

Alliance Cohesion in an Age of Populism

Exploring ways NATO can adapt in an Era
of Sovereignty, Identity, and Populism

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Alliance Cohesion in an Age of Populism

Exploring Ways NATO can adapt to an Era of Sovereignty, Identity, and Populism

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[The Parties to this Treaty] are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. – North Atlantic Treaty, 1949²

² The North Atlantic Treaty. (1949, April https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm)

INTRODUCTION

The European elections in May underscored what has been apparent for some time: populism is not going away. Populist parties have more than tripled their support in Europe over the last two decades.³

The populist resurgence is global. Between 1990 and 2018, the number of populists in power around the world increased five-fold, from 4 to 20.⁴ Populist leaders now run four of the six largest democracies: India, Mexico, Brazil, and the Philippines.^{5,6}

Since the watershed events of 2016 — the election of Donald Trump and the decision by the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the European Union (Brexit) — the rise of populism has become impossible to ignore in today's geopolitics. Populism is changing the strategic environment across the world and within the transatlantic community.

As NATO cruises past its 70th birthday and approaches its next Strategic Concept, the surge of populism looms large along with other changes in the security environment. What does the rise of populism mean for the Alliance? How will it impact Alliance cohesion? How should NATO respond?

This paper aims to advance the conversation about how NATO can adapt to this new reality. It does so with an eye towards Alliance cohesion, meaning the ability of member Nations to work together. The core thesis is that whether out of strategic necessity or earnest belief, NATO needs to adjust itself for today's era of populist grievances about sovereignty, identity, and cultural change. Global politics will continue to shift and evolve, but populism isn't going away — not in the near-term at least.

The potential effects of populism pose significant threats to the cohesion of the Alliance. This paper explores these threats using the five cohesion themes identified by NATO's Framework for Future Alliance Operations (FFAO) Cohesion Project. These threats are serious, and yet by forcing changes that better serve member Nations and fulfill its original mission, populism may prompt actions that help strengthen the Alliance.

The final section of the paper offers ideas on how NATO can adapt. **First**, NATO could take the grievances powering populism seriously, build relationships with populist leaders, and expand public engagement through social media. **Second**, NATO could increase its focus on sovereignty and migration issues. There is no getting around the anxieties over unbridled mass immigration and its effects shared across populist movements. NATO should recognize uncontrolled migration as a both a threat and

³ Lewis, P., Clarke, S., Barr, C., Kommenda, N., & Holder, J. (2018, November 20). Revealed: One in four Europeans vote populist. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist>

⁴ Kyle, J., & Gultchin, L. (2018, November 7). Populists in Power Around the World. <https://institute.global/insight/renewing-centre/populistspower-around-world>

⁵ Lewis, P., Clarke, S., Barr, C., Kommenda, N., & Holder, J. (2018, November 20). Revealed: One in four Europeans vote populist. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist>

⁶ See Framework for Future Alliance Operations 2018 Report. Page 52 https://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/media/doclibrary/180514_ffao18.pdf

⁷weapons system, and revive its focus on protecting “the common heritage and civilization of our peoples” as enshrined in the preamble of the Washington Treaty (but rarely discussed). **Third**, NATO could encourage audacious thinking about its values and role in coming decades, seeking new reconciliations of competing forces. Leaders need to answer fundamental questions like: Why do we exist? What are we securing? What makes us relevant?

THE RISE OF POPULISM

Over the last 20 years, populism within NATO member nations has ventured from the fringes of society to the mainstream of politics. Support for populist parties has more than tripled in Europe over the last 20 years, with 1 in 4 Europeans now voting populist. Populists are challenging the established order both within the Alliance and outside of it. Many foreign policy experts view populism as a symptom of political crisis while others interpret it as an opportunity to refocus on the needs of the citizens. This paper sees it as both. The following section looks at why populism has seen so much growth.

What Is Populism?

Defining populism can be challenging, but one starting point is the truism that “populism worships the people.” Academic definitions of populism typically center on one of three perspectives. Viewed as an ideology, populism emphasizes antagonism between the people and the elite and the primacy of popular sovereignty. Viewed as a discursive style, populism is a style of discourse that speaks on behalf of the majority and invokes “us versus them” language. Viewed as a political strategy, populism involves charismatic leadership and mass mobilization of mostly unorganized and under-institutionalized followers.⁸

Populism can be rightwing or leftwing, but its recent growth is mostly right-leaning. Political theorist Cas Mudde points to three core features of rightwing populism.⁹ It is *anti-establishment*, valuing ordinary people over a corrupt establishment. It is *authoritarian* in impulse, favoring strong and charismatic leaders. It is *nativist*, emphasizing the primacy of the nation and traditional values rooted in the majority population’s culture.

