of leaving its democratic path. Turkey is a key NATO ally in the fight against the Islamic State and in dealing with the associated refugee crisis. But President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has progressively consolidated an increasingly authoritarian regime, most recently ousting the moderate Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, further enhancing the president’s personal power. Turkey’s path takes it directly toward conflict with EU members and with NATO values

Other developments in the transatlantic relationship further complicate Europe’s internal political challenges.

Most importantly, the unauthorized release of secret US intelligence documents by Edward Snowden led to the disclosure in 2015 that the US National Security Agency (NSA) had been spying on the German and other European governments, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s private telephone conversations. The common adage that allies spy on each other did not cut it among European peoples. With revelations of NSA spying, German public opinion of the United States and confidence in President Barack Obama dropped significantly from a high of 93 percent in 2009 to a low of 71 percent in 2014.⁷ The NSA scandal outraged many Europeans much more than Americans truly appreciate and significantly undermined European trust in the United States. Prior to the disclosures, there was already fertile ground for anti-Americanism in many European countries. The appreciation for the American role in World War II, and even in the more recent reunification

7 “Confidence in the US President,” Global Indicators Database, Pew Research Center, June 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/6/country/81/>.

of Germany, had faded. Differences over the Iraq war linger strongly among some European allies. And, in Germany's eastern regions as well as in some former Warsaw Pact countries, a certain romantic memory of the "predictable" days of communist control has lingered. In a 2015 public opinion survey, the German public even edged away from NATO's key collective defense commitment. Some 58 percent of Germans in the survey opposed using force in support of a fellow NATO ally attacked by Russia.⁸

A growing "values gap" between the United States and some European countries was illustrated by the European Parliament's vote in October 2015 to absolve Edward Snowden for illegally releasing highly classified American documents on the grounds that he was defending democracy. This took place while Snowden was being sheltered in Moscow by the hardly democratic Russian government.

The focus on issues inside European political systems should not imply the United States is without internal challenges. The Obama administration's 2012 strategic "pivot" to Asia sent signals across the Atlantic that the United States was divesting politically and militarily from its sustained commitment to Europe.

The administration's thinking that Europe could take on more of a leadership role in its neighborhood was overly optimistic. The EU has stumbled in attempts to produce coherent and effective foreign and defense policies. In these realms, Europe has remained decisively a Europe des états. It was unrealistic to expect "Europe" to speak, to say nothing of acting, as one on questions still so deeply embedded in national sovereignty.

This new US approach came in the midst of serious economic weakness in Europe, a time when there were neither political nor financial resources to finance a confident European defense and security-policy role. It also turned out to have come at a time when threats in

the Middle East and Europe would take dramatic turns for the worse.

The gridlock in the American domestic political system has seriously weakened the foundation on which American leadership rests. In 2015, one of the most widely respected Washington hands and former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta judged that dysfunction in Washington was the biggest threat to US security.⁹ Nothing has improved since. If the American political system is dysfunctional for the United States, its dysfunction spreads to the transatlantic alliance and Western Europe.

Washington's dysfunction—from Republicans labeling German Chancellor Merkel an appeaser while the administration tried to engage her, to multiple government shutdown that hampered military spending, to some of the angry political messages in the 2016 presidential campaign—has further diminished US credibility, soft power, and leadership in NATO.

The ISIS terrorist attacks in Paris followed by the ISIS-inspired one in California raised the level of fear in the United States to a peak not seen since the aftermath of 9/11.¹⁰ Issues that were already part of the American political debate during the 2016 election season took on more of an edge: Do the dangers to

the nation from terrorism outweigh the civil rights that Americans cherish? How does the United States strike a balance?

Meanwhile, President Putin's approach to governance has even intruded on the American political campaign. Putin and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump seem to think that they have a lot in common. In December 2015 the *Washington Post's* editorial writers wrote, "What the two men share, and recognize in each other, goes beyond strong polling numbers, an affinity for incendiary language and a contempt for those (with

The gridlock in the American domestic political system has seriously weakened the foundation on which American leadership rests.

