

NATO Allies' geopolitical diversity and the cohesion of the Alliance

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The Russia-Ukraine war has revealed a high degree of cohesion among NATO Allies, who largely converge on what the Alliance is about and how it should respond to the Russian threat. In the longer-term, though, NATO's cohesion will be dependent on Allies' success in knitting together a common vision from their varying strategic cultures and threat assessments. And indeed, from the United States' global reach and first-class military to France's strategic autonomy imperative and the UK's renewed ambition for 'Global Britain'; from the Baltic states' and Poland's geographical proximity to Russia, to Italy's and Spain's regional southern focus; and from Türkiye's special defence and foreign policy posture to Germany's *Zeitenwende*, the Atlantic Alliance brings together a wide range of geopolitical diversity.

This *Policy Brief* draws on a study conducted by the author¹ to build a typology of NATO Allies based on three sets of variables: the nature of the relationship between any given Ally and the United States; the Ally's perception of the Russian threat; and the extent to which NATO is given exclusivity in the Ally's defence policy. Against this backdrop, Allies can be classified into three groupings that reveal persistent fault lines running through the Alliance, making cohesion a permanent challenge.

The determinants of a military alliance

The centrality of the United States

At the political level, Allies vary based on the degree of correlation between their own foreign/defence policy and NATO's agenda as well as their degree of dependency vis-à-vis the United States. The link to the United States is key to any state's presence in NATO and it largely determines a given Ally's degree of alignment with NATO policy. However, some Allies may have a foreign policy agenda that is broader than NATO's, or at times different, as much as they may be more or less politically close to, or dependent upon, the United States. These variations naturally impact the degree of alignment between Allies within NATO's agenda. While some Allies' defence policies are largely a product of what is designed within the Atlantic Alliance, the policies of some others are to a great extent distinct from NATO's position.

Keywords

Alliance's cohesion
Strategic culture
NATO alignment
Russia

The centrality of Russia

Second, threat assessment across the board leads to various categories of Allies. In particular, variations occur depending on how wide versus Russian-centric the security agenda of Allies is. Of course, the 2022 Ukraine war has significantly increased the centrality of Russia for most NATO Allies. From a longer-term perspective though, some Allies' defence policies had already been

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1 See T. Tardy (ed.), Chapter 1, in *The Nations of NATO. Shaping the Alliance's Relevance and Cohesion*, Oxford University Press, 2022. The book explores national policies of 16 countries within the Atlantic Alliance (United States, France, Türkiye, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Netherlands, Canada, Norway, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania). It focuses on issues such as their strategic cultures, relationship with the United States, contributions to NATO operations, levels of defence spending, domestic challenges, and decision-making processes.

single-mindedly focused on deterrence and defence against Russia even before the war, be it nationally or through NATO. This shapes their conception of the Alliance's role and their vision of how it should – or should not – evolve. Insofar as the United States shares this single-task approach in its engagement with NATO, the

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link between these Allies and the United States is affected accordingly. For others, threats are more numerous and originate beyond Russia. These include threats from the South and the instability that these threats' second-order effects produce as well as other, broader issues, including terrorism, mass migration, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation, the impact of climate change, or the rise of China. The Ukraine war has made these latter threats less immediate, yet they have not disappeared and will continue to matter to quite a few NATO Allies.

The centrality of NATO

Third, Allies vary in the degree to which they centre their security policy around NATO. Ultimately, NATO is only one among several security instruments at Allies' disposal. For some, it is the preferred channel of security policy; for others, it is one option amongst others, alongside national means, ad hoc coalitions, or other international organizations, such as the European Union (EU). These differences are evident in the Allies' varying political postures and through their military operations. For some, operations can take place outside of NATO or even outside of any institutional framework or nationally, while, for others, NATO is the preferred framework of action. The extent to which the United States contributes to a given military operation also matters, as US-led ad hoc coalitions may stand as an alternative for states that are in principle reticent to act beyond NATO initiatives.

Utilising the prism of these three variables allows us to construct three categories of NATO Allies: the 'non-NATO-aligned with a broad security agenda'; the 'NATO-aligned with a Russian-centric security agenda'; and the 'NATO-aligned with a non-Russian-centric security agenda'.