⁷ Lewis, P., Clarke, S., Barr, C., Kommenda, N., & Holder, J. (2018, November 20). Revealed: One in four Europeans vote populist. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist>

⁹ Ionescu, Ghita, and Ernst Gellner, *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*. New York: Macmillan.

⁸ For more on this, see Gidron, N., & Bonikowski, B. (2013). Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda. https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/gidron_bonikowski_populismlitreview_2013.pdf

⁹ Cas Mudde. 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. NY: Cambridge University Press

A number of general conditions are said to give rise to populism: a perception of elite corruption; a loss of trust in existing institutions; a new challenge that existing institutions are not solving; and the perception that people are ready to be mobilized, often in new ways.¹⁰

Although this paper accepts populism as a term, it is important to note that some thinkers dispute the concept. Hungarian sociologist Frank Furedi, for example, points out that today's populist movements have little in common other than being a reaction to the "anti-political, technocratic version of liberalism" that has emerged in recent decades.¹¹ Furedi views the anti-populist narrative as a barely sublimated critique of popular sovereignty and democratic decision-making.¹² From this perspective, populism is a slur — a way to discredit democratic sovereignty movements and supporters.¹³

Why Is Populism On The Rise Today?

It has become conventional wisdom that today's conditions have never been more fertile for populist growth in NATO's 70-year history. Economic inequality has grown while standards of living have stagnated for middle-income earners. Many people feel left behind by globalization, technological change, and the growing wealth gap.

Mass immigration, often against the will of the people, has led to growing unease with cultural and demographic change. Crime and terrorism have led to fear and apprehension. Trust in media and government has steadily declined. The Internet and social media have created new ways to connect and mobilize people, as well as propagandize to them. Many are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in their country.¹⁴

In the 2018 book *National Populism - The Revolt against Liberal Democracy*, Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin's refer to the "four Ds" behind today's rise in populism. These include the *distrust* of elites and institutions; the *destruction* of national cultures, values, and ways of life amid record immigration and demographic change; a sense of *deprivation* relative to cosmopolitan elites; and a *dealignment* in which the bond between voters and traditional parties is being broken.¹⁵ Yascha Mounk's *The People vs*

¹⁰ Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2019, May 31). How Do Populists Win ? <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/populism-keyingredients-by-daron-acemoglu-and-james-a-robinson-2019-05>

¹¹ Furedi, F. (2016, November 29). Populism: A defence. http://www.frankfuredi.com/article/populism_a_defence

¹² Ibid. Also, see Furedi's book, *Populism and the European Culture Wars: The Conflict of Values Between Hungary and the EU* (Routledge, 2017).

¹³ For example, see: O'Sullivan, J. (2017, October 14). The Misunderstood Nature of Populism. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/10/populist-party-strength-helps-democracy/>

¹⁴ Out of 27 nations surveyed by Pew in 2018 (about half NATO members), a dozen had majorities who were dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in their country. Kent, D. (2019, May 31). The countries where people are most dissatisfied with how democracy is working. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/31/the-countries-where-people-are-most-dissatisfied-with-how-democracy-is-working>

¹⁵ *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin. Pelican. 2018. Also: Goodwin, M. (2018, November 08). National populism is unstoppable – and the left still doesn't understand why | Matthew Goodwin. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/08/national-populism-immigration-financial-crisis-globalisation>

Democracy points to similar forces propelling populism: a stagnation of living standards, a decline in ethnic homogeneity, and the rise of the Internet.¹⁶

The Cultural Backlash Thesis

The most convincing academic studies point to cultural backlash as the leading cause of today's populism rather than economic factors. A ground-breaking 2016 study by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris tested multiple hypotheses against data on 268 political parties in Europe from 2002 to 2014. Findings showed that cultural values, combined with several social and demographic factors, provided the most consistent explanation for populist party votes.¹⁷ By contrast, economic insecurity was mixed and inconsistent as an explanation.¹⁸ Studies of U.S. President Donald Trump voters have found similar results.¹⁹

The cultural backlash theory is clarified in David Goodhart's book *The Road to Somewhere*. Goodhart explains how traditional left-right divisions are being overlaid by a divide between cosmopolitan "Anywhere" people and more rooted and traditional "Somewhere" people.²⁰

The conflict between the so-called Somewheres and Anywheres can be seen as a conflict between populism and cosmopolitan liberalism. A helpful chart from the Inglehart and Pippa study shows populism opposite cosmopolitan liberalism on one axis and "economic right" versus "economic left" on the other axis.²¹ The characteristics of populism — anti-establishment, strong leader, popular will, nationalism, and traditional values — are shown in contrast with cosmopolitan liberalism's emphasis on pluralistic democracy, multiculturalism, multilateralism, and progressive values.²²

The story of today's populism, the data suggests, is the story of cultural backlash against cosmopolitan liberalism taken too far. It is a rebuke of the cosmopolitan vision of open borders and open societies.

