

NATO, Authoritarianism, and the West's Culture War

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Estoril Political Forum 2020

The Estoril Political Forum is now the Cheltenham Gold Cup of the conference racing season and should therefore be unmissable even during a plague. So I'm delighted to be able to participate from afar, though I will be honest and admit that on the whole I would be rather be in the Hotel Palacio.

NATO is perhaps the organization which is both most and least relevant to the main topic of concern at this conference: namely, the challenge of authoritarianism to liberal democracy. NATO is most relevant when it is addressing the military challenge to democratic countries in the NATO alliance. That challenge comes from three directions: China, Russia, and jihadism—and although NATO has gone “out of area” since 1989, China offers the least obvious military challenge to NATO or at least a lesser one than either Russia or jihadism.

We are increasingly aware of the Chinese challenge to NATO countries, of course, in the twin forms of technical and commercial subversion. Our post-Cold War view of China was that our welcoming them into a commercial and pacific relationship of trade, investment and cultural contacts would gradually transform them into good neighbors and strategic partners. That hasn't happened. China at home has moved towards not authoritarianism but totalitarianism in its domestic policy—its herding the Uighur Muslims into a new Gulag and its building a communications panopticon to control its own people are classic totalitarian measures. And it has moved towards an aggressive

expansionism in its foreign policy, seeking to grab islands in its immediate neighborhood. Its expansionism doesn't threaten NATO as such because the Spratley Islands are "out of area." But its use of economic contacts around the world subversively does weaken NATO countries. And some NATO member-states have interests and allies outside the NATO area, notably the US, that are also threatened. That's why the UK and US are right to think again about allowing Huawei to play a role in their internal communications.

On the other hand Germany has a commercial-based security policy that will limit any strong anti-Chinese response. Germany's new national ethic of commercial pacifism also complicates NATO's overall response to Russia—the country which offers the most obvious challenge to NATO since the Georgian and Ukrainian wars and occupations. Those events have stimulated a greater willingness in Poland and the Baltic states to take defense seriously and to spend more on it. Trump has helped here too, because he sounds as if he really means it when he threatens to leave if Europe continues to be a free rider. Earlier presidents were ineffectual in making the same pleas. Germany, however, has flirted with Russia over its two gas pipelines that cut Central Europe out of the supply chain and enable the Kremlin to weaponized energy supplies to Ukraine.

A third factor is the distraction of EU Common Security and Defense Policy which is an expression of political Europeanism that weakens NATO essentially for reasons of political culture—again a response to German public opinion. Economically, it either duplicates NATO spending or it diverts scarce military dollars from NATO to the ESDP at a time when military dollars are in short supply. Politically, it is bound to strike Americans as aimed against the US and NATO—the main providers of Europe's security—when Angela Merkel keep talking aloud about Europe being required to provide its own security since the US can no longer be relied. Washington has downplayed its opposition to

ESDP, but there's a continuing temptation to turn the tables on Europe and say—Clint Eastwood style: Go ahead. Provide your own security. Make my day. And that would indeed be a problem for the EU. Though it did establish its own rapid reaction force in 2007, it has yet to see military action, and at present EU member-states are asking not to have to provide their own contributions on schedule. That means existing national providers will have to soldier on (though that doesn't seem to be the right term.)

These are, of course, practical military and political problems to be solved in practical ways. But they are inevitably influenced by the fact that they take place within---and are thus influenced by---the political cultures of NATO and EU countries. In a discussion on authoritarianism and liberal democracy, those cultures are relevant and important.. Let me demonstrate that today by two contrasting speeches. One is by the NATO secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, the other is Donald Trump's speech to the Polish Parliament almost four years ago in Warsaw following his debut at NATO in Brussels. The first is on NATO and climate change; the second is NATO and Western civilization.

NATO's Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, a former Danish Prime Minister, addressed that question of NATO and Climate Change in a virtual speech to the students of ten major universities earlier this year. The full speech is here : <https://bit.ly/2Gn7snZ>

Mr. Stoltenberg begins by mentioning various challenges facing NATO which included cyber warfare, disruptive technologies, the shifting global balance of power, and climate change. Okay, the first three problems are obviously relevant to military power. But he told the students that he would focus on the last one:

“Some may ask if NATO, a military alliance, should be concerned with climate change. My answer is that yes, we should. And for three reasons.

