

BIDEN'S TRANSATLANTIC OFFSET

The United States and its allies are entering an era of strategic simultaneity for which the Transatlantic Alliance is ill-prepared. The prospect of concurrent conflict or pressure from opposing sides of the Euro-Atlantic region would stretch existing resources beyond commitments. It would also risk undermining Article 5 and 70 years of stability and prosperity for NATO in Europe. As the U.S. pivots to the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration should pursue closer relations with the Alliance as a fourth offset strategy which seeks to bolster European defense and better align strategy at the national and multinational levels. In so doing, the United States can enhance the security and stability of the political West with a view towards the emerging geopolitical environment of the coming decades.

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“Strategy is the art of making use of time and space. I am less chary of the latter than of the former; space we can recover, time never.” — Napoleon¹

The uncertainty and complexity of the emerging security environment casts a long shadow over U.S. strategic interests. The so-called unipolar moment marked by military hegemony is over and multi-directional threat vectors increasingly abound.² The U.S. and its allies have been late to recognize this reality while the intentions and capabilities of strategic rivals have continued to evolve.³ In an era of heightened geopolitical competition with a rising China and revisionist Russia — plus the unlikely but extant potential for more substantive Sino-Russian convergence⁴ — the Transatlantic Alliance must now measure strategy and capabilities against existential scenarios.

Perhaps most concerning is the prospect of strategic simultaneity — dual pressure or crises from opposing sides of the Euro-Atlantic region. This could manifest below the threshold of conventional warfare with so-called hybrid tactics such as information operations, electronic warfare, civil unrest, cyber incursions, intellectual property theft, and undermining critical infrastructure. These tools are not new but they present threats on an indefinite timescale, creating friction with Western political decision-making cycles. So-called hybrid threats have increasingly targeted the Transatlantic Alliance over the past decade owing to the West’s post-Cold War strategic malaise and disengagement in its so-called periphery,⁵ the growing ambitions of strategic rivals, and accelerants such as emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs). Below-threshold threats should not be discounted as they could also set the theatre for conventional operations.

Simultaneous conventional crises in the Indo-Pacific and along NATO’s Eastern Flank — rapid incursions into Taiwan and the Baltic states, for example — would almost certainly stretch U.S. resources beyond commitments and overwhelm local

¹ David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon: The Mind and Method of History’s Greatest Soldier* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1966), p. 149.

² “Brussels Summit Communiqué,” *NATO*, 14 June 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm.

³ Ivo Munssen, “‘Inhaltlich lag Trump meist Richtig’: Der ehemalige amerikanische Spitzendiplomat Wess Mitchell fodert von Europa mehr Engagement in der Sicherheitspolitik,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 9 July 2021; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); and “Russia’s Military Modernization,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 30 September 2020.

⁴ Jeffrey Edmonds, Samuel Bendett, et al. “Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy in Russia,” *Center for Naval Analyses*, May 2021, <https://nps.edu/documents/115559645/122225231/2021+Dist+A+CNA+AI+and+Autonomy+in+Russia+May+2021.pdf/eed101c2-678b-130e-3c9b-08680356a6a2?t=1622817291960>; Bobo Lo and Edward Lucas, “Partnership Without Substance: Sino-Russian Relations in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 28 April 2021, <https://cepa.org/partnership-without-substance/>

⁵ Wess Mitchell, “Tipping the Scales: Why Central Europe Matters to the United States,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 2006, <http://www.ncpathinktank.org/pdfs/CEPATippingtheScales.pdf>

defenses. This could create a territorial *fait accompli*, which would force the U.S. and its allies to choose between accepting redrawn borders or embarking upon a liberation campaign.⁶ NATO could theoretically protect the so-called ‘rimlands’ by bolstering its forward strategic presence,⁷ but it is unlikely to muster sufficient resources, reposture capabilities, or generate the necessary political will in the near-to medium-term. Strategic simultaneity could therefore present the U.S. with an impossible choice between upholding Article 5 and the most successful military alliance in history, or stymying the primary geopolitical rival.

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The U.S. is preempting this dilemma by unambiguously pivoting to the Indo-Pacific.⁸ With limited resources, its presence in Europe will remain constant — if not decrease — in the foreseeable future. At the same time, no single Ally is better off defending or deterring against the challenges of the emerging security environment alone. The U.S. must therefore remain committed, even as it turns to China, to enhancing transatlantic collective defense and bet on NATO’s ability to quickly adapt again.⁹ As the Biden administration develops its national security strategy,¹⁰ it should pursue a ‘fourth offset strategy’ centered around NATO which aims to achieve asymmetrical advantages vis-à-vis potential adversaries and enhance defense and deterrence in Europe. This would not require increasing U.S. presence, but enhancing specific capabilities as well as encouraging greater transatlantic cohesion and coherence through better alignment of transatlantic strategy at the national and multinational levels. The conclusion of NATO 2030 and development of the next strategic concept¹¹ provides the right moment for the U.S. to pursue this objective.