Populism & NATO

The term populism originated in the late 19th century, but the phenomenon can be seen as far back as ancient Rome. It almost always involved a strong leader, like Clodius, railing against a corrupt ruling elite

¹⁶ Three Causes of Populism, and One Solution: Positive Nationalism. (2018, October 9). <https://www.theinagency.com/news/what-can-we-do-about-populism>

¹⁷ Inglehart, R. F., & Norris, P. (2016, August 06). Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2818659

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ For example, see Rothwell, J. T., & Diego-Rosell, P. (2016, August 15). Explaining Nationalist Political Views: The Case of Donald Trump. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2822059

²⁰ Goodhart, D. (2017). *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*. London: C Hurst.

²¹ Inglehart, R. F., & Norris, P. (2016, August 06). Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash. Page 35 https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2818659

²² Ibid.

to make change on behalf of the people.²³ One can see elements of populism in 16th century peasant uprisings, the French Revolution, and in the American Presidency of Andrew Jackson.

Populism did not have as much of a presence within NATO member nations during the Cold War. The Soviet threat made clear the importance of international bodies and strong defense. Post-war economic growth provided job security and opportunities to the working classes. The specter of World War II was still present, tempering nationalist impulses.

The roots of today's populism developed after the fall of the Iron Curtain, when western democracies reached an “end of history” consensus around neoliberal economic reforms, multiethnic open societies, and European integration. This cosmopolitan consensus set the stage for cultural backlash.

At the 2006 NATO Summit in Riga, Latvia, while Americans Ronald D. Asmus and Richard C. Holbrooke were advocating a more global role for NATO, Bulgarian commentator Ivan Krastev presented a paper titled “NATO in the Age of Populism” warning of the rise of populism within NATO:

“NATO has failed to recognize the complex nature of the global wave of democratization that started after the end of the Cold War and its impact on the security dilemmas that both Europe and the United States face. NATO has neglected the security threats coming from the transformation of the democratic regimes in the Alliance’s own member states. The world has entered the age of the populist revolutions.... It is not possible to understand the nature of global threats, therefore, if we fail to understand the nature of the populist revolution.”²⁴

Two years later, in 2008, the global financial crisis led to a new reckoning for the elite and distress among member nations like Italy and Greece, where democratic governance clashed with the politics of bailouts. Then came the migrant crisis of 2015. Perhaps no singular event did more to accelerate the spread of populism in Europe. In his 2017 book *After Europe*, Krastev describes the refugee crisis as “Europe’s 9/11” because of its extensive impact on democratic politics.²⁷

The refugee crisis amplified a broader secular trend of mass migration and demographic change across NATO member nations. Seventy-six million migrants lived in Europe as of 2015.²⁵ In the U.S., 44 million immigrants account for nearly 14% of the current population, nearly triple the share (4.7%) from 1970.²⁶ In Canada, more than 20% of the population is foreign-born, the highest proportion among G8 countries.²⁷

²³ Bufacchi, V. (2018, May 29). Populism and the Politically Excluded: Lessons from Ancient Rome.

<https://www.21global.ucsb.edu/globale/may-2018/populism-and-politically-excluded-lessons-ancient-rome>

²⁴ Krastev, I. (2016, November). NATO in the Age of Populism. http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00004886/01/1164715030_a4_krastev_d.pdf

²⁷ Krastev, I. (2017). *After Europe*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. Pg 19.

²⁵ The number of international migrants has grown faster than the world's population. (n.d.). <https://www.unric.org/en/latest-un-buzz/30032the-number-of-international-migrants-has-grown-faster-than-the-worlds-populationnnds>

²⁶ Radford, J. (2019, June 03). Key findings about U.S. immigrants. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/03/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants>

²⁷ Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity in Canada. (2018, July). <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010x2011001-eng.cfm>

Against this backdrop came President Donald Trump, Brexit, and the continued growth of populist parties across Europe and North America, all fueled by social media's efficient transmission of messages independent of traditional media. By the end of 2016, it became conventional wisdom that "social, political, and media landscapes in Europe favor populists more than at any time since the end of World War II."²⁸

Following the trajectory of Krastev's views is an interesting way to trace the rise of populism. After the European elections this May, he wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed: "Now, there is no choice but to admit that the populist far right is becoming a permanent feature of European politics."²⁹ Krastev is correct: Populism is a present reality in Europe, in the transatlantic bond, and across the world.

