Democratic Resilience and Cooperation at the Core of NATO's Future
Kristine Berzina
Senior Fellow, Alliance for Securing Democracy

NATO is at a critical moment of re-invention. The alliance survived the tumultuous years of the Trump presidency – in practice, U.S. commitments to collective defense remained strong, and defense spending across the alliance has been growing every year since 2015.[1] The next question is how the alliance can not only survive but thrive. NATO will need evolve to adapt to an ever-increasing array of threats, from disruptive technologies to renewed great power competition with China and Russia. And because adversaries target not only NATO's borders but strike society within NATO countries, the alliance will need to give more attention to defending against threats at home. Improving NATO's resilience needs to go beyond shoring up critical infrastructure and cyber capacity to bolstering the democratic principles and systems that underpin the alliance.

The North Atlantic Treaty that set up NATO in 1949 explicitly recognizes the NATO allies' determination to "safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law."[2] My colleagues and I at the Alliance for Securing Democracy called on NATO to uphold these values within the Alliance and with partner countries in a policy blueprint for countering authoritarian interference in Europe.[3]

Establishing a Center for Democratic Resilience at NATO would be one way to achieve the goal of safeguarding democracy and upholding the values on which the alliance was founded. The exact structure of a NATO body focusing on democratic resilience can vary, yet the need to address both external and internal threats to democracy is paramount.

*Democracy: Not outside the scope of NATO*

Democracy does not go beyond the scope of NATO. The alliance's founding treaty foresees NATO not only as a body for collective defense but also for political consultation. And this provision would allow NATO members to draw on each other for support and guidance on countering threats to their democratic processes and institutions.

NATO exists to help its members protect themselves and assist each other in countering existential threats – those against territorial integrity as well as political independence. Article Five's collective defense provisions against armed attack are well known. But Article Four of the Washington Treaty calls on members to "consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened."

Russia and other authoritarian states seek to undermine democratic and electoral processes in NATO countries through cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, among other tactics. These asymmetric efforts can erode the political independence of NATO states, undermine their sovereignty, and if successful, alter the direction of NATO policy. This is at the heart of the question of political independence for individual allies and NATO as a whole.

---

[1] [210316-pr-2020-30-en.pdf (nato.int)](#), p. 2.
[2] [NATO - Official text: The North Atlantic Treaty, 04-Apr.-1949](#)
[3] [European Policy Blueprint for Countering Authoritarian Interference in Democracies | The German Marshall Fund of the United States (gmfus.org)](#), p. 28.

The need to counter threats to democracy is growing. The Alliance for Securing Democracy's Authoritarian Interference Tracker logs 600 instances in which Russia or China have sought to undermine democracy across forty NATO and non-NATO democracies in North America and Europe.[4] Russia began using many of these tools, from economic coercion to information manipulation, in the Soviet era. But in recent years, other autocratic states including China are learning from Russia's example. In the Covid-19 pandemic, China has increasingly piggybacked off Russia's information network and imitating its tactics.[5]

Being vocal about the values of democracy, liberty, and the rule of law matters in and of itself. If these values were put forward more prominently at the alliance, as a Center for Democratic Resilience could do, NATO members would feel more accountable on the question of values and democratic health to their fellow allies. Expectations on good governance should be made clear in routine NATO operations. Moreover, focusing on these values may allow NATO countries to build confidence and support for democratic systems at home.

*Not only external threats*

The external dimension of threats against democracy may be fairly straight-forward to address at NATO. Allies could come together, ideally in a regular manner such as that which would be provided by a Center for Democratic Resilience, to assess and provide solutions for minimizing threats. But if NATO is to counter the threats posed by Russia, and increasingly, China, it will have to address vulnerabilities within European societies – how countries choose partners for technological innovation, trade, and infrastructure projects as well. These are the vulnerabilities that allow economic coercion, cyber-attacks, and information manipulation to take hold.

A difficulty for NATO will be to address internal issues in member states. But NATO will need to find a way to address domestic threats to democracy. Extremist groups within NATO societies are now taking up the tactics started by Moscow, from information manipulation to cyber-attacks. Political leaders in NATO members have taken steps to restrict democratic freedoms in their countries. A NATO node for democratic resilience could work in cooperation with civil society and other international organizations to address these more sensitive domestic issues.

*Why democratic resilience, and how can NATO help itself?*

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly's suggestion for a Center for Democratic Resilience at NATO would be meaningful as a central coordinating node at NATO that shares information and best practices both within alliance structures and with member countries to counter external and internal threats to democratic institutions and processes such as elections.

