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Structural Challenges Facing NATO to 2040

by **Andrea Charron**
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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Between now and 2040, NATO will be challenged unlike at any other time in its storied 70+ year history. Indeed, it may be facing its most difficult years yet. A growing nationalist/globalist divide and internal political churn create the conditions for non-state actors to capitalize on NATO's motley alliance struggling with great-power competition. These factors have the potential to divide allies and create the ideal conditions for NATO disunity.

Reflecting on changes for NATO in the next 20 [years](#) requires a reference for the rate of change of competing political ideas and concepts. Are concepts of world order stable with disagreements on the margins or will there be acute and discombobulating changes? If we reflect on the fact that it will be 20 years in 2021 since the United States was attacked by suicide bombers on 9/11, you get a sense of the rate of political change over two decades, given a relatively stable world order.

In those 20 years, the United States' launch of the war on terrorism and the singular focus on Islamic, especially Sunni-based, actors defined the defence agenda for NATO and allies. Relatively out-of-the-blue events ([like the Arab Spring](#)) were dealt with within the bounds of the world order of the day; i.e., U.S. policy served as the guiding framework which NATO and allies supported with varying levels of resources and enthusiasm. Now, with a change in the world order to splenetic [great power competition](#), the speed at which governance ideas change will be faster and more destabilizing. The last time we saw such [an unstable world order](#) was during the interwar years of massive disruption and a great battle over governance ideas – i.e., should toxic forms of right-wing nationalism (or fascism) or toxic left-wing communist ideals dominate? Or would more centrist democratic forms of governance prevail?

Given the great-power competition today and the added shock of a world-wide pandemic, one can expect contentious and divisive competing governance ideas that will create the conditions for criminal gangs, terrorists and other dangerous non-state actors to thrive. Over the next 20 years, three trends will be apparent and particularly problematic for the United States and the NATO alliance. The first trend is the widening globalist/nationalist divide that is intensifying in starkness. Second is the growing internal political churn within states which makes them more politically divided and contributes to the creation of more nationally driven states. Both of these trends will create the ideal conditions for the third trend – the conditions for greater influence and impact by non-state actors, which will challenge NATO as never before.

[The nationalist/globalist divide](#) in world politics is separating states into two groups: those that want national interests to prevail and those that want global, international solutions to problems. This goes beyond an approach to the world economy to how states view other states and the approach to transnational problems. Very different COVID responses are reflective of this growing trend, which is proving particularly destructive especially for the poor (particularly women and girls) and poor nations of the world. More than one international organization may be a casualty of this divide. [The U.S. withdrawal of support to the WHO](#) is a warning for what can happen when organizations try too hard to cater to both global and national demands simultaneously. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the



International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) could be next. Approaches to securing vaccinations and personal protective equipment (PPE) are a microcosm of the growing competition between nationalist and globalist approaches to other issues, such as access to rare-earth minerals, clean water and nationally driven (critics would say arbitrary) decisions to close borders to particular groups or even to other regions of the world. An example of the latter is when the [EU court found that Poland and the Czech Republic failed to settle their allotment of asylum seekers](#).

This globalist vs. nationalist divide is not driven by factors from outside the state but from within. Donald Trump, for example, identified a genuine divide in the American electorate that has resulted in a more pronounced and strident U.S.-first approach that alienates allies. [The aluminium tariffs against Canada](#) (declared a national security threat) are a cogent example. NATO is beginning to cleave along nationally oriented states vs. globalist states, which will make consensus on key threats and policy direction difficult – especially the new problem of how to deal with China. [The U.S.'s pivot to the Arctic](#) and singular focus on great-power competition to defend the homeland ([or harden the shield and wield the sword](#), as the new language suggests) is at odds with some EU states which see the Arctic [as a global commons needing preservation and protection from threats such as climate change](#). Another by-product of the globalist-nationalist divide is the lack of consensus, and even apathy, to deal with politically contentious issues like human rights abuses. The “global” Magnitsky movement is a case in point. None of the lists of targets is an exact match and while North America focuses more on corruption than human rights, the new EU legislation is set to focus on human rights abuses exclusively.

The globalist-nationalist divide is a function of the second trend, which is a growing ideological entrenchment between the left and the right within states. Each election has the potential to make the [choice between right- and left-leaning parties and issues](#) more stark compared to the other. What used to be differences in approaches to a problem or degree of concern has become an ideological filter on which issues can even be discussed or not. More and more, elections are often an outlet for protest votes and movement-affiliated or issue-specific parties, e.g., the growing number of anti-immigrant parties or climate change/green parties. For an alliance like NATO, which depends on consensus to reach decisions about future action, more politically divisive elections, and therefore state outlooks, will make it harder to agree on what are the key threats and options to respond to. A consensus-based NATO will find it harder and harder to agree on priorities.

These first two trends – globalism and nationalism, and political retrenchment – will compound divisions around the world, creating the ideal conditions for non-state actor groups, especially criminal gangs and terrorists, to further foment division and occupy or exploit the gaps created by the globalist/nationalist divide and the right- and left-wing split. These gaps will manifest in the form of overlooked, poorer states, especially those with absentee governments or governance. [Russia is already using non-state actor proxies to determine the fate of Libya](#). The global pandemic too has brought state borders back with a vengeance which also benefits non-state actors; if goods and services cannot cross borders legally and/or easily, non-state actors are motivated by higher profits procuring illicit goods. What is more, the focus on [great power competition by the U.S. Defense Strategy](#) means that international terrorism has dropped in priority but is still very much



one for [the EU](#) and [the UN](#). The United States will remain focused on great power competition and will expect NATO to follow suit as reflected in [NATO 2030](#), which suggests the potential for “NATO disunity” is high. There is a growing divide between the United States and European states regarding security priorities which could result in two outcomes. The first is that the divide means that the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations [may gain momentum \(and coherence\)](#) and challenge NATO primacy, especially if the United States remains otherwise engaged, particularly on homeland defence.

The alternative scenario, with implications for NATO as well, is that the globalist vs. nationalist and left-right polarization might upend NATO allies first. Throughout [NATO at 2030](#), it cautions against “Allowing disputes that are external to NATO to infect the functioning of the Alliance”; the decoupling of some allies to a shared democratic identity and “changes in the grand strategic approach of Allies that could cause division”. Both ways, NATO between now and 2040 will be challenged as never before and will struggle to balance its collective defence and crisis management mandates.

► About the Author

Andrea Charron holds a PhD from the Royal Military College of Canada (Department of War Studies). She obtained a Masters in International Relations from Webster University, Leiden, The Netherlands, a Master's of Public Administration from Dalhousie University and a Bachelor of Science (Honours) from Queen's University. Her research and teaching areas include NORAD, the Arctic, foreign and defence policy and sanctions. She serves on the DND's Defence Advisory Board and has published in numerous peer-reviewed journals. Dr. Charron worked for various federal departments including the Privy Council Office in the Security and Intelligence Secretariat and Canada's Revenue Agency. She is now Director of the University of Manitoba's Centre for Defence and Security Studies and Associate Professor in Political Studies.

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