POPULISM & NORTH ATLANTIC ALLIANCE COHESION

The rise of populism is now firmly on the radar of academics and foreign policy experts. Even Pope Francis is warning about its dangerous effects.³⁰ But what exactly are these risks and how might they impact NATO's Alliance cohesion? This section of the paper focuses on the potential effects of populism with an eye towards the glue that holds NATO together — Alliance cohesion.

What Is Alliance Cohesion

Alliance cohesion in this paper is defined as the ability of NATO members to agree on goals, strategy, and tactics, and coordinate activity directed towards those ends.³¹ It is the ability to work together despite differences, especially during moments of crisis.³²

Alliance cohesion is commonly regarded as the strategic center of gravity for NATO, meaning the source of its power and its greatest vulnerability.^{33, 34} This is an important concept because it underscores how fundamental Alliance cohesion is to NATO's continuity and mission. Without Alliance cohesion, NATO could not function.

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²⁸ For example, see Mudde, C. (2016, November 02). Europe's Populist Surge. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-10-17/europe-s-populist-surge>

²⁹ Krastev, I. (2019, May 28). The Far Right Is Here to Stay. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/28/opinion/european-elections.html>

³⁰ Horowitz, J., & Gillet, K. (2019, May 31). Pope Francis, in Romania, Warns of Populism's Dangers. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/31/world/europe/pope-francis-romania.html>

³¹ Holsti, Ole, Hopmann, Terrence, and Sullivan, John, 1973. *Unity and Disintegration in International Alliances: Comparative Studies*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

³² Weitsman, Patricia. *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War*. Stanford University Press: Stanford. 2004. P. 35.

³³ Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, 2011. *Joint Operation Planning*. Washington, DC: The Joint Staff.

³⁴ Echevarria, Antulio J. II, 2003. "Clausewitz's center of gravity: It's not what we thought", *Naval War College Review*, LVI (1), 108-123.

³⁸ Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, 2011. *Joint Operation Planning*. Washington, DC: The Joint Staff.

³⁵ Echevarria, Antulio J. II, 2003. "Clausewitz's center of gravity: It's not what we thought", *Naval War College Review*, LVI (1), 108-123.

fundamental Alliance cohesion is to NATO's continuity and mission. Without Alliance cohesion, NATO could not function.

Perspectives on North Atlantic Alliance Cohesion

There is significant scholarship on Alliance cohesion in international relations, political science, and sociology. Theoretical perspectives include realism, institutionalism, social-constructivism, collective action theory, and organizational development. These perspectives are helpful to explaining NATO's Alliance cohesion in theory, though this paper takes a more practical perspective.

A useful question to consider is: why does NATO still exist? During the Cold War, the looming Soviet threat was NATO's primary source of cohesion. Many realists predicted that NATO would dissolve following the Cold War as this dominant external threat went away. So why hasn't it?

One perspective is that NATO has remained intact because of its endurance as an institution. Another perspective sees NATO's continuity as a function of mutual interest. NATO members form a large economic bloc, share democratic values, and collectively spend trillions on defense. With a more diffuse set of threats following the Cold War, the thinking goes, it is in everyone's best interest to continue participating in NATO.

Perhaps the simplest explanation for why NATO still exists is because NATO has persistently made itself relevant to member nations. The history of NATO, from this view, can be seen as an ongoing quest for relevance.

The Five Alliance Cohesion Themes

Drawing from different academic perspectives on Alliance cohesion, researchers in 2017 collaborated with the Innovation Hub sponsored by the NATO Allied Command Transformation to identify factors that would affect Alliance cohesion through 2035 and beyond. The project brought together 100 young leaders across different backgrounds (military, academia, government). It came to be known as the "FFAO 2017 Cohesion Project."³⁶

Based on the data that was collected, the research team found that variables affecting Alliance cohesion clustered into five thematic areas: (1) external risks, (2) political and economic factors, (3) organizational structures and processes, (4) technology advances, and (5) core values.³⁷ The five themes are useful for

³⁶ Framework for Future Alliance Operations 2018 Report. Pages 50-52

https://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/media/doclibrary/180514_ffao18.pdf

³⁷ Bazin, A., & Kunertova, D. (2018, January). An Alliance Divided? Five Factors That Could Fracture NATO.

