

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The tenth in our series of expert comment and analysis, by GSF Advisory board member, Lord Campbell of Pittenweem, Chairman of the Political Committee, NATO Parliamentary Assembly. He writes here in personal capacity. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

## Transatlantic Solidarity During And After The Pandemic: Glass Half Full

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been no shortage of warnings that this marks the end of the liberal global order and the return of aggressive unilateralism. International cooperation did not exactly flourish in dealing with the pandemic. But, as was said by an unenthusiastic critic about Wagner's music, it is not as bad as it sounds.

The NATO Alliance has bucked the trend. Having recently celebrated its 70th birthday, NATO has once again demonstrated usefulness and agility. While not a health emergency response organisation, NATO quickly reviewed its toolbox and offered its members unique instruments to help each other. By its nature, NATO is primarily about planning and rehearsing the movement of national military assets across the Alliance in case of crisis. NATO is not the go-to organisation for vaccine development or economic recovery, but it is second to none when it comes to logistics.

Through its Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre – a rather long title for a small unit – NATO has been able to bring together those members and partners who urgently needed assistance with those who could provide it. Turkey delivering test kits to Allies and partners in the Balkans, or Slovakia delivering surgical masks and disinfectant concentrate to Italy are just two of many examples of such assistance. Through its joint procurement agency, NATO also purchased vital supplies such as ventilators and protective equipment to help Italy, Spain, Norway and Luxembourg.

During a recent online meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, a high-ranking NATO official provided further examples of NATO's unique added value in response to COVID-19. At the time when most civilian aircraft had been grounded, NATO's military airlift proved to be an enormous asset in moving medical supplies and equipment. Within the NATO framework, the United Kingdom offered strategic airlift support to the UN. Additionally, the Alliance allowed aircraft carrying medical supplies, equipment and personnel to use the NATO callsign in order to accelerate air traffic control clearance to cross airspace.

The Alliance reaffirmed its transatlantic nature during the pandemic – the USA was both a provider and a recipient of assistance through NATO channels.

All of this has been done while fulfilling the collective defensive responsibilities of the Alliance such as Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States and Poland and deploying approximately 20,000 military personnel in operations around the world.

Where NATO did not do very well was in communicating about its contribution. While China and Russia turned their aid deliveries into public relations opportunities, the far more substantial assistance from NATO and EU countries and institutions was barely noticed by the public. The information space was distorted by an avalanche of fake news, conspiracy theories and aggressive Chinese and Russian propaganda.

Despite the feeling of doom and gloom, can liberal democracies and alliances like NATO come out of the global storm stronger than before? I believe they can



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and for these reasons:

Responsible democratic leaders did well during the crisis: they listened to scientific advice and proposed measures that were necessary but did not undermine basic human rights. Their approval ratings generally increased, at the expense of fringe politicians. Leaders like Putin, Lukashenko and Bolsonaro, on the other hand, face growing domestic discontent.

As a result of the pandemic, Europe is finally waking up to the challenge of China. For too long, European nations have been sleepwalking into growing dependence on China, succumbing to the lure of superficially attractive Chinese investment. The United Kingdom should surely revisit its earlier decision on Huawei. The transatlantic link would be bolstered by better alignment of European and American positions on China. NATO is not in the business of looking for new enemies, but China's increasing assertiveness should be a motive for bringing the Allies closer together.

The pandemic could be a catalyst for genuine strategic cooperation between NATO and the EU. The crisis has made it clear how much these two organisations need each other: with NATO's logistical prowess dovetailing with the EU's economic strength and regulatory measures, NATO and the EU worked closely to counter disinformation and strengthen cyber resilience. The pandemic showed that the EU's Military Mobility Project – to refurbish European infrastructure in order to enable better mobility of armed forces – is not only an EU contribution to NATO, but will benefit the EU itself. It is essential that the EU rejects the proposals to cut funding for this project in its next multiannual budget.

The transatlantic Alliance will face formidable problems in the post-COVID environment. Members of NATO will face pressure from the public to cut defence budgets to tackle economic priorities. Even the armed forces of nations that already meet NATO's 2% GDP defence spending target may be affected as GDP itself will shrink. Members should be encouraged to retain existing expenditure in real terms as a minimum. Allied governments must maintain adequate defence funding. The post-pandemic world will be volatile, and it will be irresponsible to be unprepared. Without security, there will be no prosperity.

Transatlantic allies will also have to address the divergence between European and American attitudes towards global institutions and treaties. It is regrettable that the current US leadership is willing to disengage unilaterally from these international obligations. I hope this may be reversible. To preserve the rules-based system, we need to strengthen the voice of liberal democracy inside these institutions. And we cannot do that without the Americans.

But there needs to be an overhaul of these international institutions in order to adapt them to the needs and priorities of the 21st century, such as fairer distribution of the benefits of globalisation, the protection of privacy in the cyber era and addressing the existential challenge of climate change. The pandemic could provide a catalyst for such profound reform.

The same applies to arms control regimes. We can lament the demise of the INF, or the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the fragility of the Open Skies Treaty, but we have to acknowledge that these treaties were the product of a very different world, which did not anticipate the meteoric rise of China and its economic and military capabilities. What is needed is much more inclusive global arms control and better non-proliferation architecture. NATO and the EU should work together towards these objectives.

The first step could be the overhaul of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention by endowing it with a mechanism for verification – a provision suggested for years but never implemented. In 2021, the Ninth Review Conference of the Convention will take place. The Euro-Atlantic community should lead the charge for verification.

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***He writes here in a personal capacity***



*House of Lords Official Portrait*

