



## **NATO's reflection process (NATO 2030): will it address the twin elephants in the room (American exceptionalism and militarism)?**

By Dr. Ian Davis

*We must see now that the evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism are all tied together. And you can't get rid of one without getting rid of the other.*

*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

On the 8 June, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [launched](#) his outline for [NATO 2030](#) in an online conversation with two US think-tanks, the Atlantic Council and the German Marshall Fund of the United States. "This is an opportunity to reflect on where we see our alliance ten years from now, and how it will continue to keep us safe in a more uncertain world" the Secretary General said.

'NATO 2030' is the label given by the Secretary General to the task he was given at the December 2019 [NATO Leaders](#) meeting in London to lead a forward-looking reflection process to strengthen NATO's political dimension. A [group of ten experts](#) have been appointed to assist him in this process over the coming months, which is also expected to see NATO engage with "allies, public and private sector experts, and young leaders to provide fresh thinking on how to make sure NATO remains ready today to face tomorrow's challenges".

### **The NATO 2030 launch event**

Stoltenberg [outlined](#) his vision of NATO 2030 standing up for "a world built on freedom and democracy, not bullying and coercion". To do this he said, "we must stay strong militarily, be more united politically and take a broader approach globally" in order to continue to "protect our democracies" in a "more competitive world". It would also involve working more closely with "like-minded" partners such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea to "defend the global rules and institutions that have kept us safe for decades". There was no mention, of course, that the very institutions and treaties that have helped defend the global rules have been under attack from President Trump. He has pulled the United States out of the Paris climate agreement, the INF Treaty and the Iran nuclear deal, [unsigned the Arms Trade Treaty](#), [abandoned the landmine ban](#), threatened to undertake the first [nuclear weapon tests](#) in America since 1992, contemplated cutting funding to the World Health Organization and then [announced](#) withdrawal from it, set in motion [withdrawal](#) from the Open Skies Treaty, and imposed [sanctions against International Criminal Court](#) (ICC) officials in response to ongoing ICC investigations into alleged US war crimes in Afghanistan.

NATO Secretary Generals traditionally avoid criticising individual member states. Asked for example about [US plans to withdraw US troops from Germany](#), he refused to comment directly on "leaks or media speculation" and instead defended the US military commitment to Europe, saying: "In the last few years we have actually seen an increase in the US presence in Europe again". There were also only some very oblique references to the [Black Lives Matter](#) protests and civil unrest ongoing in the United States. In response to a question on the role of young people in NATO, the Secretary General said that NATO acted as a guarantor of peace, and without peace we would fail to tackle issues like climate change or "now the fight against racism". While this seems like a reasonable argument, he could have called for more commitment to the global efforts to combat climate change and challenge institutional racism.

Moreover, many professionals engaged in international development and peacebuilding will raise eyebrows with NATO's claim to be the guarantor of peace. Indeed, it is striking and perhaps not coincidental that NATO has chosen 2030 for its forecasting, a date resonant with meaning because of the [UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). While the fundamental purpose of NATO today remains essentially contested, it would take an enormous stretch of the imagination to see it ever taking the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable, resilient and truly peaceful path.

In answer to another question, the Secretary General said that the best way to counter disinformation and propaganda was for "the truth to prevail" via "a free and independent press". While these

sentiments were primarily directed against the alleged hacking and propaganda activities of China and Russia, they would also resonate in the United States where President Trump's [casting](#) of the media as the "enemy of the people" has contributed to journalists being [targeted](#) by police during the recent anti-racist demonstrations in US cities.

As usual, the Secretary General denounced Russia, which he correctly said was "heavily modernising its nuclear arsenal", while ignoring the fact that the US has been doing the same [spending \\$35.4 billion](#) on nuclear weapons in 2019 alone, almost as much as the eight other nuclear weapon states combined. However, he also made some pointed observations that could be construed as a criticism of US unilateralism under President Trump: "The challenges that we face over the next decade are greater than any of us can tackle alone. Neither Europe alone. Nor America alone. So we must resist the temptation of national solutions", he said.