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2018/An-Alliance-Divided-Five-Factors-That-Could-Fracture-NATO/>

exploring risks posed by populism to Alliance cohesion. In the following section, the author attempts to outline these risks.

Theme 1: External Risks -> Divergent Threat Perceptions. The rise of populism increases the likelihood of divergent threat assessments, especially for non-Article 5 threats. Populists, for example, may view migrant issues as the foremost external threat, whereas others view Russia or climate change as threats.³⁸ According to a survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations, the top five current security threats in Europe are, in descending order: cyber-attacks; state collapse or civil war; external meddling in domestic politics; uncontrolled migration; and the deterioration of the international institutional order.³⁹ None of these threats involves a conventional armed attack. In this environment, forging a strategic consensus around common threats is challenging enough and may become even more challenging.

Theme 2: Political & Economic Factors -> Political Paralysis, Fragmentation. The rise of populism will likely increase disagreement among NATO members, making consensus decisions more difficult. It also may increase the level of political turmoil and fragmentation within and among member nations. Other risks include an undermining of international institutions and multilateralism, a weakening of the transatlantic bond, and withdrawal of a NATO member from the Alliance. Populist leaders might scapegoat NATO for domestic gain or more aggressively agitate for change.

Theme 3: Organizational Structures & Processes -> Internal Conflict, Burden-Sharing Disputes, Irrelevance. Perhaps the biggest risk in this category is that populist leaders view NATO as irrelevant, outdated, and unresponsive to their security needs. The presence of more populist leaders could make NATO's consensus decision-making more difficult. Continued unequal burden sharing of defense costs could result in larger states reducing their support and their willingness to defend free-riding members. An overly bureaucratized NATO could create a perception that it is a corrupted, globalist entity — an enemy of sovereignty to be resisted. Growing polarization both within and between member states could slow the ability to coordinate activities, making consensus hard to achieve.

Theme 4: Technology Advances -> Disruptive Technology. The rise of populism could slow down technological knowledge sharing among NATO members. New technologies and platforms could lead to further political disruption, with new ways of mobilizing and expressing. Communications technology also increases the spread of risks such as cyber-attacks and propaganda against NATO nations. These risks may be more acute among populists, who rely more on communications technologies to interact and mobilize and who may be less trusting of traditional media.

³⁸ The refugee crisis and NATO's southern strategy have already revealed divisions in the way populists view security issues versus other groups.

³⁹ Dennison, S, Frankie, U & Zerka, P. (2018, July) The nightmare of the dark: The security fears that keep Europeans awake at night. https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/the_nightmare_of_the_dark_the_security_fears_that_keep_europeans_away_at_n

Theme 5: Core Values -> Values & Vision Misalignment, Democratic Backsliding. The rise of populism increases misalignment on NATO's core mission and values that could significantly damage Alliance cohesion. Populist supporters view themselves as promoting core NATO values like democratic sovereignty, territorial integrity, and protecting common heritage. They view their movements as democratic responses to an undemocratic elite. Critics of populism, on the other hand, see in populism the potential for democratic backsliding, illiberalism, and autocratic tendencies. This divide in perspective is likely to increase with the rise of populism, putting NATO's political and organizational consensus in jeopardy.

Beyond the five themes from the FFAO report, the author proposes three additional considerations for the risks posed by populism to Alliance cohesion:

Consideration 1: American Leadership. America has been the dominant player in NATO since its founding in 1949. Many view its ongoing leadership and support as essential to NATO's ongoing success. Losing American support is unlikely in the foreseeable future given spending levels, reaffirmations, and the widespread support of Congress.⁴⁰ Still, with so many commitments across the globe, successful transatlantic relations will require America's continued prioritization

Consideration 2: Russian Hybrid Warfare. Russia is another consideration. The rise of populism may increase friendly overtures and stronger ties to Russia among some member states, thus creating new vulnerabilities to hybrid warfare tactics and furthering Kremlin aims. This could lead to increased discord within the Alliance, more meddling, and more complicated defense mechanisms. Russia could become a wedge issue even among populists. Some may view Russia as an ally; others as an adversary. In a June FT interview, Russian President Vladimir Putin openly championed nationalist populist movements across Europe and North America and claimed that "the liberal idea" has become obsolete.⁴¹

Consideration 3: The European Union Relationship. The European Union (EU) is an important strategic partner for NATO. Although the EU is not a party to the NATO treaty, it shares many of the same challenges and interests. Thus, the direction of the EU and NATO's relationship with it are important considerations for NATO's cohesion. The rise of populism increases the likelihood of EU disintegration and disunity, and may impact the way the EU develops its security role. While NATO's sovereignty orientation makes it more protected against centrifugal forces of populism than the EU, the direction of the EU is still a critical consideration.