International IDEA's definition of democratic resilience can provide a useful reference to NATO as it considers an in-house democracy unit. According to International IDEA, "resilience is the property of a social system to cope, survive and recover from challenges and crises. The characteristics of a resilient social system include flexibility, recovery, adaptation and innovation."[6] At NATO, a Center for Democratic Resilience could provide 1) intelligence and resources (both informational and financial) to

[4] Authoritarian Interference Tracker – Alliance For Securing Democracy (gmfus.org)
[5] The Kremlin's disinformation playbook goes to Beijing (brookings.edu)
[6] www.idea.int

allow NATO and the allies to detect, recover from, and adapt systems to respond to threats against democratic processes, and 2) to provide a platform for NATO member states to consult with each other and collectively innovate solutions and create inclusive, cooperative formats and initiatives to engage society and help counter democratic decline. For example, a NATO-wide conference on democracy, resilience and security could provide fresh insights into the interactions between these areas.

The question of democracy, while central to NATO's founding documents, is not currently given sufficient institutional attention within NATO structures. What is missing is a body that would pull together big-picture, cross-cutting analysis on threats to democracy. Many tactics used by adversaries receive considerable attention – notably, the Emerging Security Challenges Division's work on issues from cyber to energy security, and the Public Diplomacy Division's work to countering vulnerabilities in the information space. Political Affairs and the Policy Planning Unit have more holistic oversight of the problem but presently, insufficient dedicated capacity to address it in depth.

Not having a horizontal view of all threats to democracy is a strategic weakness that NATO could remedy with a unit focusing on threats to democracy. Democratic societies view the public and private sectors, military and civil assets and capabilities, and individual sectors critical to the functioning of democracy (the media, communications infrastructure, energy, transportation) as inherently separate. But adversaries in autocratic countries do not operate with these divisions in mind and can use our stove-piped structures to their advantage.

For example, a holistic assessment of threats across several sectors is necessary to assess and protect against threats to elections. A malign adversary's efforts to interfere in a NATO member's elections could consist of several smaller operations across different sectors. Cyber-attacks could try to penetrate election databases and voting infrastructure. Disinformation campaigns could seek to reduce voter turn-out. Financial operations could bribe and influence political candidates or provide support to campaigns. Many of these operations, especially if there are numerous small-scale activities, may be missed by authorities, and individually, none may set off alarm bells over the political independence of a country being at risk. But if there is a dedicated body that tracks these threats across sectors, the scale and gravity of election interference efforts would be easier to determine.

*The need for cooperation*

NATO is an essential body to bring its members together for political consultations and give weight to security concerns. Formal NATO attention to threats against democratic values and processes would signal that the alliance does not see transgressions against the allies' democratic systems and institutions as secondary or permissible.

A Center for Democratic Resilience would give NATO allies opportunities to share their own best practices in tracking threats to democracy from internal and external actors. Some smaller allies in the Baltic States and in the Balkans have extensive experience tracking efforts to subvert their democracies. These lessons need to be learned anew in more established democracies that have long taken the security of their systems for granted. As the January 6th attacks on the U.S. Congress showed, even the United States could learn from allies in connecting the dots for election and post-election security.

But NATO and its members alone will not be able to provide all necessary answers for addressing threats to democracy. NATO will need to cooperate closely with key international partners – including the EU

and NATO partners in the Indo-Pacific – as well as with civil society to develop resilient solutions to democratic threats.

The NATO and EU have a solid record of cooperation in many areas that touch on hybrid threats, including cyber. A Center for Democratic Resilience at NATO should work closely with EU counterparts at the European External Action Service and in the European Commission on tracking threats and collecting best practices. The EU can often provide guidance and, in some cases, funding for activities that improve democracy, which NATO could draw on for inspiration or complementarity.

Democracy does not pertain to government leaders and the bureaucracy alone. A NATO Center for Democratic Resilience should work closely with, and provide support to, civil society and academia's efforts to track and develop best practices to guard against interference in democracies and to prevent democratic decline. This is especially important when addressing backsliding and threats in very politically sensitive areas.

Notably, democratic resilience should be a great area for cooperation with NATO's democratic partners in the Indo-Pacific and worldwide. When NATO looks to understand and counter China's threats to democratic processes and institutions, it should look to Australia's experience, for example, in framing and countering the threat China poses even to those with whom it has close economic ties.

*Democracy and the future of NATO*

As NATO draws up a new strategic concept, it should put democracy, values, and resilience at the center. Democracy, freedom, and the rule of law are embedded in NATO's origins. As NATO's adversaries continue to target not only NATO militaries but the principles and processes on which their societies are based, NATO will need to reenergize its commitment to its values. Furthering democratic resilience needs to be a part of NATO's future.