- 1. Because climate change makes the world more dangerous.*
- 2. Because it makes it harder for our military forces to keep our people safe.*
- 3. And because we all have a responsibility to do more to combat climate change.”*

None of these three challenges really adds up to much. The first may not even be true. Many experts on climate policy argue cite statistics to argue that extreme weather situations are not getting worse or more frequent. And if turns out that NATO forces may have to launch more missions to rescue people from floods and other natural disasters, that’s a secondary mission that keeps soldiers busy and has a useful public relations function. We maintain large military forces to preserve our security, not to do social work.

The second reason is we have to protect the ability of NATO forces to fight in difficult climatic conditions. Well, yes. Napoleon and Hitler made an enormous error in sending troops to fight in Russian winters without warm clothing. Obviously, our military planners should always think about such matters—not that they always do as my examples suggest—but climate change alters such calculations hardly at all. And thinking about the conditions of warfare should be second nature.

And the third reason boils down to ensuring that our military and logistical planning should be done in such a way as to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by the usual dates. Insofar as this is a general obligation on everyone, the armed forces will doubtless comply. But thinking about such matters should not be a priority. In comparison with countering the most advanced weaponry being developed by the Russian and Chinese militaries, the subversive methods of asymmetric warfare, and developing defenses against biological warfare intended or accidental, holding down carbon emissions is a third-order consideration.

Truth be told, climate change is not a question of military security at all unless some other power is weaponizing climate change against NATO. That kind of thing happens a lot in James Bond movies—usually through the agency of a mad billionaire—and I imagine that some scientists may be locked away in places like Siberia and Wuhan thinking the unthinkable about the climate. Might there even be some DEFRA-type body looking into how NATO itself might weaponize climate change against our enemies too? I hope so even if only for the purposes of deterrence.

Were that to be so, however, I doubt that Mr. Stoltenberg would be mentioning it to audiences of students. They wouldn't be the right kind of audience for it. But they are exactly the right kind of audience for talks on NATO as an agency for combatting climate change.

In making the case for its own preservation as the primary vehicle for European defense, NATO has to deal with the massive political fact that European political culture—and German political culture even more so—is both Green and anti-American. Anti-Americanism is the driving force behind the persistent campaign for a structure of European defense separate from NATO and independent of the United States. It's to be found on the French Right, the German Left, and in the Brussels Eurocracy. It is even to be glimpsed in Britain's Ministry of Defense which is doing its bureaucratic best to keep the UK inside European defense structures "despite Brexit" and without much parliamentary scrutiny. Or so the generals in Veterans for Britain tell us once they are safely retired—for more details see <https://veteransforbritain.uk/>.

NATO can hardly deal with this directly. It would be too obviously pleading its own (and Washington's) cause. So it is doing the next best thing—seeking to appease and (with luck) convert the rising political forces of Green environmentalism which are replacing the traditional social democratic and socialist parties on the Left of European and German politics. On the success of that campaign may depend whether

the defense of Europe is conducted in German or English—only thirty years after the reunification of Germany.

And so I must admit to having been mistaken. Stoltenberg's speech on NATO and the Environment was a hard-headed political pitch for keeping NATO on as Europe's main engine of defense. It was therefore meant for hard-core NATO enthusiasts like me.

My apologies to NATO, therefore. I was misled by its green camouflage

Now to President Trump's first major speech in Europe in the same week that he apparently alarmed Western Europe by demanding its countries pay more to defend themselves in NATO:

By any conventional standard of rhetorical criticism, President Trump's speech in Poland was a great success. It received a genuinely enthusiastic reception from its audience of Polish political notables. Considered as a vehicle for policy points, it addressed all the questions that a serious audience in and outside of Poland would want answered satisfactorily. It soothed their principal anxiety — would he endorse NATO's Article Five? (He did.). And in the main the speech got the good coverage it deserved.

But there was also a strong hostile reaction to it from some writers on the Left, such as Peter Beinart in *The Atlantic* and Eugene Robinson in the *Washington Post* — hostile but also odd and revealing. It would have been possible, after all, for such critics to respond to the speech by smiling indulgently and pointing out that the president had finally done what they had been urging for months: namely, endorsing Article Five and criticizing Russia. Instead, they went off the deep end in the opposite direction, fuming about the racist, chauvinist, exclusionary, and other vicious implications of the terms “the West” and “Western civilization” and accused Trump of directing NATO and Europe into another “world” of “walls” and Huntingtonian opposites that no longer

exists and that would be undesirable if it did.

Mostly this is nonsense, and in its extreme formulation — that Trump’s speech amounted to an alt-right version of history — it’s nonsense on stilts. Give these critics the credit, however, of seeing that Trump was attempting in some way to shift alliance politics in his direction. What was he doing?

