

Discussion Article

US progressives and NATO: Finland and Sweden's membership and burden sharing

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Abstract

In the past two decades, a foreign policy shift has taken place in Washington, and it is not limited to one side of the political spectrum. Voices from the left-wing of the Democratic party, or progressive Democrats, are also challenging traditional foreign policy orthodoxies, and these views are moving closer to the mainstream. The focus of this foreign policy re-examination is around US military spending in service of global dominance and (over)extended military commitments. This has important implications for European allies of the United States. An examination of progressive views reveals that US commitment to NATO in general is supported, as are the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. Not least due to a commitment to climate change mitigation and multilateralism, for Europeans in the political center and left of center, much of the progressive foreign policy agenda should be welcome. However, there is a broad and firm view that Europeans collectively should rely much less on the United States for their security – which is a prospect that European NATO countries are still far from genuinely pursuing.

Keywords

NATO, US Foreign Policy, US Politics

Introduction

Many European leaders watched the 2022 US Midterm elections with concern, with good reason. In addition to the health of US democratic institutions, transatlantic security cooperation, and in particular the significant US support for Ukraine's defense efforts, seemed to be at stake. Kevin McCarthy, the leader of the GOP minority – who was poised to be the speaker of the House under a Republican majority – had shortly before the election quipped that a GOP-led Congress would not be offering a “blank check” (Brooks, 2022) to support Ukraine, citing the recession and other political issues important to Republicans. But Republicans were not the only source of disquiet. In the same month McCarthy hinted at trouble, the Democratic Progressive Caucus released a letter signed by 30 lawmakers urging a greater push for a diplomatic solution between Ukraine and Russia. The latter was quickly retracted, but a sense that US political support may be wobbly has remained. This sense is justified.

In the past two decades, a foreign policy shift has taken place in Washington, and it is not limited to one side of the political spectrum. On the Republican side, the anti-leadership, anti-multilateral, starkly transactional Trumpist-style evolution has been stark and closely observed in Europe. Republicans in the Reagan era shared a consensus that being “a shining city on a hill” (Frum, 2021) was part of America's destiny, part of its glory and strength in the world. Today's Trumpist Republicans ask instead: what is in it for us? Expensive global leadership should be replaced with profitable transactions; stability can be someone else's problem. Alliances with lesser powers, including NATO, are viewed as binding or sapping US power, rather than amplifying. These isolationist or realpolitik “America-First” Republicans have not taken over the party yet, but their influence is growing.

On the Democratic side, too, there is new energy in the left wing of the party, and rising challenges

to orthodoxies. The new Congress taking its seats in January will be much more progressive than in recent decades. The Congressional Progressive Caucus (the group that released and then withdrew the open-letter on the Russia–Ukraine war) will count more than 100, making up 48% of House Democrats (up from 95 in the 117th Congress). Despite being firmly centrist, the Biden administration has been more progressive than the Obama administration.¹ The influence of progressives was already evident in the 2020 Democratic party platform's reforming view on foreign policy: “That's why we cannot simply aspire to restore American leadership. We must reinvent it for a new era.” (Democratic Party, 2020)

For Europeans in the political center and left-of-center, much of the progressive agenda should be welcomed. But in foreign policy terms some of it may be a hard pill to swallow. The US commitment to NATO and its views on Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO are a particularly interesting issue to examine because the progressive view is more clear and common than views on other central issues, such as China or Israel.

NATO Expansion

On the Democratic side of the aisle, there was unanimous support for the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO in the August 2022 vote (one Republican Senator voted “present” and one “no”, while all others supported the bill). Chris Murphy, a centrist-progressive Democrat and important foreign policy voice has repeatedly talked about this expansion as a plus, mentioning a “revitalized” NATO in this context, and has also said that Finland and Sweden will not be the last new members (Hamilton 2022; Murphy 2022). The Biden Administration's National Security Strategy (released after some delay in October 2022) positively mentioned the expansion multiple times, stating, “Welcoming Finland and Sweden to NATO will further improve our security and capabilities” (The White House, 2022, p. 26). Although, admittedly, Biden's national security team is more centrist than progressive.

1. The massive pandemic relief (\$1.9 trillion), infrastructure (\$1.2 trillion), and inflation reduction acts (\$393 billion) passed so far in the Biden administration include not only an economic shift away from a neo-liberal model, but also the biggest investments to combat climate change in US history.

More progressive voices have voiced concern about adding a long border with Russia through Finland's accession and in general extending US commitments. Christopher Chivvis from the Carnegie Endowment warned that "[i]f Sweden and Finland aren't secure enough with their own armies, then bringing them in might create a major new vulnerability for the alliance just as the chances of conflict with Russia are rising" and went on to caution that "[i]t's unrealistic and would be unwise to expect the United States to shoulder any major part of such a new commitment, given America's domestic politics, other global defense priorities, and the fact that European allies should be capable of carrying the lion's share of the burden on their own" (Chivvis, 2022). But even Chivvis concludes that NATO membership for Finland and Sweden "could offer real advantages that increase security in Europe".

