

Biden Wants NATO to Project the Strength It Doesn't Have

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Joe Biden travelled to Brussels riding the wave of his “America is back” mantra. Far from rebuilding the US-NATO relationship, he used NATO as a prop to help set the stage for his upcoming meeting with Vladimir Putin.

The United States is facing a perfect storm of crises of its own making. On the domestic front, the American democratic institution is collapsing under the weight of centuries of unresolved societal inequities that threaten to divide the country into two irreconcilable factions. In the Pacific, decades of geopolitical neglect fundamentally ceded the strategic advantage to a surging China, allowing the momentum of that country’s economic and military expansion to challenge and, in some areas, surpass what had previously been a region of uncontested American influence and control. In Europe, the post-9/11 focus on the Middle East and South Asia left a once dominant American military posture in ruins, and with it the influence 300,000 troops once forward-deployed on European soil used to bring. Lacking an American military spine, the NATO alliance withered into virtual irrelevance, unable to meaningfully project power or mount a credible defensive deterrence.

This storm is still raging, and despite all the rhetoric and flexing being done by the administration of President Joe Biden, will continue to do so, unabated, for the foreseeable future. One of the root causes of this storm is the disconnect between policy and action on the part of the US over the course of the past 30-odd years. In 1991, the US had the world’s most powerful economy backed by the world’s most powerful military, sustained by the world’s most vibrant democracy. The deterioration of these three pillars of US credibility and strength was gradual yet steady, unnoticed by most outside (and internal) observers who opted to dig no deeper than the gilded façade offered up by the American establishment, rather than examine the deteriorating framework that held the American behemoth together.

Military power inherited and squandered

Joe Biden is a veteran American politician who was part of the establishment which squandered the inheritance of wealth, prestige and power America had accumulated in the aftermath of the Second World War. He is the living embodiment of American political

hubris, where words speak louder than results. As the senior Democrat in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he helped oversee the post-Cold War physical expansion of NATO void of any existential reason for doing so. In this way he helped create the bloated edifice that exists today, 30 nations united in everything except a viable military alliance. He also helped frame the current poisonous situation with Russia, denigrating post-Soviet Russia by supporting and sustaining the political career of Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and then expressing resentment when Vladimir Putin took over in the wake of Yeltsin's physical, mental and moral collapse and refused to continue the Yeltsin policy of lying prostrate before the US and Europe.

The rise of Putin coincided with America's strategic shift from a Euro-centric power focus to pursuing regional transformation fantasies in the Middle East and South Asia, seeking to use the US military as a vehicle for nation building in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. This 20-year experiment has failed, leaving the US fiscally and morally bankrupt, and its military in Europe a mere shadow of its former self in terms of capability and reach - where in 1990 we could deploy four divisions to Europe in 10 days, today it takes us four months to deploy one brigade. The administration of George W. Bush initiated this process (with a substantial assist from the Clinton administration), and the Obama-Biden administration sustained it. While tactless and inept in his execution, Donald Trump was realistic regarding the situation he had inherited, seeking to repair relations with Russia while approaching the issue of NATO with a more realistic perspective born of fiscal and geopolitical reality. This approach incurred the wrath of the American establishment, resulting in a single term presidency and the ascension of Joe Biden to his status as American commander in chief.

Biden has shown no real appreciation for the state of affairs he has inherited, formulating a foreign policy premised on the mantra of "America is back" without having an appreciation of what "back" means. His rhetoric and posturing suggest that he believes the dominance and prestige America enjoyed in 1991 can be replicated today simply by willing it to be so. This is irresponsible fantasy, something even Biden seems to realize in the aftermath of his "Putin is a killer" comments to the US media. The reality check that followed Biden's impolitic chest thumping, manifested in the withdrawal of Russia's ambassador and the snap mobilization of 100,000 Russian troops on Russia's border with Ukraine, drove home the reality that the US and its NATO allies were not in any position to confront Russia militarily. Moreover, more sober assessments coming out of both Europe and the US held that the rise of an expansionist China represented a greater threat to the geopolitical positioning of the transatlantic partnership than Russia.

