

28th Estoril Political Forum

The New Authoritarian Challenges to Liberal Democracy

Threats from Russia and China: Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance

21st October 2021

Remarks by the Speaker of the Session, Ambassador Luis de Almeida Sampaio

“I would like to greet the Host for this very important Session, my friend Jakub Klepal, with whom I am closely working in Prague, organizing, amongst other things, a series of high level conferences scheduled to take place during the upcoming Portuguese Presidency of the European Union, and to salute the Chair, Christopher Walker, as well as the three Discussants, Dóra Gyorffy, Ken Godfrey and Zdzislaw Mach. I am honoured for having being granted the opportunity to speak again at the *Estoril Political Forum*.

Indeed the *Estoril Political Forum* is one of the most prestigious major events in the international political and academic landscape. It is a truly remarkable event, already in its 28th year, and it is very fitting to have devoted its 2020 edition to *The New Authoritarian Challenges to Liberal Democracy* and in that context to have foreseen a debate on the *Threats from Russia and China: Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance*.

The objective of my intervention is to set the scene for a lively debate, so my remarks will reflect my personal viewpoints and by no means should be interpreted as the official positions of the Portuguese Government, even though I trust that after more than 35 years in the Portuguese Diplomatic Service even if I would try hard I would not be capable of departing too much from the main thrust of the very well established Portuguese foreign policy lines.

Now, let's get ready to confront the first iteration of our equation: “*Threats from Russia and China*”. I must confess that I would have preferred a somehow less radical formulation. I would have opted for “*Challenges*” instead of “*Threats*” from Russia and China. *Challenges* provides for a broader context. Addressing the *Challenges* allows us to be more comprehensive than just addressing the *Threats*. In that sense, *Challenges* provides for a more strategically focused discussion. Yes, of course, there are instances when and where both Russia and China represent *Threats*. But again, both Russia and China can also be *challengers*, *competitors* and *opportunities*, sometimes everything at the same time.

So, first things first: first Russia, then China.

Even though it is true that both Russia and China share one essential thing in common, that being that the West should have no illusions about neither of them, indeed Russia and China should be dealt with in separate ways. And not only for the sake of an intellectual discussion like this one but also from a deeper strategic perspective. In fact, it is not in the interest of the West to contribute, and much less to promote, that Russia and China

strategically join together in their international efforts of greater political and economical clout.

I will argue that the West and Russia (or, before present day Russia, the Soviet Union) were always, since the end of the Second World War, or even during the Second World War, in a state of "*strategic confrontation*". Even during the *détente* years. That is why it only made sense, even then, to attach the greatest importance to deterrence as the matrix of our collective defence. In fact, NATO is a defensive Alliance; a defensive alliance based on the doctrine of deterrence and effective defence against any aggression should deterrence fail.

The discussion on deterrence and defence is intertwined with every reflection on Russia, or rather on NATO's relations with Russia.

It is clear to me that the lack of trust between Russia and NATO is very serious, but nevertheless, or so I argue, it is in the interest of the West and in the interest of Russia to make their mutual relations more stable.

It is a matter of the most basic precaution. Talking about risk reduction does not mean, and cannot be interpreted as, acquiescence to the arguments of the other side.

I do not advocate that the conditions for overcoming the state of "*strategic confrontation*" between NATO and Russia are there, much less that it should be a matter for the foreseeable future to imagine that the "*strategic confrontation*" could be replaced with a new "*strategic partnership*", no, but I would rather argue that the state of "*strategic confrontation*" that prevails in the relations between NATO and Russia should be made more secure and more predictable. Should ideally evolve into what I would call "*controlled confrontation*".

How can this be achieved?

First of all by setting as a short and medium term goal the completion of a *stabilisation menu*, through a *more useful dialogue* (e.g. a more predictable pace of the NATO/Russia Council meetings, more military communication channels, use of an emergency channel in case of cyber incidents, etc.), through a *more substantive dialogue* (e.g. on risk reduction) and through a *broader dialogue* (e.g. using unofficial *fora* for discussion, resuming parliamentary contacts, promoting contacts between academics and analysts, etc.).

"*Controlled confrontation*" as I see it doesn't mean that Moscow would get away with having broken the international law in Crimea or the Donbas or that it should escape being condemned or sanctioned for its attempts to silence its internal opponents, to curtail the freedom of their own media, to conduct cyber attacks and to interfere in other countries electoral processes.

"*Controlled confrontation*" means only, and this "only" would be already a lot, a more predictable thus less riskier security environment and, once that achieved, the possibility to explore, to the limits dictated by sound judgment, prudent policies and unwavering deterrence and defence, the virtuosities of a constructive dialogue in matters of mutual interest or concern. And there are many matters of mutual interest and concern.

