

# NATO DURABILITY IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

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**THE GLOBAL POLICY HORIZONS  
LAB**





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the collapse of Soviet Union and the subsequent end of Cold War era superpower confrontation, the continued relevance and survivability of NATO has been put into question. While many predicted that alliance would cease to exist, it has not only weathered the storm of changing geopolitical landscapes but has also emerged stronger. Given that, this study will offer a comprehensive analysis in answering an important question

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## Introduction

For over forty years after its inception, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had directed most of its attention on countering the threat posed by the Soviet Union. However, since the end of the Cold War, the ongoing relevance and survival of the organization has become a subject of considerable inquiry. Even before the collapse of Soviet Union, and especially in the aftermath, many predicted that the Atlantic alliance would cease to exist. The demise of a common enemy for its members has led to a profound challenge to the organization's *raison d'être*, the foundation of its legitimacy, and the cohesive platform that binds the allied states together, even as it continues to formally exist on paper (Mearsheimer, 1990). Contrary to this expectation, the absence of Cold War era superpower confrontation did not mark an end to the alliance.

Instead, NATO remains intact and transforms from a primarily regional organization into its present form, extending its operations beyond its transatlantic boundaries (Croft et al., 2004). It continues to be widely regarded by many as the central security organization in the Western Hemisphere.

The central question then arises: what explains NATO's resilience in the post-Cold War era, considering the complexities and challenges it has confronted? NATO's longevity as a defense alliance has traditionally been attributed to 'what NATO does' with particular emphasis on its remarkable capacity to adapt to evolving security environments. While there is undeniable merit in NATO's adaptability, concerns have emerged regarding its growing vulnerability in areas that have traditionally underpinned its strength: the preservation of its identity rooted in shared liberal democratic values ('what NATO is'). The following sections explore how and why the alliance has endured in the decades following the end of Cold War.

## NATO and Roots of Democracy

States typically form alliances by joining together to pursue mutual benefits and achieve common interests, often centered around eliminating threats to their unity. Traditional alliances are, thus, said to be built around transactional relationship grounded in shared interests and tend to dissolve once these interests have been achieved or diminished (Byrne, 2013). Arguably, NATO has endured through the post-Cold War era because it represents more than just a military or defense alliance, and also embodies constructive security cooperation built on shared liberal democratic values, norms or identity among its member states.

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NATO's durability in the



focuses on specific issues pertinent to liberal democracy and examines how these factors have enabled the alliance to sustain and strengthen its relevance and, consequently, its survivability. Since the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO functioned more as what Paul Nitze called



liberal-democratic norms and values – the defining principles of the Western community – to join the alliance. Notably, NATO's founding states included authoritarian states such as Portugal, Greece, and Turkey, which are ruled by authoritarian regimes after institutionally established democracies have been overthrown (Barany, 2004). Most surprisingly, Spain, a state whose political regime posed an active threat to liberal democratic values, was also a member to the alliance (Gheciu, 2005). The accession of these states into NATO, despite their lack of democratic credentials, was largely based on the shared recognition among the allies of the geostrategic importance of these nations in the face of the growing military confrontation with the Soviet Union. It is this prevailing sense of including these strategically vital but normatively non-conforming states as an acceptable compromise made in the shared interests of safeguarding the democratic community, that NATO largely tolerated the accession of these non-democratic states and acknowledge their crucial role in bolstering the anti-Communist and anti-Soviet defenses. In essence, throughout the Cold War, NATO functioned as a military alliance built on a political foundation. It brought together a community of states that, for the most part, are committed to upholding the liberal democratic principles, and are at the same time, willing to defend against potential military confrontations with the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies.

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the alliance a powerful *raison d'être*. Thus, the enduring success of NATO stems from the careful balance struck between its military and political pillars, all underpinned by a commitment to democratic values and human rights. Although these principles have certainly always been controversial, they remain indispensable in ensuring internal cohesion within NATO and in cementing its durability and relevance in an ever-evolving security landscape.