⁴⁰ Cordesman, A. H. (2019, June 13). The U.S., NATO, and the Defense of Europe: Underlying Trends. Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-nato-and-defense-europe-underlying-trends>

⁴¹ Barker, Alex. (2019, June 28) Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has 'Become Obsolete' <http://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573ee5cbb98ed36>

RECOMMENDATIONS & OPPORTUNITIES

The rise of populism poses considerable challenges to Alliance cohesion. NATO should consider ways to adapt to this environment as it develops its next Strategic Concept, both to mitigate risks and to prompt actions that help strengthen the Alliance. This may require a mindset shift. Instead of viewing it as ipso facto negative, NATO might instead ask: *What can be created from this situation? Could populist energy be harnessed to strengthen Alliance cohesion? What would that look like?* The following section offers some ideas and recommendations.

Engage, Don't Alienate

The first recommendation is to engage rather than alienating populist supporters. Media coverage and foreign policy discussions often carry a tone of disdain and dismissal about populist movements and leaders. Populism is referred to as a threat posed by backwards, uneducated people. *Populism is bad. Populism must be fought and contained.* This type of tone only reinforces the populist perception of corrupt, out-of-touch elites. It may have a secondary effect of making populists more open to hostile interests.

Attack Grievances Not Populism. For starters, NATO should maintain its neutral orientation to member politics. It should recognize that populism is a feature, not a bug, of politics within the Alliance for the time being. So first, NATO could approach the topic of populism sensitively and with proper perspective. Instead of fighting populism, NATO should focus on addressing the problems that gave rise to it. Instead of containing populism, focus on containing its potential threats to the security environment. Instead of dismissing populist grievances as irrelevant or uneducated, take them seriously.

Actively Engage Populist Parties & Influencers. Second, NATO should actively engage populist parties and influencers. Involve them in helping strengthen the Alliance and advancing security. Listen to the needs. Identify emerging leaders. Include their voices in the shaping of the next Strategic Concept. The FFAO team, for example, could engage populist parties and influencers on a project looking at a particular issue like cyber-defense or readiness for another migrant crisis. This type of collaboration would engender buy-in, create a channel for mutual learning, and help everyone involved better understand the complexities, constraints, and possibilities of security matters.⁴²

Expand NATO's Social Media Outreach. A third recommendation is to expand NATO's outreach to citizens and influencers on social media. For example, NATO could turn its "NATO engages" annual event into an ongoing communications brand that engages constituencies through social media as well as in person events. One notices, for example, that the latest "NATO Engages" conference was live-streamed and is stored on the Atlantic Council's YouTube channel instead of a dedicated NATO channel. Why not create a "NATO Engages" channel for this sort of video? Social media engagement may especially

⁴² For example, see: Loucaides, D. (2019, May 21). Building the Brexit party: How Nigel Farage copied Italy's digital populists. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/21/brexit-party-nigel-farage-italy-digital-populists-five-star-movement>

resonate with populists who value the participatory nature of social media and opportunity to have their voices heard. Some may wonder how far NATO should go in engaging member citizens directly in this manner. This is a valid consideration and appropriate boundaries would need to be considered, though NATO's current approach seems overly conservative.

Strengthen Focus on Sovereignty & Migration

Focusing on sovereignty and migration issues is perhaps the most significant way NATO can engender the support of populists while advancing its mission. Mass migration is arguably the leading issue propelling populism across NATO members, and one where a corrupt elite is viewed as being overly permissive against the will of the people. Although migration numbers in Europe are no longer at crisis levels and migration politics are complicated, the challenges of sovereignty and migration are likely to increase given ease of travel and global demographic trends. NATO should prepare.

Recommit to Protecting Common Heritage & Civilization. As part of this, NATO could revive its commitment to the second sentence of the original treaty that states: "[The Parties to this Treaty] are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples."⁴³ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and other NATO leaders frequently invoke NATO values like democracy and rule of law, but they rarely mention safeguarding common heritage and civilization. For example, it is not mentioned anywhere on the "purpose" page of NATO's website despite being an animating objective of the treaty.⁴⁴ NATO could restore this language and renew the Alliance's commitment to it. This would signal to populists that NATO's mission does not run counter to their anxieties about sovereignty and identity. It is an important metapolitical shift.