Why “*controlled confrontation*” is needed now more than ever? Because Russia is faced with looming very serious long-term economic and demographic difficulties, mostly of its own making, that could make Russia more unpredictable and more dangerous. More of a *threat* and less of a *challenge*.

Thus it is in the West’s interest to help Russia finding its way back into a more meaningful dialogue both with NATO and the European Union. It is in the West’s interest to understand that Russia is a major international power player that reclaims being treated accordingly. Yes, all that is true but with one proviso: that Moscow also understands that what defines a major international power player in the 21st Century is, first and foremost, its abidance by the international law, its respect and its engagement for and with the international rules based order.

Now, China.

China is a different question from Russia altogether.

I believe that Washington only relatively recently started to see NATO as a privileged instrument in the “*fundamental strategic competition*”, background against which it envisions its relationship with Beijing. On this matter, there is, at least for the moment, an important convergence of views between the two ails in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

That convergence of views is essential for the construction of a real strategic doctrine to deal with that “*fundamental strategic competition*” with China. That convergence of views in the Congress should be preserved and should remain independent from what happens coming November.

I believe that in the United States Congress there is a clear understanding that the “*fundamental strategic competition*” with China will be the name of the game for the second half of the 21st century.

If this proves to be the case, the Chinese question will quickly overtake Russia as the American priority in the political debate about the future of NATO.

It is worth recalling that, since April 2019, on the initiative of the United States, NATO has embarked on an exercise to try to identify the implications for our collective security of the international actions and the ambitions of global projection of China.

In that vein issues such as Chinese acquisitions and investment in critical infrastructures in the territory of the Allies, including new technologies, such as the “5G” among others, were brought forward to the NATO debate.

Increasingly that debate focused on the risks posed by China’s assertiveness in the international rules based order and often led to the conclusion that, more than competition, the future of the relationship between the West (if such a thing still exists in the second half of the 21st century) and China will be one of inevitable confrontation.

But in that debate, I would argue, it is also very important to highlight the advantages of “*engaging China*”, as well as the opportunities that the relationship with Beijing may

represent, namely for the dialogue between NATO and the EU with the preoccupation of avoiding that the, mainly American, more confrontational perspective on China damages the transatlantic relationship.

However, at the end of the day, the greater danger for our liberal democracies would be the combination of the Chinese autocratic regime under the firm grip of the Chinese communist party with the prospect of China's economic success being translated into real social prosperity for the vast majority of the Chinese population that, as we speak, still doesn't benefit from the extraordinary Chinese economic development growth of the past 20 years.

If that prospect materializes, I predict that many in the West, many in our open societies, will find ways, as they always do when presented with a good opportunity, to, intellectually first and politically after, try to question the very foundation of our constitutional systems based on the principles of the Rule of Law, Separation of Powers and respect for individual liberty and freedom, including absolutely unhindered freedom of expression.

Let me address now the second iteration of our equation, the one that underlies the idea of: *Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance*. I would, here again, as I did about the first iteration of our equation, state that I would have preferred a different formulation, like, for instance, "*Strengthening*" instead of "*Rebuilding*" the Atlantic Alliance.

Why? Because the Atlantic Alliance still remains the embodiment of the common strategic interests of the *Liberal Democracies* on both sides of the North Atlantic Ocean.

It has always been like that since the inception of the Alliance, since 1949, since the signing of the Washington Treaty. I disagree with those that thrive on the intellectual distinction between NATO and the Atlantic Alliance.

In my view NATO is the materialization of the Atlantic Alliance. NATO is the Atlantic Alliance.

In that particular but very vital sense, NATO is the home of the transatlantic relationship.

During the already 71 years of the NATO's Alliance history, that link, that bond, was often challenged and always with no success.

We must however recognize that it was never challenged as it is being challenged today.

One of the reasons for that challenge is the way NATO is perceived by some in Washington. Let us not fool ourselves. In spite of the overwhelming support for NATO in the United States there are powerful voices that cast a shadow on NATO's future.

Let me put it in a very simple but also very compelling way: the United States is looking into strategic directions that are not directly related to the North Atlantic area.

Of course we all know that it was not the still incumbent American Administration that started to define the Greater Pacific region, or Southeast Asia, to give you concrete examples,

as strategically key long-term fundamental objectives for the worldwide power projection of the United States political, economic and security interests.

If you look back in time you could almost exactly identify the moment when, at the very beginning of the first Barack Obama mandate, America decided to look more to Asia and to the Pacific than to Europe and to the Atlantic.

As a global superpower, America has global interests and thus it should not have been unexpected or utterly surprising that a strategic shift towards the Asia-Pacific region would occur.

NATO should not try competing with that. NATO should be complimentary to that, should be in sync and in close coordination with that.

What is important, what is essential, for our common North Atlantic security interests is that that shift towards the Asia Pacific Region does not harm and does not diminish the US engagement, the US involvement, the US presence in the North Atlantic Area. That is what is important.