## Counterarguments: Democratic Decline Within NATO

A closer analysis underscores the growing complexity of the question of allied unity in the post-Cold War era. In particular, NATO is now confronted with substantial challenges, with issues extending beyond conventional external security threats or adversaries. The alliance now also grapples with intricate internal dynamics, notably the emergence of radical conservative ideologies and political forces within several member states and similarly alarming “absence of strong, principled American presidential leadership for the first time in history” (Burns and Lute, 2019). These internal challenges, marked by ideological shifts and a shift in leadership norms, pose unprecedented hurdles to NATO's cohesion and effectiveness. Although NATO has been durable due to its ongoing politico-military identity, the crisis of democracy within NATO's member states and the crisis of American leadership together undermines NATO's durability built on such identity.

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One of the most significant challenges to NATO's durability arises from the current ascent of authoritarian governments that directly contradicts the core liberal democratic principles that define the alliance. This challenge is primarily the consequence of self-pro







Western identity founded on liberal democracy. This dichotomy influences their perception of NATO membership, their roles within the alliance, and thus stands in the way of NATO continued relevance and durability.

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A greater threat to NATO's enduring strength and its identity as a liberal-democratic security community arises from the diminishing U.S. leadership. The rise of illiberal nationalist politics is







significantly contributed to the promotion of stable democracy in the region, making the alliance a driving force behind democratic reforms and conflict resolution in Eastern Europe.

In the post-Cold War era, NATO has continued its historical role of enhancing security in Europe, akin to its role during the Cold War, by incorporating new member countries and adapting its capabilities for contemporary challenges. Democratization and NATO enlargement have brought fundamental strategic advantages, fostering stability and cooperation in the region. However, a significant obstacle remains: the resurgent Russia. Despite NATO's long insistence that its expansion is not aimed at Russia, the alliance's relations with Moscow have soured, particularly due to considerations for the membership of former Soviet republics like Georgia and Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014). This has caused internal discord within NATO and intensified Russian resentment towards the alliance and the broader Western world. In any event, a sense of "enlargement fatigue" has gripped many Europeans, exacerbated by conced



Opponents of a global NATO raise valid concerns, suggesting that broadening the alliance's scope could dilute its foundation as a vehicle primarily serving North American and European interests. They argue that expanding the alliance globally might complicate decision-making processes, diminish contributions from European members with limited long-range operational capabilities, and increase reliance on U.S. resources (Simon, 2008). These concerns, however, overlook historical instances, such as the admission of Greece and Turkey shortly after NATO's founding, where the alliance's democratic character was already adapted and expanded. For NATO to remain a genuinely useful institution, it must engage in regions where security challenges arise and where its unique resources and capabilities can make a significant impact. However, risks persist. First, developing democracies like Australia, Brazil, Japan, and India may not always align with the policies of the U.S. and its NATO allies. The prospect of these democracies becoming part of a global NATO could lead to complexities. Second, diverse challenges might arise, necessitating cooperation even with authoritarian regimes, reminiscent of the Cold War era, to effectively address certain global issues. Striking a balance between expansion, adaptability, and maintaining democratic values will be crucial for NATO's future global engagement.

In line with the arguments advanced in this study, there are several clear implications for NATO's policy considerations. First, despite its enduring durability rooted in liberal democratic identity and shared values among member states, NATO's long-term survival is not guaranteed indefinitely. Its continued relevance depends not just on addressing the immediate security



essential for policymakers. By leveraging these strengths and addressing weaknesses, NATO can navigate the complex international security landscape and remain strong and relevant in the face of multiple crises.

In conclusion, NATO's endurance is rooted in its identity as a community of shared values, and the current crisis facing the alliance is more about who it is than what it does. However, the alliance's approach to promoting these values has become a potential liability, exacerbated by the challenges posed by the twin crises of 'democracy' and 'leadership.' Despite recent achievements, NATO finds itself in a new and challenging position. To ensure its continued durability in the coming decades, addressing its core values is imperative. While reconsidering these values might introduce uncertainty and instability, ignoring their role jeopardizes NATO's long-term resilience. Now more than ever, values are crucial for mitigating NATO's vulnerabilities both internally and externally.







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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zin Mar Khing is a recent graduate, holding both undergraduate and graduate degree in international relations at Webster University. She has presented her research Covert Operations: Means or Ends at the annual Peace and Conflict Resolution Conference, while pursuing her undergraduate degree. Her academic interests and research focus on conflict management, ethnic conflict, international organizations, democracy, and human rights issues.



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The current Director of the Lab is Professor Dani Belo, PhD.