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Introduction: the West, its ideas and enemies

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The most difficult part of solving a problem often is defining it. Only in the past few years has it become clear that what we call "the West" has become vulnerable to a potent combination of external threats and internal challenges. Perhaps the end of the Cold War encouraged some citizens of the West to relax their guard, to take the future well-being of our political, economic and security systems for granted. Now, the "problem" for Western countries is dealing with a confluence of forces that challenge the "idea" of the West, its application in Western democracies and the international institutions founded on liberal internationalist principles.

The West of which we speak is defined by the values of liberal democracy, individual freedom, human rights, tolerance and equality under the rule of law. The West is an idea, or rather a basket of ideas. It is not defined by distinctions of race, culture, religion, language, nationalism, wealth or other traits that divide rather than unite human beings. It is not the West that President Trump has referred to as constituting "the bonds of culture, faith and tradition that make us who we are."[1] Trump's formulation threatens to close the door of the West to those of different cultures, faiths and traditions who, while differing in many ways, nonetheless accept and practice Western values.

This concept of the West has been shaped largely since the end of World War II. But the history is both much deeper and fraught with the challenges of change. This West traces its roots to the birthplace of democracy in Greece some 8,000 years ago. The period of Enlightenment – a movement among European intellectuals some 200 years ago – advanced the concept dramatically with its advocacy of relying on reason and rationalism rather than tradition, tribalism and religion to govern human relations. It celebrated science and the promotion of religious tolerance and governments based on constitutionalism with separation of church and state. This progress toward what we now call liberal internationalism nonetheless grew alongside the spread of slavery in Western states. Western governments initially used the concept to oppose the barbaric "East," or anything that was not European.

To understand the idea of the West today, it's important to recall that, even in recent historical periods, "the West" has not always represented the best that people can be, reminding ourselves that colonialism and robber barons were still features of Western civilization not many decades ago. Only after we acknowledge that history can we credibly argue that the West nonetheless developed some of the most powerful paradigms for human decency – individual liberty, human rights, and so on – and that the West can be defined as synonymous with these values. However, the struggle against ideas that run counter to these Western values continues, as demonstrated by recent political developments on both sides of the Atlantic. As one observer has noted, "The source of the West's evolutionary power has been its openness, its equality of rights, and its social trust."[2] All of those attributes have been called into question by the recent resurgence of illiberalism.

This, of course, is not the first time that such a threat has appeared. As author Thomas Ricks has recently observed, in the 1930s "The end of the Western way of life, and especially the death of liberal democracy, was a common theme in cultural life."[3] And we all know what came next.

The transatlantic traumas of 2016–17 have once again put

the West in jeopardy. The combination of external threats from Russia, disruptive radical Islamist terror and internal weaknesses in Western social, economic and political systems has formed a perfect storm. That storm endangers not only the security of Western democracies but also the values that have shaped the West since the end of World War II, and the institutions that operationalize them.

Then-US Secretary of State Dean Acheson told members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the North Atlantic Treaty to which they were being asked to give their advice and consent "is far more than a defensive arrangement. It is an affirmation of the moral and spiritual values which we hold in common."[4] Nearly seventy years since the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was founded and the beginning of the European community-building process, reaffirmation, reform and reactivation of these values will be required to preserve what we know as "the West."[5]

During the Cold War, it was generally accepted that Western nations included not only the transatlantic democracies but also several nations around the world that accepted, at least in principle, the North Atlantic Treaty's support for "democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." The West therefore extends well beyond NATO and the European Union (EU), particularly as there are important partners in Asia and Australasia – Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea in particular – that consider themselves part of this community of liberal democracies. These democracies may not become candidates for membership in NATO or the EU, but they will most likely continue to look to these organizations as critical components of the Western system. Russia will continue to see strengthening or enlarging membership of NATO and the EU as threatening to its interests, at least as currently defined in Moscow.

Ever since the signature of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington on 4 April 1949, the United States, Canada and a constantly expanding number of European democracies have combined their resources to defend their security and democratic political systems against external threats. At the same

time, many of the European democracies, urged on by the United States, developed the community system of integration that has produced today's European Union. NATO and the EU became the main institutional embodiments of the West. Most of the countries that considered themselves part of the West cooperated to defend it against communism, deter Soviet aggression, develop intense economic and financial ties across the Atlantic, and invited qualifying new democracies to join their ranks. They largely assumed that Western values would remain the touchstones for their political and economic development and the institutional arrangements intended to ensure their security and well-being.