Sweden and Finland, with their strong human-rights records and progressive democracies are perhaps the simplest case for American progressives. NATO expansion in less consolidated and liberal democracies will find much less consensus—especially without the background of an obviously belligerent Russia. Around NATO more generally, the war in Ukraine has brought some clarity and broad agreement, but there remain some issues of contention among the progressive crowd.

Progressives and NATO

The progressive agenda has generally focused on domestic policy with military spending – especially military spending in relation to domestic spending – being the most salient foreign policy position. Nonetheless, some aspects of a progressive alternative foreign policy are clear. Progressives are skeptical of a foreign policy doctrine built on US military (hyper) dominance and want to end the overextension of US global military presence

and commitments. More military restraint, smaller defense budgets, and ending the “forever wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan (as well as avoiding new ones), as well as more emphasis on combatting climate change, have been central pillars to a progressive alternative² (Warren, 2019).

Nonetheless, there is broad support for NATO, also among progressives in Congress. Bernie Sanders, in many ways the father of the current progressive movement, has called NATO “the most successful military alliance in, probably, human history” and committed to stay in NATO in the December 2016 presidential primary campaign (Beckwith, 2016; Sanders, 2020). Elizabeth Warren, the other most prominent progressive in the Senate, has similarly consistently voiced support for NATO and US commitment to NATO (New York Times, 2020). Prominent progressive foreign policy analysts working to define an alternative foreign policy, including Matthew Duss and Stephen Wertheim, similarly support NATO collective defense commitments in general, although the proportion of commitment is at issue.

Support for the North Atlantic alliance is a bit shakier in far-left-wing media (the biweekly *The Nation* and the *Jacobin*, for example)³ or other progressive groupings. For example, the Democratic Socialists of America, whose most prominent members include House member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Bernie Sanders, but also a handful of other House members, released a statement on February 26, 2022, in which it “reaffirmed” its call “for the US to withdraw from NATO” (part of the DSA’s 2021 party platform) and “to end the imperialist expansionism that set the stage for this conflict” (Democratic Socialists of America, 2022).

Neither Sanders nor Ocasio-Cortez seem to have shared/endorsed nor renounced the statement. While Sanders’ support for NATO is unequivocal (at least in the past decade) and repeated, AOC’s

2. In 2019 Senator Warren introduced the Department of Defense Climate Resiliency and Readiness Act, which would require the Department to achieve net-zero emissions from non-combat infrastructure by 2030 and incorporate climate change-related risks into the National Defense Strategy, the National Military Strategy, and operational plans for the Department of Defense.

3. To cite just two examples, *Jacobin* published an article titled “The Orwellian Attacks on Critics of NATO Policy Must Stop” by Branko Marcetic on March 7, 2022, and *The Nation* published an article by Jeet Heer entitled “The Perils of Fortress NATO, Gatekeepers to Europe’s Walled Garden” on November 10, 2022.

record on the question is scant. This is, however, not surprising: as a House member on the Oversight and Financial Services Committees, her foreign policy role has been so far rather limited. But there is no reason to assume that she views NATO as an “imperialist” institution or opposes US NATO commitments.

In an interview with *The Intercept* shortly after the midterm elections in November 2022, AOC was asked about the lack of “progressive voice” on the Russo-Ukrainian war and the retracted progressive caucus letter, to which she was also a signatory. Her response underscored consistency between the progressive letter and the Biden administration and indicated support for Ukraine and the US/NATO support for Ukraine, rather than any critique of NATO or Western approaches (Grim, 2022).

The war in Ukraine has in fact created a greater alignment between progressives and more hawkish democrats on NATO. Whereas before the war many leftist Democrats were sympathetic to Russia’s narrative of an “imperialist” NATO encircling it, the invasion has turned the imperialist tables. In 1997 Senator Bernie Sanders still argued against expansion to include the Baltic states on the grounds that it would “provoke” Russia:

First of all, Russia clearly perceives that the expansion of NATO into the Baltics would be an aggressive, wholly unjustifiable move by the United States. On May 22, 1997, President Boris Yeltsin’s spokesman, Sergei Yastrzhembskii, stated that if NATO expands to include Former Soviet Republics, Russia will review all of its foreign policy priorities and its relations with the West. Since the cold war is over, why are we militarily provoking Russia? (US Congressional Record, 1997)

While in the subsequent decades and as a presidential candidate, his support for NATO became more outspoken, Sanders remained critical of expansion and an overly muscular NATO. Just two weeks before Russia’s full-scale invasion, Sanders wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper:

I am extremely concerned when I hear the familiar drumbeats in Washington, the bellicose rhetoric that gets amplified before every war, demanding

that we must “show strength,” “get tough” and not engage in “appeasement.” A simplistic refusal to recognize the complex roots of the tensions in the region undermines the ability of negotiators to reach a peaceful resolution.

One of the precipitating factors of this crisis, at least from Russia’s perspective, is the prospect of an enhanced security relationship between Ukraine and the United States and western Europe, including what Russia sees as the threat of Ukraine joining the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (Nato), a military alliance originally created in 1949 to confront the Soviet Union.