⁶ “S.3936 – Taiwan Defense Act,” *U.S. Senate*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/3936>; LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, and Peter B. Doran, “Securing The Suwałki Corridor: Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence, and Defense,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 9 July 2018, <https://cepa.org/securing-the-suwalki-corridor/>; and Richard Hooker, “How to Defend the Baltic States,” *Jamestown Foundation*, October 2019, <https://jamestown.org/product/how-to-defend-the-baltic-states/>

⁷ Nicolas Spykman, *The Geography of Peace* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1944).

⁸ “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

⁹ “Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg,” *NATO*, 7 July 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_184735.htm.

¹⁰ “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” *The White House*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>

¹¹ “Brussels Summit Communiqué,” *NATO*, 14 June 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm

Historical Context

The U.S. Department of Defense has implemented three offset strategies since the end of the Second World War when peer or near-peer competitors have had overwhelming conventional advantages over the U.S. and its allies. Each offset has been predicated not on investing in defense spending overall, but establishing asymmetrical advantages in specific areas. President Eisenhower developed the first offset strategy¹² to counter Soviet conventional superiority by arming smaller U.S. ground forces with atomic weapons. This compelled the Warsaw Pact to quickly respond by developing a countermeasure designed to prevent NATO from using nuclear weapons early in campaigns.¹³

By the early 1970s, the Soviet Union had regained conventional superiority, and the prospect of Soviet forces overwhelming NATO in Central Europe precipitated the second offset strategy.¹⁴ The U.S. pursued an advantage through technological innovation. This included precision-guided munitions, stealth technology, long-range capabilities, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems which allowed the U.S. to penetrate multi-layered Soviet defense systems — long-lasting innovations which eventually helped overwhelm Saddam Hussein’s regime in *Desert Storm* in 1991.¹⁵

The third offset strategy, officially known as the Defense Innovation Initiative,¹⁶ has been ongoing since 2015. It followed the recognition that near-peer strategic rivals had eroded U.S. asymmetrical advantages from the second offset in technological research, development, and implementation. Designed to support all domains of warfare, the third offset focuses on emerging technologies including autonomous learning systems, human-machine collaborative decision-making, assisted human operations, advanced manned-unmanned systems operations, and network-enabled autonomous weapons and high-speed projectiles. Rather than fund specific capabilities or projects, it will “see what germinates.”¹⁷

¹² Peter Grier, “The First Offset,” *Air Force Magazine*, June 2016, pp. 56-60.

¹³ Octavian Manea, “The Role of Offset Strategies in Restoring Conventional Deterrence,” *Small Wars Journal*, 4 January 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jml/art/role-offset-strategies-restoring-conventional-deterrence>

¹⁴ Sam Seitz, “The Origins and Effects of the Second Offset,” *Politics in Theory and Practice*, 1 October 2019, <https://politicstheorypractice.com/2019/10/01/the-origins-and-effects-of-the-second-offset>

¹⁵ Joseph Felter, “It’s Not Just The Technology: Beyond Offset Strategies,” *Hoover Institution*, 15 March 2017, <https://www.hoover.org/research/its-not-just-technology-beyond-offset-strategies>

¹⁶ “The Third U.S. Offset Strategy and its Implications for Partners and Allies,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, 28 January 2015, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/606641/the-third-us-offset-strategy-and-its-implications-for-partners-and-allies/>

¹⁷ Kathleen H. Hicks and Andrew Hunter, “Assessing the Third Offset Strategy,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 2017.

“NATO has long prioritized conventional over non-conventional or so-called hybrid threats.”

But the U.S. cannot face the dilemma of strategic simultaneity with the third offset strategy alone. The ebb-and-flow of measures versus countermeasures is accelerating, which could more quickly undermine the enduring military advantage of specific capabilities. The U.S. now faces two near-peer or peer competitors rather than one. For the first time in more than a century, an adversary has reached 60 percent of U.S. GDP.¹⁸ China has the world's largest navy, a significant stockpile of ground-based cruise and ballistic missiles, and highly-advanced integrated air and missile defense systems.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Russia continues to pursue an aggressive military modernization plan,²⁰ has a conventional overmatch in the Black Sea region, and has rapidly militarized Crimea and the Arctic.²¹ The Biden administration seeks more “stable and predictable” relations with the Kremlin, presumably in hopes of mollifying Russia to focus on China.²² But the Transatlantic Alliance cannot rule out the prospect of Russian revisionism inciting another crisis scenario to distract from domestic politics or enhance Russia's perceived global position.²³ Russia's military build-up along Ukraine's border in the weeks before the Biden-Putin meeting is a clear signal that the Russian bear is unlikely to be tamed. On its own, the technological innovation of the third offset cannot negate these realities.