What then, to make of this launch event? Overall, it restated many of the known guiding principles of current NATO thinking while remaining vague on the details of potential future ideas. As yet, there are few signs of the "fresh thinking" that has been promised. One thing is clear, however. These opening remarks by the NATO Secretary General, the make-up of the Reflection Group and the choice of location for the launch (two traditional US think-tanks), suggest that this reflection process will not be challenging the position of the United States as the key determinant of strategic processes within the alliance. This is likely to have a number of critical impacts upon this exercise. For while the United States has often in the past been seen as the beacon of freedom and constitutional democracy, it also

displays tendencies of exceptionalism and militarism.

### **American exceptionalism and militarism**

American exceptionalism is a controversial ideology containing a complicated and often contradictory set of assumptions. According to the historian Ian Tyrell it is a [belief](#) that the United States follows a path of history different from the laws or norms that govern other countries:

*The US is not just a bigger and more powerful country — but an exception. It is the bearer of freedom and liberty, and morally superior to something called "Europe." Never mind the differences within Europe, or the fact that "the world" is bigger than the US and Europe. The "Europe" versus "America" dichotomy is the crucible in which American exceptionalist thinking formed.*

Europe is seen as old, tired and born of imperialism. Modern Europe is seen as hamstrung by regulation and tradition, such that entrepreneurial activity is held back and unduly squeezed. The United States has a contrasting self-image as go-getting, forward-looking and free-spirited, values that can transform the rest of the world. But in this mind-set, it is the United States in the active mode that does the transforming of the rest of the world.

Jeremy Konyndyk, who oversaw the US government's Ebola operations in West Africa, suggests that American exceptionalism also helps to [explain](#) many of the United States' failures in combating COVID-19. "The notion that the United States is unique among nations and that the American way is invariably the best—has blinded the country's leaders (and many of its citizens) to potentially lifesaving lessons from other countries", he said.

There have always been two sides to the American exceptionalist coin: one side helped to build a system of international law and organizations that contributed to a freer and more peaceful world, while the other was often a pretext for being above international law, undertaking covert regime change, foreign invasions and assassinations, as well as propping up authoritarian regimes. Exceptionalism was reflected in the drive to protect its ascendancy during the Cold War as seen in its support for various African and Asian leaders. Ronald Reagan further amplified and popularized US exceptionalism. The immediate post-Cold War period was a partial interregnum, when democracy promotion was a major feature of US foreign policy, even while opportunistically acquiring allies and bases close to the Russian border.

However, 9/11 heralded a return to hard-nosed US exceptionalism and militarism—another controversial ideology which seeks to explain a disproportionate emphasis on the military in national and international affairs. Militarism is deeply embedded in the US national psyche and dominates domestic and foreign policy regardless of who is in the White House. It is characterized by assertive military preparedness, excessive military spending—the US spent [\\$732 billion in 2019](#), dwarfing Russia's \$65.1 billion—and the [exaltation of military service](#) as the highest expression of [patriotism and service to country](#). It is reinforced in US culture (films, books, video games etc) and by the [military-industrial complex](#) (MIC) and its '[revolving door](#)' practices, whereby senior officials, military staff and politicians join arms and security companies.

A Boston university historian and former army colonel and Vietnam veteran, Andrew Bacevich, has [written](#) about this

marriage of militarism and exceptionalism, of unprecedented military might wedded to the view of the universality of American values. This mindset, Bacevich warns, invites endless war and the ever-deepening militarization of the United States. Always fixated on warfare and supremacy (or “domination”, to [quote Trump](#)), it has had an inevitably corrosive impact on American values and democracy. Heavily armoured US military vehicles, equipment and personnel that were used to dominate the streets of Baghdad and Kabul are now part of a domestic [militarisation of US policing](#). The result: widespread use of [heavy-handed militarized tactics](#), particularly for policing communities with large shares of African American residents, and heavily armed special weapons and tactics (SWAT) units [deployed even for mundane tasks](#). These trends had eroded public trust in the police even before the unprecedented levels of [police brutality](#) during the current anti-racism protests.

### **A bipartisan consensus?**

Even under Barack Obama, who ran for president on a campaign based on hope for change and for a new beginning, the attitudes and arrangements of US militarism remained untouched and largely sacrosanct, or in some cases were adapted and expanded. These included a [tenfold increase](#) in air strikes in the covert war on terror, including an expansion in the policy of assassination by drone strikes; the introduction of a [nuclear weapons modernization](#) programme that will cost at least \$1.25 trillion over 30 years; and [overseas military action](#) in at least seven countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan) that meant US military forces were at war for all eight years of Obama’s tenure, the first two-term president with that distinction.