On countless occasions over the past seventy years since the North Atlantic Treaty was signed, some observers have asserted that NATO is "only a military alliance." No doubt, NATO is a military alliance. But it is also true that, if it were only a military alliance, it would not be around well into the twenty-first century. As Wallace J. Thies has argued – albeit before Donald Trump became the definer of US policy toward the alliance – "Unlike many pre-1939 alliances, which collapsed at the first hint of troubles among the members, the democracies that make up the Atlantic Alliance have shown a willingness to do whatever it takes – even outright policy reversals – to heal a rift in the Alliance."[6] According to Thies, NATO is different from previous alliances in at least two key ways. First, it was established not just to meet a specific threat or serve a narrow purpose, but was designed to have much more lasting utility. Second, NATO was an alliance among liberal democracies with a value foundation that previous alliances had lacked – with strategic exceptions originally made for Portugal and for military juntas in Greece and Turkey on several occasions. Perhaps the big question now is whether that value foundation is still strong enough to resist some of the value-based threats that have emerged from within the alliance, as well as those that threaten from outside.

The values articulated in the preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty and their affirmation by US Secretary of State Acheson were not simply political rhetoric, designed to generate political

support for a unique and demanding set of commitments. They defined the West.

In the late 1940s, leaders of NATO's founding states understood that a political philosophy – fascism – had not only led to Germany's power grab in Europe, but had also replaced democratic political systems across the continent. They also understood that the Soviet Union's World War II military role allied to the United States, as critical as it was to victory over Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany, had positioned the Soviet Union to spread its power and ideology across the continent. The continental leaders – France in particular – wanted to ensure that Germany's power would never again be used to threaten French independence, and that democracy would remain safe from the fascist temptation that had just devastated Europe. The United States, joined by democratic forces in Western Europe, was concerned about the Soviet Union's post-war domination of Central and Eastern Europe and the threat that communist parties in Western Europe would lead to establishment of communist regimes there as well. That certainly seemed to be Soviet dictator Josef Stalin's objective.

So, even in the beginning, NATO had a political and economic as well as a military purpose. The goal was to stabilize Western Europe as insurance against a fascist or German revival, while resisting attempts by the Soviet Union to use democratic systems to take control of governments, as Moscow had done in the East, where governments in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and the Eastern half of Germany were brought into the Soviet orbit.

NATO therefore was a military alliance whose purpose was to protect democratic, free market political and economic systems in the member states. The community-building process in Western Europe had been stimulated by the US Marshall Plan program of assistance to the war-torn European countries. The Marshall Plan had been offered to Central and Eastern European countries as well as to Western European ones, but the Soviet Union blocked them from participating. The United States placed a critically important condition on the recipients of

Marshall Plan aid: that they organize a cooperative effort to use the assistance most effectively. That cooperative effort provided the foundation for the community-building process that led to today's European Union. Irrespective of how one feels about the EU's current strengths and weaknesses, that process provided a Eurocentric partner to the Atlanticist NATO that stabilized Western Europe and protected democracy from potential internal and very real external threats. It is true that, during the Cold War, the values enumerated in the North Atlantic Treaty occasionally took second place when authoritarian regimes in NATO member nations were tolerated in the interest of maintaining a militarily strong alliance. But NATO's survival beyond the end of the Cold War suggested that its value foundation and the inherent logic of Euro-Atlantic cooperation remained important ingredients in the glue that was holding the alliance together.

In 1989, a process began in which the benign tides of history seemed to be washing away the military rationale for NATO. On 9–10 November 1989, East and West Berliners breached the Berlin Wall that communist authorities had erected in 1961 to prevent East Germans from fleeing to West Germany. This became the first step toward reunification of East and West Germany. On 3 October 1990, the Federal Republic of Germany absorbed the German Democratic Republic, creating a unified Germany. NATO's North Atlantic Council welcomed the unified country as a full member of NATO. Like autumn leaves, communist regimes started falling throughout Eastern Europe, with the Soviet leadership unwilling or unable to stop the unraveling of their alliance and, ultimately, of the Soviet Union itself.