A Transatlantic Offset

Allies are the United States' enduring asymmetrical advantage — and so the Biden

¹⁸ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁹ “Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>

²⁰ “Russia's Military Modernization,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 30 September 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/09/rmm-introduction>

²¹ “Concerned about Ongoing Militarization of Crimea, Human Rights Violations in Eastern Ukraine, Speakers Tell General Assembly Minsk Agreements Must Be Fully Implemented,” *United Nations*, 20 February 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/ga12241.doc.htm> and Thomas Grove, “Russian Military Seeks to Outmuscle U.S. in Arctic,” *Wall Street Journal*, 25 May 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-military-seeks-to-outmuscle-u-s-in-arctic-11621935002>

²² Alan Cullison, “Biden Wants to Focus on China, but Putin and Russia Crises Remain a Distraction,” *Wall Street Journal*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-wants-to-focus-on-china-but-putin-and-russia-crises-remain-a-distraction-11623937240>

²³ Leon Aron, “Putinism,” *American Enterprise Institute*, Spring 2008, https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/20080508_Putinism_g.pdf?x91208 and Kier Giles and James Nixey, *et al.*, “Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia: How they affect Western policy, and what can be done,” *Chatham House*, 13 May 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia>

administration should pursue a fourth offset strategy centered around closer relations with NATO. At issue is developing a more cohesive and coherent transatlantic approach to defense and deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic area and investing in transatlantic capabilities which build on the third offset and create near-term asymmetrical advantages for the West. While offset strategies have traditionally occurred decades rather than years apart, the fourth offset should not be viewed as entirely separate from the third, but as a force-multiplier of technological innovation which prepares the Alliance to respond to the multiplicity of threat vectors in the emerging security environment. To encourage greater policy alignment at the multinational and national levels, the following priorities could be reflected in U.S. national security strategy and NATO's strategic concept.

Enable NATO as a Forum For Consultation.

The Alliance's ability to offset emerging threats hinges upon its unity. Consensus is the source of NATO's strength but single-country blockages within the Alliance have inhibited the speed of decision and decision-making itself.²⁴ The U.S. should continue to raise within the NAC the NATO Reflection Group's recommendation of elevating single-country blockages to the ministerial level.²⁵ It should also continue to advocate for greater autonomy for SACEUR to act in his area of responsibility under peacetime conditions. More broadly, member states should recommit in the next strategic concept to using NATO more frequently as a forum for consultation and policy coordination.

Remove the Distinction Between Military and Non-Military Threats to NATO.

NATO has long prioritized conventional over non-conventional or so-called hybrid threats. While the Alliance has taken steps to adapt its non-military approach,²⁶ its most recent strategic documents and operational planning should unambiguously acknowledge the potential of the wide spectrum of tools which threaten to undermine the Alliance's political and military foundation. In other words, NATO should fully acknowledge the military implications of non-military threats. The challenge is that they present on undefined, long-term timescales. They constrict traditional time-space calculations in operational planning, enabling adversaries to almost

²⁴ Octavian Manea, "Wess Mitchell: 'The West needs to redevelop the tools and mindset of strategic competition,'" *Eastern Focus Quarterly*, 5 April 2021, <https://www.eastern-focus.eu/2021/04/wess-mitchell-the-west-needs-to-redevelop-the-tools-and-mindset-of-strategic-competition/>

²⁵ "NATO 2030: United for a New Era: Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General," *NATO*, 25 November 2020, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf Reflection Group

²⁶ Michael Rühle and Clare Roberts, "Enlarging NATO's toolbox to counter hybrid threats," *NATO*, 19 March 2021, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/03/19/enlarging-natos-toolbox-to-counter-hybrid-threats/index.html>

instantaneously target or strike critical infrastructure and capabilities from distance with little or no warning. Adapting for the emerging security environment begins by eliminating tiering within the full spectrum of threats facing the Alliance — and then more fully incorporating all elements into NATO strategy, operations, and exercises.

Adopt a More Sophisticated Approach to Burden-sharing That Better Aligns Means and Ends.

The burden-sharing debate within the Alliance is not new. While it was more palpable and divisive under the Trump administration, the Biden administration has changed tone but not substance.²⁷ For European allies, this removes a convenient excuse for increasing burden-sharing and reaching the 2 percent defense-spending target agreed upon at the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales.²⁸ Two concrete steps can help increase momentum and incentivize greater burden-sharing in support of transatlantic objectives. First, while sticky national budgets and domestic aversion to increasing defense-spending remain barriers in many European countries, European allies could follow the model of Japan by prioritizing spending on enablement of multinational rather than national capabilities.²⁹ Investing in collective defense rather than ‘national militarization’ could help consolidate domestic support for higher spending. Second, the Alliance should consider reframing how burden-sharing is calculated, which currently differs across member states and does not reflect all contributions to real military value such as cyber protection of critical infrastructure.³⁰ This does not mean eliminating or lowering the 2 percent target. But burden-sharing is the backbone of transatlantic defense and deterrence and should be incentivized as such.