American exceptionalism and militarism reflect a political consensus among the majority of Republicans and Democrats, although this consensus falls along several different points of an exceptionalist spectrum. At one end are Democrats, some Atlanticist Republicans (like Colin Powell) and think tanks like GMF and the Atlantic Council that long for a return to the narrative about American global leadership within a strong US-led transatlantic alliance. Hilary Clinton, for example, [joined the exceptionalist bandwagon](#) while campaigning for the presidency in 2016, describing it as the United States’ “unique and unparalleled ability to be a force for peace and progress, a champion for freedom and opportunity. Our power comes with a responsibility to lead, humbly, thoughtfully, and with a fierce commitment to our values”.

While a Joe Biden presidency would undoubtedly be a steadier hand on the US foreign policy tiller than the incumbent, as Kori Schake, director of foreign and defence policy at the conservative American Enterprise Institute [suggests](#), on some issues “Biden seems either to share Trump’s reflexes or accept his basic premises, raising the question of how much a Biden administration would change the substance of American policies”. The recent [opinion piece](#) by two of Biden’s advisors arguing that a German request to remove US nuclear weapons from their country would significantly weaken NATO and Germany, suggests that it might indeed be business as usual.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, lurks President Trump’s hyper arrogant brand of US exceptionalism. His ‘America First’ policy involves a unilateralist and nationalist approach to world leadership, the nihilistic repudiation of US international obligations and a

hostility towards many of America's allies, including those within NATO. Goading and bullying (and where deemed necessary, bombing) other countries are the modus operandi of his predatory form of nationalism.

### **How could NATO's reflection process help?**

So, faced with these two versions of US exceptionalism and militarism, Biden's is clearly the more palatable. But could Canadian and European allies, and NATO itself, be doing more to help to redefine and shape US attitudes? Harvard professor [Joseph Nye](#) asks whether the US can successfully address both aspects of its exceptionalism:

*Can it learn how to promote democratic values and human rights without military intervention and crusades, and at the same time help organize the rules and institutions needed for a new world of transnational threats such as climate change, pandemics, cyberattacks, terrorism, and economic instability? Those are the moral questions Americans should debate ahead of this year's presidential election.*

In a similar vein, the *New York Times* recently [quoted](#) Dominique Moïsi, a political scientist and senior adviser at the Paris-based Institut Montaigne:

*[In its response to the pandemic] America has not done badly, it has done exceptionally badly.... America prepared for the wrong kind of war.... It prepared for a new 9/11, but instead a virus came. It raises the question: Has America become the wrong kind of power with the wrong kind of priorities?*

These are the kind of questions that NATO's Reflection Group should also be considering. As Jake Sullivan, a former

Obama administration official and senior adviser to Joe Biden, [argues](#), "the United States can and should continue to occupy a global leadership role", but a "different role than in the past". He describes a new values-based foreign policy as combining:

*the best kind of patriotism (a shared civic spirit and a clear sense of the national interest) and the best kind of internationalism (a recognition that when your neighbour's house is on fire, you need to grab a bucket). And it should reject the worst kind of nationalism (damn-the-consequences aggression and identity-based hate-mongering) and the worst kind of internationalism (the self-congratulatory insulation of the Davos elite).*

NATO and its member states can help to shape such a constructive transition in a number of ways.

First, NATO needs to accept there is a problem with its most important member state. The charge sheet includes a hollowed out public sector, political polarization, MIC-driven spending priorities, high and growing levels of inequality, structural racism and now civil unrest. (There are also problems related to democratic governance with at least three other member states—Turkey, Hungary and Poland—that fatally undermine the alliance's claim to legitimacy as defender of freedom and democracy, but that is a separate discussion). Recognizing the signs of past denial is crucial in starting down the road to resorting priorities.