8 Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes, and Jacob Poushter, "NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid; In Russia, Anti-Western Views and Support for Putin Surge," Pew Research Center, June 10, 2015, <http://www.pew-global.org/2015/06/10/nato-publics-blame-russia-for-ukrainian-crisis-but-reluctant-to-provide-military-aid/>.

9 Nick Gass, "Leon Panetta Blasts 'Total Dysfunction in Washington,'" *Politico*, February 15, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/02/leon-panetta-blasts-total-dysfunction-in-washington-115217.html>.

10 Rebecca Riffkin, "Americans Name Terrorism as No. 1 US Problem," Gallup, December 14, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/187655/americans-name-terrorism-no-problem.aspx>.

President Obama leading the list) they regard as weak. What really attracts them is a common worldview in which money talks and democratic norms are for suckers.”¹¹

The future of the transatlantic community could come down to three very basic questions:

- First, should the United States and its European partners acquiesce in Russia's geopolitical demands for a buffer zone between Putin's kleptocracy and the democratic West, or should they assert the liberal values that they hoped would shape post-Cold War Europe?
- Second, what should the United States and its allies do about the threat posed by ISIS and other groups determined to attack the foundations of Western values when there is little taste in Europe or the United States for more involvement in the Middle East?
- Finally, how can NATO and its members effectively deal with domestic illiberal trends and political movements that could undermine the very political systems the Alliance is designed to defend?

While the external threats to the West are real, internal weaknesses could block Western democracies from effectively and cooperatively confronting them. If transatlantic solidarity fails, then the future of the West would be in doubt. When NATO leaders meet in Warsaw, their minds should be focused not just on the geopolitical challenges faced by the Alliance, but also on whether their nations are still acting from the same list of values. As then-US Secretary of State Dean Acheson stated upon NATO's founding, “the North Atlantic Treaty is far more than a defensive arrangement. It is an affirmation of the moral and spiritual values which we hold in common.”¹² Nearly seventy years since NATO's founding, these values, and not external threats, will be what keeps the Alliance strong.

11 “For Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin, a Bond of Power-Hungriness, Vulgarly and Cynicism,” *Washington Post*, December 19, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/for-mr-trump-and-mr-putin-a-bond-of-power-hungriness-vulgarity-and-cynicism/2015/12/19/7c4401b0-a5b5-11e5-b53d-972e2751f433_story.html.

12 US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, North Atlantic Treaty, Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, 81st Congress, 1st session, April 27-29 and May 2-3, 1949.

Policy Implications

In March 2016, a distinguished bipartisan group of American experts and former officials called on those competing for the American presidency to put democracy “at the center of U.S. foreign policy.”¹³ In fact, democracy promotion has been an important goal of American administrations since World War II, and a key goal of NATO's approach to enlargement since the end of the Cold War. Today, however, while the NATO allies must deal decisively with the threats posed by Russia and Islamic terrorism, NATO members should also focus on dealing with the factors that are giving rise to illiberal political tendencies that are eroding democratic institutions and processes. This means that all allies should pay more attention to the need for democracy revitalization in each of their countries. European allies need to ensure that political and economic conditions inside their countries provide hope for their successor generations, promote economic growth, reduce unemployment, and rebuild faith in the European integration process.

The United States, if it wishes to serve as a “shining city on a hill” to be admired by those building their own democracies, needs to recognize that its democracy is still a work in progress. The model provided by citizen participation in local government through traditional town meetings, for example, shows democracy at its best. But other aspects of American democracy, including the gerrymandering of congressional districts to ensure political outcomes and the influence of big money in American politics, remain defects that raise skepticism about the model of American democracy among foreign observers.

NATO's future credibility as a values-based alliance will therefore depend not just on more effective defense spending and other security measures, but also on the quality of the democratic systems and market economies of the member states. This is a challenge that the leaders at Warsaw should take back to their capitals after the summit.

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13 “US Must Put Democracy at the Center of Its Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, March 16, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/16/the-u-s-must-put-democracy-at-the-center-of-its-foreign-policy/>.

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