Projecting weakness

The problem confronting Biden was that the issue of NATO expansion had left the alliance held hostage by both the anti-Russian posturing of its relatively new Polish and Baltic members and notions of a potential NATO membership on the part of post-Maidan Ukraine. One of the goals of the recently completed NATO summit was to create a framework of action which would provide political cover for both issues, while allowing for enough latitude to realistically apportion the political and economic resources necessary to pivot to China. This is the heart of the NATO joint statement - a commitment to a new military posture which seeks to rebuild NATO's crumbling military component while expanding the reach of NATO's Article 5 defensive umbrella to include space, cyber and so-called "hybrid" activities.

The notion of NATO building a 30-battalion combat force capable of full mobilization in 30 days is an indication of a reality that NATO knows it cannot, and will not, be fighting a

ground war in Europe against a Russian foe. The 30-battalion figure is a goal, not a reality, one that will be impacted by fiscal realities driven by the domestic imperatives of 30 separate nations, some more committed to the concept than others. And the 30-day mobilization figure is likewise purely political, given that Russia can mobilize many times that number in half the time, and that most scenarios involving Russia-NATO combat have the Russians prevailing in a period of one week or less. The 30-battalion concept is a political fig leaf designed to demonstrate resolve without really having to do so.

The same can be said about expanding the scope of NATO's Article 5 commitment to self-defense. The old formula had NATO automatically coming to the defense of a member state if it were attacked by a hostile power. The purpose of this clause was to confront any potential threat - namely the Soviet Union and, later, its Warsaw Pact allies - with the reality that any attack against one NATO member would be treated as an attack against all. The deterrence value of this posture was significantly enhanced by the presence of a combined NATO air-sea-ground force possessing unified command, communications, logistics and operational structures, so that any attack would be met immediately with the full weight of NATO's military capability - there was no "30-day" period of mobilization involved.

By expanding Article 5 protection guarantees into the fields of space, cyber and "hybrid", NATO is projecting the sad state of its current deterrence posture. The feeling in Brussels is that Russia could degrade NATO communications and interoperability capabilities by shutting down satellites in space, degrade and disrupt critical infrastructure using cyber-attacks, and exploit internal political and ethnic unrest through so-called "hybrid" fifth columnists. The fact that these concerns are self-created, formed by either mirror-imaging NATO intent onto Russian capability or, in the case of the "hybrid" concerns, manufacturing a doctrine where no such doctrine exists, is beside the point. Perception creates its own reality, and currently NATO is in the grips of a panic driven by the perception of a Russian threat where none exists.

No détente expected - only more posturing

From the perspective of Joe Biden, the NATO Summit was not so much about fixing the myriad of problems facing NATO, but rather creating the impression that NATO was united in the face of Russian aggression. The perception of strength, from the perspective of the Biden administration, is more important than reality, because the long-term focus of NATO cannot be on Russia if it ever hopes to muster the political and economic resources necessary to confront China. Joe Biden simply needs to take this perception of NATO unity and strength with him to Geneva, where he will use it as a prop in the political theater that will transpire when he sits down with Russian President Vladimir Putin on June 16.

In Geneva, Joe Biden will not try to reset relations with Russia, or repair relations with Putin. There will be no détente. Instead, the goal is to prevent the continued worsening of relations between the two nations, to create a sense of stability and predictability that will maintain the present chill in relations without continuing to a deep freeze or, worse, a hot war. To accomplish this, certain perceptions must be maintained, most important of which is that NATO is ready, willing, and able to stand up to any military threat posed by Russia. This is the real purpose behind the NATO Summit - to construct a fiction capable of bolstering Biden's posturing during his meeting with Putin. The fact that Russia is fully aware of this reality only underscores the theatrics of the entire affair. That, more than anything, defines the current situation between the US and Russia - theater posing as reality, to cover for weakness in order to project strength, all in an effort to avoid a conflict no one wants.

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