Second, Europeans and the Canadians need to have the courage and agency to say 'enough is enough' and to establish their own red lines. For example, demanding that they will defund NATO unless the US administration reinstates the

Open Skies Treaty and making it clear that new intermediate range missiles are not welcome in their countries. It is damaging to the long-term cohesion and credibility of the alliance for European and Canadian allies to be covering for the poor choices being made by a US administration. Neither the risk from Russia, nor the emerging risk from China, justify the risks taken by European/Canadian subservience to US exceptionalism.

Third, strategic competition with China and Russia needs to be re-evaluated and managed differently. The global pandemic and the climate crisis offer opportunities for desperately needed international cooperation in sharing information, exchanging good medical and environmental practice and in developing a vaccine and innovative renewable energy resources made accessible to all.

NATO's direction of travel with regard to China is particularly troubling. Asked at the NATO 2030 launch whether NATO would consider Beijing an adversary, Stoltenberg said the alliance "does not see China as the new enemy" but must be ready to face up to the country's growing might, both in military development and disinformation. "They're coming closer to us in cyberspace, we see them in the Arctic, in Africa, we see them investing in our critical infrastructure. And they're working more and more together with Russia—all of this has a security consequence for NATO allies," Stoltenberg said. However, this malign reading of China's growing international importance is largely being [driven by paranoia in Washington](#) and the US-China trade war. China's military ambitions are relatively modest and regional and, although they are certainly growing with its power, Beijing's primary concerns and influence remains economic.

After 9/11 the United States shifted NATO's focus towards the so-called 'war on terror' that among its many negative ripples and wide-ranging effects included the global spread of Islamic jihadism, a splintered Iraq, a long-running war in Afghanistan and a resurgent Iran. Now Washington wants to move the goalposts again to so-called 'great power competition' with Russia and China. However, there will be no winners from a rekindled Cold War with Russia and a new Cold War with China.

Fourth, the debate on burden-sharing needs to mature. Measuring contribution by the simple metric of defence spending, and thereby the narrative that the Europeans owe a huge debt to the United States, is completely inappropriate to any concept of real security. There is some limited understanding of this in Europe, but an unwillingness to state it clearly. There are significant dangers in Washington investing so much of its political focus, limited capital and expert workforce in armaments, especially nuclear armaments. This spending is unjustifiable at a time of global recession and huge public debt induced by the unprecedented economic shocks of the pandemic.

In practice, this means (a) winding down the US-led war on terror and participation in the wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan; and (b) rebalancing priorities among the various forms of American power—military, diplomacy, mediation and 'soft power' approaches (development, trade, investment and technology). Above all else, this requires deep cuts in US military spending. With NATO collectively accounting for over 50 per cent of [global military spending](#), instead of Europeans paying more, Americans need to be paying less: closing

half of over 800 US military bases in more than 90 countries [would raise](#) about \$90 billion for other priorities.

Similarly, the Arms Control Association in 2019 produced three [nuclear cost-saving and force reduction scenarios](#) with projected 30-year savings ranging from \$29 billion to \$282 billion. The largest savings resulted from transitioning to a 1,000 deployed-warhead dyad (currently 1750 warheads are deployed—i.e., placed on missiles or located on bases with operational forces—out of a total US stockpile of 5800 nuclear warheads, which includes 2000 retired warheads waiting to be dismantled) based on elimination of all ICBMs plus the Long Range Stand Off missile and its warhead, the withdrawal of all B61s from Europe, reduction of the SSBN force to eight boats, and the elimination of post-2016 additions to nuclear modernisation. So, to summarise, the United States would still retain a devastating nuclear capability, while redirecting many billions of dollars to higher priorities and restoring a sense of realism and proportion to US defence and foreign policy.

The NATO reflection process is an opportunity for ensuring that some of the alliance’s core assumptions are re-evaluated. That should inevitably mean seriously debating US exceptionalism and militarism. It remains doubtful, however, that either the reflection process or European and Canadian allies will choose to address these systemic problems with its leading and most powerful member.

### DONATE NOW PLEASE

NATO Watch is a small non-profit organisation that provides **independent oversight and analysis** of an ever-growing NATO. But with tightly stretched resources we struggle to consistently and continually function as an effective ‘watchdog’.

**If you share our vision for a transparent and accountable NATO** please donate whatever you can afford to help NATO Watch thrive. Click on the picture below to find out how you can make a donation.