Recognize Mass Migration as a Meta-Security Threat. Another important shift is for NATO to definitively recognize illegal mass migration as meta-security issue tied to terrorism, public health, arms trafficking, civil unrest, and other security issues. Illegal Mass migration should be seen as a weapons system that — wittingly or unwittingly — is destabilizing western democracies from within and without.

The 2010 Strategic Concept mentions the "illegal trafficking of people" as one of the threats to the Alliance's security. This doesn't go far enough and could be taken further in the next Strategic Concept.

Improve Migrant Readiness & Humanitarian Capabilities. NATO could improve its migration-related capabilities, particularly for crisis events. NATO could conduct training exercises involving mass migration events. It could develop expertise in addressing humanitarian issues at the point of their origin. It could facilitate knowledge sharing among member nations. For example, President Donald Trump's recent use of economic diplomacy to address migrant issues with Mexico may be applicable to other NATO members.

⁴³ The North Atlantic Treaty. (1949, April). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm

⁴⁴ NATO's purpose. (n.d.). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_68144.htm

Adapt NATO Articles for Migration Issues. NATO may consider how its treaty articles could apply to migration issues. For example, NATO could use Article 3 to require border sovereignty and immigration enforcement, since these efforts promote stability and rule of law. NATO could create a framework for invoking Article 4 during migrant crisis events. This makes sense because Article 4 requires members to consult whenever their territorial integrity, political independence or security is threatened. Finally, NATO could encourage deeper thinking about what constitutes an armed attack in the 21st century, particularly when it comes to acts of unconventional warfare. Are there circumstances where “weaponized migration” could constitute an armed attack? This topic may be worth exploring.

Launch Communications Campaign Tying NATO to Sovereignty. Another way NATO can engender populist support and differentiate it from other international organizations is simply by communicating that NATO promotes sovereignty. At NATO’s 70th anniversary, Secretary General Stoltenberg said: “Let us remember that Alliances do not stand in the way of strong and independent nations. NATO exists precisely to ensure the freedom and prosperity in which sovereign countries and peoples can thrive.”⁴⁵ This message is an excellent starting point for a populist-friendly communications campaign.

Encourage Fresh Thinking

A third high-level recommendation is to promote fresh thinking and vigorous debate about NATO’s values, vision, and role over the coming decades. The rise of populism may or may not pose an existential threat to NATO, but it is at the very least cause for another cycle of reinvention — as NATO has repeatedly undergone during its past. Today there is a sense that liberal democracy itself is in crisis. NATO needs fresh perspectives to continue to adapt and to remain relevant.

Disrupt Thyself. Like any large organization in a changing strategic environment, NATO needs to disrupt itself from within before outside forces do. To be clear, NATO does not need to move away from its founding mission and values. But it does need to restore, adapt, and re-conceptualize them for a new era. Embracing a “disrupt thyself” mindset may be helpful as NATO develops its next Strategic Concept. A useful exercise for the FFAO would be to apply theories of disruptive innovation to NATO, viewing populism (combined with active measures) as disruptive innovations in the political realm where NATO is the incumbent.

Invest in Political Thinking. Another recommendation is to invest in political thinking and new reconciliations of NATO’s core values. The Belfer Report on “An Alliance in Crisis” is correct to highlight upholding democratic values as a key challenge for the Alliance.⁴⁶ But what does this mean in today’s context? To populists, the imposition of elite cosmopolitan values has been anything but democratic,

⁴⁵ NATO Alliance Marking 70 Years, Looks to Counter Threats. (n.d.). <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1788045/nato-alliancemarking-70-years-looks-to-counter-threats/>

⁴⁶ Burns, N., & Lute, D. (2019, February). NATO at Seventy: An Alliance in Crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/nato-seventy-alliance-crisis>

and there's a sense that the language of democratic values has been subverted. If anything, populists want to discard liberalism rather than democracy, and populists are exposing growing tensions between liberalism and democracy. By encouraging debate about what it means to promote democracy and free institutions, NATO can help navigate these difficult waters while gaining buy-in from populists. This will give NATO greater moral authority when criticizing members for genuine violations of democratic principles.

Rethink Securitization. One of the challenges of the present security environment is how to determine what counts as a security issue in the first place. With threats coming from multiple directions, NATO faces a much more fluid and ambiguous security environment than it did during the Cold War. What is NATO securing? How should NATO manage the way it securitizes and de-securitizes issues without over- or under-scoping its focus? These issues are more pressing given the internal and nonlinear threats posed by the effects of populism, which pose a conceptual challenge to traditional security thinking.⁴⁷ NATO's anticipation of "instability situations" is one step in this direction. A more flexible and adaptive approach to securitization and de-securitization may facilitate consensus-building while better preparing NATO for crisis events and new threats.