Non-NATO-aligned with a broad security agenda

In this first category are states that: have a defence policy that is not directly correlated with the NATO position and that are not systematically aligned with US policy (first variable); have a security agenda that goes beyond Russia (second variable); and do not necessarily see NATO as an exclusive forum for their own defence policy (third variable). Only three Allies fit into this category: the United States, Türkiye, and France. These three countries have a foreign and defence policy that is largely independent from NATO and that is shaped by NATO's agenda to only a small degree. The defence policies of France and Türkiye are also independent of the United States, although they may depend upon Washington for certain capabilities. Russia is an important component for the three countries' security agenda, yet it does not primarily determine their respective defence postures. These states also possess security interests (and/or values) that do not per se coincide with what can be defined as core NATO interests (or values). As a matter of fact, they are also the countries whose interests may diverge from one another, which is less the case in the two other groupings (see below), where security interests are more homogeneous. These three countries will resort to NATO to implement particular aspects of their defence policy and obviously they – at least the United States – play a central role in shaping NATO's agenda. But they also have other options in their foreign and defence policy and frequently operate militarily outside the NATO framework. More specifically, they possess capable militaries and regularly conduct national operations, which is difficult to contemplate for other Allies.² In the case of France, the EU is seen as a serious alternative to NATO, with a level of ambition for the EU – encapsulated in the notion of European strategic autonomy – that is unmatched in other EU-member state Allies.

To summarize, these three states are security-providers that are the most politically and militarily independent from NATO and the ones for which NATO is the most "dispensable" in their broader security policy. Interestingly enough, these states are also the ones where a debate on withdrawal from NATO is possible and where actual withdrawal is not inconceivable, attesting to a certain political distance between them and the Alliance. Arguably, these three states are also the ones that are potentially the most disruptive within the Alliance and that can, through their posture, statements, or sometimes distance from NATO values, present the most significant challenge to the Alliance's overall cohesion.

2 The latest national British military operation was Operation Palliser in Sierra Leone in 2000.

NATO-aligned with a Russia-centric security agenda

The second category of Allies consists of states whose defence policy is the most aligned with or dependent upon NATO and the United States (first variable); that share an existential threat – Russia – that determines their defence agenda (second variable); and who have no alternative to NATO for their defence policy and military operations (third variable). Poland, the three Baltic States, Romania, and, to an extent, Norway belong to this category. These Allies are the ones that benefit the most from their membership in NATO in the sense that the costs of membership are significantly lower than the gains.

Geography, history, and obviously the most recent events in Ukraine determine these states' Russian-centric security agenda. Incidentally, in none of these states had the pre-2014 NATO policy of rapprochement with Russia percolated; they never ceased to see Russia as a potential threat and, with the 2014 Russia-Ukraine crisis and now the 2022 war, their analysis was only vindicated. When juxtaposed with these Allies' security vulnerabilities, each of these states' Russian-centric approach justifies their tight bilateral relations with the United States and their strong alignment with NATO's deterrence and defence posture on the Eastern flank. In many respects, this renders these Allies security consumers, but they have also played an important role in shaping NATO's evolution and in the Alliance's broader reorientation towards collective defence after 2014 – an effort since redoubled after February 2022. Today, their defence and capability development policies are largely determined by NATO. They also, by and large, meet the two percent (of defence spending against gross domestic product) Defence Investment Pledge, a benchmark that has only been further validated in the post-February 2022 environment. For these states, if alternatives to NATO were to exist, it would be the United States rather than the EU or a national framework.

NATO-aligned with a non-Russian-centric security agenda

The third category brings together Allies whose defence policy is largely aligned with NATO and the United States (first variable), though to a lesser degree than the second group. While Russia features prominently in these states' threat assessments, their security agenda is broader and includes issues where NATO is not a first responder (second variable). It follows that these states also consider alternatives to NATO, depending on the issue at stake (third variable).

Countries in this category include Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom. These Allies share an Atlanticist orientation (though the relationship with the United States can vary significantly from case to case) and have security interests that largely align with NATO's agenda. Their defence policies are thus, to a large degree, shaped by the Alliance, with quite a few of them acting as agenda-takers rather than agenda-shapers. This grouping contains a mix of security providers and security consumers, with several providing limited but high-quality military assets.

Security agendas among these Allies vary. It is either significantly larger than for countries in the second group (like for the United Kingdom and, to an extent, Italy), or relatively narrow, but not necessarily Russian-centred (such as Spain or Canada). Some of these Allies harbour security interests in areas that are less of a priority for NATO – like Italy and (to an extent) Spain with regards to the Southern flank – and actually share a frustration at NATO's non-prioritization of these issues.