Why?

Because the transatlantic bond defines the key dimension of our collective security.

If you break it you put in jeopardy the security of both the North American Continent as well as the security of Europe. If you break it, you will achieve the main strategic objective of any actual or potential NATO adversary. It would represent a gigantic geostrategic shift, and, some argue, could even very well spell the end of the West in strategic security terms.

Thus the preservation of the transatlantic link lies at the very heart of NATO's strategic interests.

When I say strategic interests I mean strategic interests in a very broad sense, not only defence and security related interests. And not only economic, financial and energy related interests. I would argue that the transatlantic link is key for the preservation of the West as the set of core values that underpin of liberal democracies. Even if some in Washington, as well as some in Europe, need help in understanding that.

Let me emphasize this idea: the transatlantic bond is more than defence and security, as it is more, much more, than trade or economics. Indeed the transatlantic bond is about people, is about values, shared values, is about History, common History, and thus, it is about freedom, it is about what defines our open societies. But our open societies would not survive as such, open, free, liberty friendly, vibrant and tolerant places, if they would not be safe and secure.

Now allow me to go a step further. I would argue that it is crucial for the preservation of the transatlantic link that America remains, as it has been since the end of the Second World War, a "European power".

Why the United States needs to stay a "European power"?

Because NATO was also created to protect Europeans from themselves.

Nevertheless, even that, as important as it may be, is not enough.

Why? Because we cannot ignore the signs that start to be written on the wall.

As an example, but a very telling one, I go on and on quoting the results of a 2019 poll of 60.000 individuals across 14 EU member states conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations. Those results argue that Europeans no longer trust the transatlantic security guarantee, and in turn want to see stronger European-level defence mechanisms developed to protect them. And I would argue that today, in the midst of the pandemic that did nothing to contribute to more cooperation or to better coordination between the two sides of the Atlantic, those results would be even more worrisome.

And that is a serious challenge frequently dismissed in Washington. The Europeans, both those NATO Members that are Members of the European Union, as well as those European Nations that are not European Union Member Nations, should contribute in a steadfast way to the collective commitment to the transatlantic strategic objectives.

This is critical to fully understand the on going debate about the relations between NATO and the European Union, as it is also essential in the context of the difficult debate on *burden sharing*.

The most important thing is that the *burden sharing* debate unites and does not divide, contributes to strengthening the transatlantic unit and not to weaken it, contributes to preserve and reinforce our collective defence and does not give our critics or adversaries an opportunity to play with our common strategic goals.

Some tend to inflate the fact that the *burden sharing* debate is now more acute than before, some pretend that with the arrival of Donald Trump to the US Presidency the burden sharing debate changed in nature.

That is simply not true. If something changed, it was the way of communicating.

But the urgency to address the problem created by insufficiently funded defence priorities in the face of an evolving more complex, more dangerous and more unpredictable security landscape did not change. And it will not change with a different US Administration.

One thing I take for granted: without the dynamic engagement of the NATO Member Nations on both sides of the North Atlantic Ocean the transatlantic unity could be in trouble.

The new security environment, the evolving nature of the multifaceted challenges and threats the Euro Atlantic area is faced with, as well as political developments like the painful Brexit process, contributed, in no small way, to the deepening of the European defence and security component leading even some to speak about an European Union Strategic Autonomy or even of an European Army.

We need to set this debate straight if we are really serious in understanding the challenges that Russia and China pose to Europe and to the United States.

Everything that is done in the context of the European Union that contributes to the strengthening of the NATO's European pillar and thus that contributes to the strengthening of the transatlantic link, and contributes to a fairer burden sharing between the two sides of the Atlantic in what defence responsibilities are concerned, should be welcomed and encouraged by NATO.

But each and every one of the NATO Members have only one set of forces, and so, it is extremely important that the parameters of the on going debate about the deepening of the European Union defence dimension respect the non-duplication, non-geographic division of tasks and complementary principles.

Everything should be done, especially by those with higher political responsibilities, to preserve and reinforce both NATO and the European Union, thus strengthening the transatlantic link.

We have no time here to discuss all the challenges facing the Alliance, like, for instance, the challenges emanating from the arc of instability in our European Southern neighbourhood that are also a very important component of the debate on the NATO-EU relationship. We have to recognize that from the Atlantic shores of Morocco deep into the Middle East and the Gulf, many face the same challenges we do.

But this is a relatively new ground for NATO. We must recognize that we are into a dimension of our common security that is very different, fundamentally different, from what NATO was created for.

So let me now conclude by expressing my deeply ingrained opinion that the best way, the only way, to thwart the *New Authoritarian Challenges to Liberal Democracies* steaming from a more aggressive Russia and a much more ambitious China is to preserve, to protect, to cherish and to strengthen the transatlantic relationship.

Thank you very much."