...

Putin may be a liar and a demagogue, but it is hypocritical for the United States to insist that we do not accept the principle of “spheres of influence”. For the last 200 years our country has operated under the Monroe Doctrine, embracing the premise that as the dominant power in the western hemisphere, the United States has the right to intervene against any country that might threaten our alleged interests. (Sanders, 2022b)

On February 24, Senator Sanders’ office offered a statement with the following first sentence: “The Russian invasion of Ukraine that the world is witnessing today is a blatant violation of international law and of basic human decency” and argued that “[t]he United States and our allies must impose severe sanctions on Vladimir Putin and his fellow oligarchs” (Sanders, 2022a). Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez tweeted in March: “As Ukraine fights against the Russian invasion, we have a moral obligation to assist any way we can.” She also introduced legislation that would provide debt relief to Ukrainians and coordinate debt payments during war (Mondeaux, 2022). Both Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders have faced criticism from their fans over their support for Ukraine and its war effort. Sanders has dismissed the idea that Democrats have become war mongers (Mondeaux, 2022; Weigel, 2022).

The purpose of the defense alliance is now more evident to many progressives, as well as the idea that eastern European states may have indeed genuinely wanted (and needed) a Western

security umbrella against Russian aggression. (The progressive view remains more open to the idea that the NATO-expansion policy of the 1990s was wrong and undermined a vulnerable Russia than the mainstream view. But this view is also becoming more nuanced about the right of newly freed countries to choose their alliances.) Furthermore, a NATO focused on the traditional task of territorial defense is easier for progressives to support than the NATO of a decade ago, which was focused on joint missions across the globe. Nonetheless, there are some progressive qualms around US dominance in the alliance; qualms that will bring major consequences for Washington's European allies as they gain influence.

A More Multilateral NATO

The biggest progressive critique of NATO resembles the Republican complaints: that bugbear issue of burden sharing. Despite the superficial similarity, the two versions of the burden-sharing debate are significantly different for European partners. Republicans think too many European countries are not investing enough in their own defense (falling short of their 2% of GDP-spending commitments). The (usually not so clearly stated) solution to this is easy: Europeans should spend more on US weapon systems, increasing their capacity significantly while maintaining US strategic dominance over the alliance. Progressives have a different answer, but it is not necessarily easier for Europe.

Progressives are generally concerned about the “unwarranted influence” of the “US military-industrial complex” (Sanders Campaign, 2020). For example, Matt Duss had this to say about the support to Ukraine: “I think progressives, including those who strongly support helping Ukraine defend itself, are rightly concerned that the war could be exploited to reinvigorate an outdated hawkish interventionist ideology whose main beneficiaries are defense contractors and lobbyists” (Mackinnon, 2023). As a result, a more progressive vision of better burden sharing would be either antagonistic

to or at least agnostic about more capabilities bought from the US defense industry. In contrast, less influence over the alliance in exchange for less military commitments and less spending is a trade progressives would support.

A progressive foreign policy would certainly decrease US military spending and footprint significantly, and Europe/NATO would be an obvious place to start. Sanders is in step with most progressives (in fact most Americans) in believing that Europeans should play a larger role in funding the defense budget of a primarily European coalition (US Congressional Record, 1997). This will also be the case in a future where the accession of Ukraine and Moldova are decided. We can expect that discussion to closely mirror Sanders' congressional argument against the costs of NATO's Baltic expansion:

...[H]ow much more are we going to ask United States taxpayers to ante up to defend Europe in an expanded NATO with a still undefined mission? The total price tag is estimated at anywhere from \$27 billion to \$150 billion over the next 10 to 12 years. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the cost of NATO expansion will be between \$60.6–\$124.7 billion over 15 years. Don't forget that we have already paid \$60 million through the NATO Enlargement Facilitation Act in order to assist Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia in bringing their Armed Forces up to NATO standards... (Congressional Record, 1997)

European allies should understand that the view, as expressed by Chivvis on the Nordic accession question, that “European allies should be capable of carrying the lion's share of the burden [of defending against Russia] on their own” (Chivvis, 2022), is a firm and broadly shared progressive opinion – and is gaining ground toward the center of the Democratic party. The vital difference between this and the Trump version is that progressives take the alliance commitment seriously.⁴ A progressive vision for NATO would be an alliance that focuses narrowly on its territorial defense mission (with a human security

4. When asked by the New York Times if NATO allies who do not fulfill their funding commitments should still receive assurances from the US, Elizabeth Warren answered, “Yes. NATO is not a protection racket; it is an alliance” (New York Times, 2020).

view that includes issues such as climate change), and is genuinely multilateral. In this NATO, the largest share for European defense is provided by Europeans (the details of how remain undeveloped) – with a strong, but not dominating US commitment. Europeans often talk of wanting partnership at eye level with Washington – progressives want that too – but it will come at a hefty price for European NATO members and require a level of collective action not yet identifiable.

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