Some of these Allies make significant contributions to NATO operations – from the United Kingdom, Italy, and Germany's contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to British, Canadian, and German participation in the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP). Yet, with the exception of the United Kingdom and – at least in principle – Germany, under the new German commitment to reach the two percent target “on a multi-year average”, states in this group tend to sit below the target, at least before February 2022. This is a reality that has produced tension within the Alliance in relation to burden-sharing.

In contrast with the second grouping of Russia-focused Allies, some of these states, like Germany, Italy or Spain, also pursue alternative foreign policy options beyond NATO, although not necessarily for collective defence missions. These alternatives include the EU, in particular for crisis management and cooperative security activities, or ad hoc coalitions. Quite a few of these countries fear entanglement in a conflict along the Eastern flank, as they do not characterize Russia in the same terms as countries of the second grouping. The United Kingdom deserves special attention here. It belongs to this third grouping based on the three above-identified variables, in particular when looking at the issues of

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alignment on the United States and the availability of alternative options, both of which render it a unique Ally compared to France and Türkiye. Ultimately, the United Kingdom is simultaneously one of the most militarily capable Allies and the one that best personifies a ‘NATO standard’, which neither France nor Türkiye does.

Geopolitical diversity and long-term cohesion

Accommodating Allies’ varying security agendas will remain a constant challenge for NATO. In this context, there are at least four areas where these variations could create tensions within the Alliance. They pertain to Allies’

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dialogue with Russia, their relationship with China, the role of the United States within the Alliance, and the respective role of NATO and the EU in defence matters. First, in the context of the war in Ukraine, while the countries of the second group (‘Russia-centric’) are the least likely to accept the very idea of negotiation with Russia as long as it occupies part of Ukraine, the ones from the first and third groups may at some point see the virtues of engaging into talks with Russia – or express concerns about the economic impact of the war. In the first group, Türkiye has already shown a propensity to engage in negotiation with Russia on various issues, while the United States and France have also indicated that they would be available for such talks.³ All seem to agree that it should be up to the Ukrainians to decide when to start such negotiations, but tensions in the United States and in Western Europe in relation to the delivery of weapons or the economic cost of war may prompt these states

to put some pressure on the Ukrainian leadership, and therefore also on other NATO Allies.

Second, while the majority of Allies are reticent to see the Alliance entering into some kind of confrontation with China, the most US-aligned Allies may be tempted to go along with the United States, seeing it as the price to pay for US protection of Europe. In this conversation, the Allies most fearful of Russia, and therefore most dependent on the United States (and NATO), will likely be torn between the need to go along with the US agenda in the Indo-Pacific and the imperative of keeping the Alliance (and the United States) present in Europe.

Third, the 2024 US presidential elections may impact the above-presented typology in case of a Republican victory. With a Republican US President, a possible renewed disruptive US policy within NATO would not only lead to intra-Alliance tensions, but also possibly call into question the US commitment to the defence of Europe and of US support to Ukraine. Under such circumstances, Allies that spend two percent of their GDP on defence could hope for some (bilateral) reassurances from the United States, but the overall cohesion of the Alliance would inevitably be shaken, as was the case during the Trump administration.

Finally, the war in Ukraine has to a degree clarified the division of tasks between NATO and the EU; in doing so, this has weakened the idea of European strategic autonomy. Given the nature of the Russian threat, Allies of the Russia-centric group are vindicated in their analysis, which centres NATO as the exclusive defence guarantor in Europe, with the United States as its cornerstone. The imperative for European strategic autonomy has gained strength in the energy and economic domains, but the divide between Allies of the Eastern flank and countries like France and Germany (inter alia, in relation to the nature of their support to Ukraine) has also increased in the security/defence domain. The discussion could re-emerge in case the United States begins to visibly pivot to Asia (or if the scenario of a Republican President materializes), yet these are not immediate concerns for most European NATO Allies.

Overall, the Russia-Ukraine war has indeed strengthened the cohesion and relevance of the Alliance; still, some of the long-term sources of intra-Alliance divergence remain un-solved and may well resurface whenever momentum for the ‘defence of the Eastern flank vision’ begins to dissipate.

3 “Russia retreats from Kherson. Why is the US nudging Ukraine on peace talks?”, NPR, 11 November 2022; “Putin defiant as Macron and Scholz call for fresh Ukraine peace talks”, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2022; “Macron hopes for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine”, *Le Monde*, 13 October 2022.



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