As Peggy Noonan noticed at the time, Trump was explicitly riding on the coat-tails of John Paul II’s great pilgrimage to Communist Poland in 1979, when he told the crowds “Be Not Afraid” and they responded “We want God.” It was this pilgrimage that, via a series of religious sermons that inevitably had political implications in an officially atheist society, revealed to the Polish people that they were united in their faith and patriotism against the small coterie of Communist apparatchiks ruling them. In the rest of a speech soaked in Polish history, Trump celebrated the courage and fortitude that had enabled the Poles to survive a long history of invasion, occupation, persecution, and at times abolition.

Naturally the Poles, who have a deep consciousness of this history, which they fear outsiders know little about, responded enthusiastically to this. It was the kind of speech that would arouse any and all Poles, not merely sympathizers with the present conservative Law and Justice government. Having established that Poland’s Catholic patriotism had preserved the nation through past perils, therefore, Trump went on to outline the present threats to Poland’s future. These were Islamist terrorism and Russian adventurism, not surprisingly, but also two more intriguing threats: the creeping bureaucracy that saps a nation’s energies, and the lack of moral and civilizational self-confidence in the West — a lack of self-confidence that was all the more mysterious because it was unjustified by the actual record of the West’s cultural and moral achievements.

Most Western reporters couldn't quite see what all this weird stuff meant — apart from the minority of insightful leftists who instinctively hated it. But it would have been broadly clear to the Polish audience in Warsaw and the countryside. The bureaucracy has Czarist predecessors but in contemporary terms it's the kind of government that Brussels is gradually imposing on the continent with a plethora of regulations both economic and moral that obstruct growth at least as much as encouraging it. The lack of civilizational self-confidence is illustrated by the various ways in which Brussels, Merkel's Germany, and most other Western European governments had responded either ineffectively or perversely to the migration crisis, the terrorism crisis, and the Euro crisis.

There's a crisis of faith in today's Europe, but it isn't the crisis of religious faith or national sovereignty that most commentators discern. It's a crisis of faith in European governance, and it's prompted by the fact that Brussels is neither delivering the goods nor allowing national governments to do so. Trump was telling them that they would do better to depend upon their own fellow citizens, their own religious traditions, and their own economic energies in dealing with most of life's problems.

But he pointedly excluded NATO from this criticism of utopian post-national politics — NATO being an intergovernmental alliance that manages the practical matter of the common defense by sovereign nation-states (provided the nation-states pay for it, as he noted, with heavy significance, Poland does). Similarly his celebration of Western civilization recognized that NATO and individual Western nations were rooted in a broad Western cultural fellowship — much as the Truman administration established a Congress for Cultural Freedom to accompany and support the foundation of NATO in the late 1940s. Celebrating the West also served as a rebuke to the European Union's

downplaying of Europe's specific cultures and their achievements in the interest of playing up the importance of climate change as an issue that transcends national interests, requires the leadership of global institutions, and penalizes the West without demanding sacrifices from non-Western countries. It's fascinating that a leader of the German Green party recently suggested that Germans should in future be known as Non-Migrants. The voters are unlikely to agree.

Taken together, Trump's various themes implied a looser, less centralized, and less uniform system of Western-alliance unity. NATO would be largely unaffected, even strengthened, but the EU would have to hand back powers and regulations to national capitals. That would be unappealing to Brussels and most Western European political leaders, who happily foresee a future of greater federalism. But it enjoys considerable support in all European countries and probably modest majority support in Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries for some time to come. One can also see that the Trumpian vision of the West is not what the American Left wants—or anything like it. It's not multicultural, it's not post-national, it's not post-democratic, and it's not secularist, let alone post-religious. That's a lot of bad things to be against.

Which tendencies are likely to prevail after the experience of Covid 19 and the election of Joe Biden? We'll have to wait and see. While we're waiting, however, maybe we should concentrate less on the exaggerated conflict between "authoritarianism" and "liberal-democracy" and ask different questions. Which political culture should a serious defense organization facing major challenges from China, Russia, and jihadism want to encourage in its member-states? Would it be one that sees climate change as a greater threat than all three and one that should be managed by world bodies? Or a political culture that believes promoting pride in a nation's culture and history and in its

civilizational solidarity with its allies are firmer foundations for alliance cohesion and mutual defense than global utopianism.

The correct choice was made, in my view, by Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee when the question came before his Cabinet over whether or not Britain should support Turkey's entry into NATO. After the debate had raged on for some time between Left and Right, Attlee tapped his pipe on the table and said: "Fought against Johnny Turk at Gallipoli. Rather have him on our side than against us."

And that made it unanimous.

So