The revolutionary changes in Europe at the end of the Cold War left the transatlantic allies with historic choices about how to organize European security. NATO had been the West's indispensable institution during the Cold War. But at the end of the Cold War many wondered whether the alliance would or should be swept away by the accelerating winds of change. The NATO members had already been working hard to improve security relations in Europe, largely through negotiating arms control and confidence-building measures with the Soviet Union and its

Warsaw Pact allies. As 1990 opened, the authoritarian regimes that had held the Warsaw Pact together were crumbling, and the Warsaw Pact itself was not far behind. The West Germans and the post-communist East German authorities began negotiating reunification under the watchful eyes of the Soviet Union, the United States, France and the United Kingdom.

In this heady atmosphere, many thoughtful analysts and officials on both sides of the Atlantic questioned what NATO's place might be in a world in which the Warsaw Pact had been disbanded and the Soviet Union was withdrawing its forces from Central Europe. On the other hand, new leaders of former Warsaw Pact nations were already focusing on the goal of joining NATO, followed closely by membership in the EU.

Early in 1990, very few Western observers were willing to talk about NATO opening its membership to former Warsaw Pact states. In fact, a variety of quite different concepts for the future organization of European security competed for official and public approval. Some observers argued it might be best to keep the Warsaw Pact in business to help organize future security in Europe. Others suggested that NATO had outlived its usefulness because there was no longer any threat. Such advocates believed that the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, to which all European states, the United States and Canada belonged, could take over responsibility for maintaining peace and security on the Continent. Some Europeans, including French president François Mitterrand and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, preferred alternatives to German reunification while the United States facilitated accomplishment of West Germany's long-term goal.

As the world seemed to be changing all around them, the leaders of NATO countries decided that they should address the question of whether NATO was needed. Instinctively, the governments of all member states, as well as NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner, believed that NATO should be preserved – even if they were not fully agreed as to why. Some officials argued that NATO was more than a military alliance and was based, in fact, on a community of values that rose

above any specific military threat. Others maintained that the Soviet Union remained an alien society that could produce new threats in the future. They saw NATO as an "insurance policy" against a future fire in the European house. Some pointed to new risks and uncertainties that could best be dealt with through NATO's approach, in which like-minded countries work together to handle security problems.

The key factor, illustrating that the member states still considered NATO more than "just a military alliance," was the reaction of allies to the desire of former Warsaw Pact states and even former Soviet republics to join the alliance. Their primary motivation was universally to gain protection against ever again being dominated by their neighbor to the East. But the allies decided that the aspiring members would have to align not only with NATO's defense provisions, but also with its political guidelines. The NATO enlargement study of 1995 specified that new members would have to be contributors to security, not just consumers. It provided a path toward compatibility with NATO's military structures. But more importantly, it suggested that aspirants must establish civilian control over their militaries as well as functioning democratic systems based on the rule of law, guaranteeing individual liberties and facilitating free market economies.

If the North Atlantic Treaty provided the broad outline for what it means to be a member of the West, and I think it does, the NATO enlargement study provided the roadmap to membership in that club. When the same countries also sought to join the EU, they faced a similar set of value requirements, as well as a very demanding set of economic, financial, social, administrative and political conditions. The combination of the NATO and EU membership processes set prospective new members on a very clear course. But it did not guarantee that all new members of either or both organizations would always stay true to that course.

Some developments in recent years suggest that both the EU and NATO should worry about the quality of the democracies of those which have already made it in, not just those

which want in. That question is discussed later. But for now, we turn to the external threats to the West that dismissed any Pollyannaish dreams of a conflict-free future. We then look at the internal weaknesses of the West suggested by the gains of illiberal political parties in Europe, Turkey's dramatic movement away from its Western moorings, the UK's departure from the EU and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, all of which make the West much more vulnerable to the external threats discussed next.

Notes

1 The White House, "Remarks by President Trump to the people of Poland | July 6, 2017," www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/06/remarks-president-trump-people-poland-july-6-2017 [accessed 6 October 2017].

2 Bill Emmott, *The Fate of the West* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017), 7.

3 Thomas E. Ricks, *Churchill & Orwell: The Fight for Freedom* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 45.

4 US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, North Atlantic Treaty, Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, 81st Cong., 1st sess., 27–29 April and 2–3 May 1949.

5 For a more detailed interpretation of this history, on which this chapter draws, see Stanley R. Sloan, *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union and the Transatlantic Bargain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

6 Wallace J. Thies, *Why NATO Endures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 307.