

# U.S. Security Challenges in 2021 and Beyond

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Security challenges for the United States in 2021 must be discussed with a risk analysis that sees far into the future. Changes in science and technology will have as much impact as arms-control talks on missiles that deliver weapons of mass destruction. The array of new types of lethal weapons is staggering, and space, vital as it is to our national security and prosperity, is now a domain that must be defended. Artificial intelligence enables action without human judgment; it can be used to distort messages that could change orders or allow mistakes that could have drastic consequences. Adding to the technology innovations of developed countries, science is producing lethal options at minimal cost. Simultaneously, the speed, scale, and intensity for cyber and “hybrid” attacks are increasing, facilitated by rapid technological changes, global interconnectivity, and even unforeseen pandemics. Who could argue, for example, that an adversary with even the most limited resources would not wonder about harnessing the human and economic devastation caused by COVID-19 for its own benefit? Add this possibility to the list of threats that could be used to destroy the economy and the people of a military, economic, or values-based competitor.

What we assess as the security challenges for 2021 should guide our preparation for deterrence against longer-term challenges. Below are my thoughts, shaped through the NATO lens, about the way forward. In brief, NATO has provided transatlantic security for over seventy years thanks largely to its ability to adapt to new threats. Led by the United States, the alliance now includes the unified voice of thirty democracies spanning Europe and North America. It is the essential security alliance for Western values—values that must continue to guide the U.S. approach to foreign affairs.

## NATO Unified and Strong

When assessing the security challenges of 2021, it is imperative that NATO holds together, strong and unified.

Since its founding in 1949, NATO has expanded from twelve to thirty allies. The strength NATO brings with thirty unified allies cannot be underestimated. Each ally brings its own unique resources, expertise, and competitive advantages, stretching from North America to the Baltics to the Balkans.

NATO’s expansion, however, does not come without challenges. Because NATO acts through consensus, all decisions must be agreed to unanimously. Bilateral disputes or regional differences in priorities can divide the alliance, while some allies tend to put economic priorities above security requirements.

If careful, constant efforts are not made to maintain unity, NATO risks a weakened resolve. Failing to act or failing to prepare must be avoided in an alliance that relies on deterrence to prevent open conflict. Deterrence is achieved with superior capabilities that are constantly updated and messaged through exercises and public commitments.

In our increasingly complex world, the United States must remain the strong glue that holds our transatlantic bond together.

The National Security Strategy labels Russia and China as revisionist powers that seek to shape a world antithetical to U.S. interests. The 2018 National Defense Strategy notes that the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by these revisionist powers. In the near term, Russia aims to

weaken U.S. influence in the world, divide us from our allies, and develop existentially threatening weapons systems. In the longer term, we see the militaristic buildup of a China that uses economic might for strategic advantage to be the power struggle requiring the most preparation.

Our strategic competitors see NATO as an adversary. They use hybrid and cyber attacks as divisive maneuvers meant to wear down our publics and sow division. It is the vital role of the United States to assess risk and push the alliance to prepare against threats. This is the strength that makes us essential to NATO.

The United States must continue to lead NATO to ensure not just unity, but unity *and* strength.

## **COVID-19**

The challenges of 2021 will include defeating COVID-19. But when the immediate crisis is no longer a health issue, the effort turns to preparing for the next threat to global health. We must ensure that COVID-19 and other pandemics will not turn a health emergency into a security emergency in the future.

In 2020, NATO has done its part responding to the pandemic using military assets and logistics to support humanitarian needs. To date, NATO and allied militaries have coordinated more than 350 flights to airlift hundreds of tons of supplies around the world and set up nearly 100 field hospitals to bring aid where needed. Our defense ministers in June 2020 adopted a NATO plan to provide support in the event of a second wave or a future pandemic, stockpiling medical equipment for immediate assistance.

The challenge that will continue is determining how to prepare for a rogue nation that decides to use chemical and biological elements for hostile aggression. Attacks that could start in a water supply, transportation system, air release, or in more ways than we can even imagine today must be assessed and plans made to respond.

## **Terrorism**

The immediate priority is to eliminate terrorist havens in parts of the Middle East that have been exported to the United States and our allies. NATO stood with the United States after declaring its Article 5 commitment following the 9/11 terrorist attack on our country. The effort continues in Afghanistan and Iraq to ensure terrorism for export does not resurge.

Keeping NATO military trainers for Afghan and Iraqi institutions, enabling them to protect their own countries, is a primary focus for 2021 and likely beyond. Supporting an Afghan peace negotiation and an Iraqi government that is determined by free and fair elections will be a challenge the United States will face with increasing support from NATO.

## **Great Power Competition**

A significant allocation of resources will be necessary, near and long term, to prepare for competition from Russia and China.

Each country is expending enormous efforts to compete with U.S. security assets. The United States must continue its vigilance to assess the risk, build defense, and lead NATO in allied efforts to exhibit strength against all potential weapons and methods.

As the United States is building military hardware to meet these challenges, we can also expand bilateral partnerships that strengthen democratic institutions. NATO is the world's longest standing and most effective security alliance; it too can expand global partnerships for stability in self-governance.

NATO already has a pillar of outreach dubbed "projecting stability." This means, when welcomed by a country that seeks common values but is near areas of aggression against individual freedoms, NATO consults to strengthen institutions through dialogue, joint exercises, and training. Projecting stability through partnerships should be

expanded. As hybrid and cyber attacks have increased, democracies are seeing more disruptive false reports, including through social media, that seek to sow discontent in their publics. Strengthening democratic governments to promote fair elections, freedom of the press, the rule of law, and respect for human rights will help dilute the effects of hybrid misinformation by building trust in political institutions.

Consider, for example, an enhanced NATO network in Latin America countering the influence of Russia, China, and Iran that we are now seeing throughout our own hemisphere. Imagine the free democracies of Asia partnering with NATO and the United States to ensure freedom of navigation of the seas for global commerce.

If we look to the long term, strengthening global democracies for resilience against efforts to divide and conquer freedom will be a bulwark to protect Western values and our way of life.

NATO should not ignore global threats because these threats undermine transatlantic security. Alliance burden-sharing with America's leadership is the way to ensure that Western democracies and respect for human rights prevail in a world of challenging dynamics.

The challenges of 2021 will be to assess and prepare for a much bigger and longer-term effort. We must build institutions that ensure our way of life—determined by our people—and bring together allies and partners that are strengthened to support our collective values.

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**Kay Bailey Hutchison** was sworn in as the Permanent Representative of the United States to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on August 15, 2017. From 1993-2013, she served as a U.S. Senator from Texas and was also elected to a Senate leadership position. Ambassador Hutchison gained extensive international experience and developed a deep understanding of NATO as a Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. She also served as Chairman of the Military Construction Subcommittee and as a Member of the Defense Subcommittee on the Senate Appropriations Committee. She served two terms as Chairman of the Board of Visitors of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Prior to assuming her duties, Ambassador Hutchison was a prominent attorney at Bracewell, LLP, an established international law firm in Dallas, Texas. Ambassador Hutchison also served in the Texas House of Representatives, as the Texas State Treasurer, and as Vice Chairman of the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board. Ambassador Hutchison earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Texas and a degree of Juris Doctor from the University of Texas School of Law.