

Transatlantic Geopolitics – NATO's Future Challenges

Just like its history, NATO and its member states face today numerous challenges that require renewal and innovation in order to maintain the values that characterize our Alliance: the defense and promotion of Democracy, Freedom, Pluralism and Collective Security.

As we know, Europe doesn't have hard power mechanisms capable of responding to possible threats brought by the great world powers, like Russia and China. The same applies to more recent threats, such as the difficulty in presenting solutions capable of dealing with an insidious virus, or also to different hybrid attacks that require a huge coordination capacity and high expertise.

In fact, economic relations between countries assume an enormous preponderance in the influence that one country may have over another. China exports to Europe almost twice as much as the reverse, with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel having visited the Asian country 12 times since taking office, which reflects Europe's rapprochement to China. The fact is that Germany can hardly live without the Chinese market.

Today, few people have doubts about the vast Chinese power in economic, commercial, social, geographical and military terms. This is seen through its technological developments through an increasing control over Artificial Intelligence, Industry 4.0, Internet of Things (IoT) and 5G networks. China has altered the balance of powers of the world order, with a greater imminent confrontation between itself and the United States.

Given the current events, it will be crucial for NATO to define how it intends to position itself in the face of China's global strategy, which is increasingly establishing a presence in the Euro-Atlantic space, through its geo-economic and political project called "Belt and Road Initiative", with strong investments in European infrastructures, as well as in advanced technologies with European receptivity, naturally. It may have consequences that will affect the cohesion of the transatlantic community.

In fact, China has the second largest defense budget in the world and it is constantly investing in modernizing its military capabilities, including missiles that could reach Alliance countries. NATO must implement a more cemented political union, thinking and definitively executing cooperation partnerships with countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea, helping to contain a China that approaches all levels of the Western world.

It is essential to increase transatlantic cooperation between the USA and its European Allies, as well as between the European Union and NATO, especially in a moment where Europe is experiencing democratic setbacks in some member states, such as Hungary, Poland and Turkey, in addition to Brexit. At the same time, Europeans must honor their commitment by investing a larger budget for Defense and NATO, also investing more in research and development.

Regarding Russia, the truth is that this country has been adopting campaigns of disinformation, subversion, annexation and hybrid attacks that are destabilizing actions directed to the West. The Alliance needs a coherent strategy in the Baltic and in the East, and in the Black Sea, in order to contain Russian military power in Europe, preparing rapid political and military responses to the Kremlin's provocations.

This need can be reflected in the support that NATO can provide to its partners in the Black Sea - Ukraine and Georgia -, increasing investment in its economic development and renewing security means in the region. To give a practical example, investment in transport and energy infrastructures, including sea transport between the ports of Romania and Georgia, as well as in the Black and Caspian seas, could decisively benefit the region's security environment. Romania's accession to the Schengen area would also unquestionably boost regional investment, thereby increasing the political dimension of NATO, of the European Union and of Western values.

It is crucial that the Alliance add and reinforce the area of cybersecurity to the action it develops on land, in the air and at sea, recruiting the most prepared minds in the world of technology, thus creating resilience to new threats that are among the shadows of the conflict. NATO's role against hybrid terrorism requires strong transparency and cooperation with other actors, such as the EU and the private sector.

Concerning the threat, which is also invisible, of Covid-19 - or other hypothetical pandemics - the fact is that this reality calls into question the security and well-being of civil society, being an "attack" that needs collective and effective action by all NATO member countries.

If there is one thing that the current pandemic has taught us, it is precisely the need to create an action-oriented strategic plan, also applicable to the so-called biological wars, outlining a response protocol that involves all NATO member states. In these instances, NATO can play a vital role.

It is now urgent, more than ever, that the USA and Europe find - and give voice - to leaders who represent the peace and progress that multilateralism and cooperation have brought us, never forgetting the importance that this represents for our lives.

The time for union is today, without fragmentation or separate voices in the West. The great powers with regimes and values different from ours, exacerbated by different nationalisms, seek this division. Set it as a target. May the time never be late to realize that it is up to us, together, to safeguard the urgency of Freedom. The urgency of our common Happiness.

And that's also our role, the Youth's role in an unpredictable world.

Manuel Matos dos Santos