Align NATO's Future Military Adaptation With a Measurable Goal Based on Space and Time.

Enablement in the Euro-Atlantic area is currently fraught with friction points that would inhibit the reinforcement of the Alliance's potentially most vulnerable regions. These inhibitors include border crossing customs and procedures, heavy equipment transport capacity, infrastructure, and coordinating structures between

²⁷ Aaron Mehta, “Biden admin wants new ‘tone’ with NATO, but the old challenges remain,” *DefenseNews*, 16 February 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2021/02/16/biden-admin-wants-new-tone-with-nato-but-the-old-challenges-remain/>

²⁸ “NATO: De Maizière zu künftiger Ausrichtung,” *Tagesschau*, 1 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJ5ka-zuYiI>

²⁹ Sheila A. Smith, “How Japan Is Upgrading Its Military,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 24 February 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-japan-upgrading-its-military>

³⁰ LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges and Carsten Schmiel, “Targeting 2%: The Logistics of a More Sophisticated Approach to Burden-Sharing,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 24 September 2018, <https://cepa.org/targeting-2-percent/>

and among host nations and multinational organizations.³¹ Multiple stakeholders and competing authorities also have a hand in military mobility; there is no single overarching organization that is responsible for enablement in a crisis. As the Transatlantic Alliance looks to improve mobility moving forward — including the positive news that more allies are joining the EU’s PESCO project — it should identify and work towards a measurable mobility goal. In practice, of the Alliance should be able to reliably move a convoy, at least initially under peacetime conditions, anywhere on the European continent within a certain timeframe. This involves protecting transport routes through fully-integrated air and missile defense and securing critical infrastructure. Such a goal would help focus exercises and currently piecemeal multinational efforts to rapidly improve mobility to deter worst-case strategic simultaneity scenarios.

Deter Russia in Ukraine to Prevent Sino-Russo Convergence.

Strategic simultaneity will present a much greater challenge if Russia and China converge more substantively. Ukraine is the key to avoiding this scenario. The Transatlantic Alliance should not attempt to bargain ‘stability and predictability’ in exchange for greater Russian influence over Ukraine because allowing the Kremlin’s westward imperialist expansion would only encourage more stable relations with China.³² The logic is that Russia and China are not natural partners and the Kremlin does not want to be perceived as the ‘junior partner.’ Cooperation is opportunistic rather than natural and so closing the door on Russian expansion in Ukraine would force the Kremlin to pay closer attention to China’s activities on its other frontier.³³ NATO should therefore increase exercises with Ukraine, enhance deterrence by continuing to supply capabilities, and pursue a more assertive membership action plan for both Ukraine and Georgia to deter Russia in the greater Black Sea region.

Improve Situational Awareness Across the Euro-Atlantic Region.

The Alliance responds to crises at the speed of relevance. While NATO continues to pursue closer alignment of multinational and national-level indicators and warnings including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, gaps remain throughout the Euro-Atlantic area. Seams within the Alliance in intelligence-sharing, for

³¹ LTG (Ret.) Heiner Brauss, LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges, and Prof. Dr. Julian Lindley-French, “The CEPA Military Mobility Project: Moving Mountains for Europe’s Defense,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 3 March 2021, <https://cepa.org/the-cepa-military-mobility-project-moving-mountains-for-europes-defense/>

³² Jakub Grygiel, “Deter Russia in Ukraine and Avoid a Sino-Russian Dual Alliance,” *The National Interest*, 16 April 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/deter-russia-ukraine-and-avoid-sino-russian-dual-alliance-182898>

³³ “Brian Whitmore: ‘Putin wants to party like it is 1815,’” *The Ukrainian Week*, 19 May 2019, <https://ukrainianweek.com/World/230289>

example, also exist through Five Eyes. The Alliance should consider developing a fully-integrated system of sensors across the Euro-Atlantic region that encourages greater situational awareness. The U.S. is pursuing Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) across all national military services and it should initiate discussions within the Alliance on developing a similar system across SACEUR's area of responsibility with the aim of achieving an 'unblinking eye'³⁴ to shorten NATO's response times and maximize capabilities in crisis scenarios.

³⁴ Jakob Palowski, "Gen. Hodges: We Need Constant Surveillance over the Baltic Sea," *Defence24*, 14 June 2021, <https://www.defence24.com/gen-hodges-we-need-constant-surveillance-over-the-baltic-sea-interview>