Increase Representation of "Somewheres" within NATO. It is striking is how much of today's foreign policy leadership is dominated by "anywheres" — cosmopolitan elites. The bias towards cosmopolitan elite values is omnipresent among the political class, and yet the establishment does not seem to see it. Given the trajectory of politics, it would be wise for NATO to cultivate emerging leaders and thinkers from among the populists as well as greens. This may have the effect of disrupting adversarial political warfare. More importantly, it would create social ties and bridges that will help strengthen Alliance cohesion over time, while bringing fresh thinking and new leadership.

Encourage Audacious Thinking. As an outsider, one is struck by the lack of imagination and absence of inspiring vision for NATO's role in the world. What is "the long telegram" of today's geopolitics?⁴⁸ NATO had a clear purpose during the Cold War that it seems to lack today. And populist personalities are more likely to ask blunt question and challenge basic assumptions. Rather than recoiling, NATO should invest in out-of-box thinking and debate about its values and role and the broader strategic environment. Fresh thinking does not have to mean going big. It may mean NATO needs to retrench, strip itself down, and reexamine its most basic assumptions. *Under what circumstances could too much Alliance cohesion be harmful?* These sorts of explorations should be encouraged, perhaps as part of NATO's scenario-based discussions or other research efforts.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ NATO may find it useful to look to the Copenhagen School for answers.

⁴⁸ Kennan, G. (1946, February). The Long Telegram. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-long-telegram/>

⁴⁹ Borrowing from new modes of thought like design thinking may also be useful. Getting 29 countries to work together effectively is, after all, a design challenge.

CONCLUSION

In many respects, the global order is still remaking itself for a post-Cold War world. The consensus neoliberal policies and institutions that propelled western democracies through the 20th century are under stress. Western politics is having a crisis of identity in which structural changes and crisis events are revealing the contradictions and limitations of cosmopolitan liberalism. Cultural backlash has given rise to populism, which in turn presents new challenges and opportunities in the strategic environment.

Looking to its next Strategic Concept, NATO should consider how to adapt to this new environment with an eye towards Alliance cohesion. On one level, this is a familiar organizational development challenge for any institution: to adjust to new market realities and realign around a common vision, values, strategy, and operating model. On another level, it is very different because of the dynamic, participatory nature of the Alliance and because many of these new “market realities” come from within NATO member nations.

There is a leadership challenge in this. Populism is, after all, a response to the perception of a corrupt and disconnected elite. Is this not the case today? Ultimately, the most powerful way to adapt to the age of populism is for the elite of western democracies to recommit to the needs of fellow citizens, to take their grievances seriously, and to abandon the myth that the Cold War represented an end to history. For NATO, this means becoming more responsive to member citizens and renewing the Alliance value proposition. It means taking migration, sovereignty, and identity issues seriously. It means being reminded that the animating objective of the NATO treaty is to preserve common heritage and civilization in the face of hostile actors and ideologies. It means renewing NATO’s purpose and adapting its founding mission and values to this era. It means answering, for the people, why NATO deserves continued support.

APPENDIX

Alliance Cohesion Five Forces	Possible Effects of Populism	Recommendations to Mitigate
External Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divergent threat perceptions • Russian hybrid warfare • Divergent Alliances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elevate migrant threat • Mandate border sovereignty • Inoculate against Putinization • Engage populist perceptions of security risks • Create Article 4 framework
Political & Economic Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis of political leadership • Undermining international institutions • Unequal burden-sharing • Loss of American leadership • Authoritarian impulse • Strong personalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage new leaders • Show how NATO helps sovereignty • Enforce 2024 target • Engage President Donald Trump’s movement
Organizational Structures & Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to adapt to needs • Less responsiveness and enthusiasm • Conflict with EU • Harder collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic comms campaign • Differentiate from EU • Use technology to engage & involve public • Build agility into Alliance • Divide security responsibilities by country
Technology Advances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diminished tech sharing • New disruptive tech • Weaponized communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconsider definition of “armed attack” • Stay on technological edge • Improve cyber & hybrid defenses • Engage on migrant tech
Core Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democratic backsliding • Misalignment on values • Misalignment on purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommit to democratic sovereignty • Retrench from cosmopolitan elitism • Encourage discussion and debate • Encourage bold vision, new reconciliations

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