



# AN AGENDA FOR NATO'S NEXT GENERATION

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STRATEGY PAPER

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Cover: Seaman First Class Cynthia Fernandez looks out to sea during the NATO exercise Dynamic Mariner 19.  
Credit: NATO.

Seven decades since its founding, NATO remains the world's most successful alliance in modern history. Rising from the ashes of World War II, it has transitioned from Cold War deterrent to counterterrorism vehicle to bulwark against Russian revanchism in Europe. Weathering political storms and leadership changes, it has always survived based on the shared belief among its citizens that a world with NATO was safer than one without it. Today, a new generation of allied citizens is questioning that sentiment, putting the Alliance's future at risk.

Increasingly disconnected from the historical events that unmistakably validated NATO's importance, publics on both sides of the Atlantic have begun to doubt the value of the Alliance.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon is most striking among millennials and Gen Zs, born between 1981 and 2012, who have never experienced World War II or even the Cold War. As they face a range of new threats that seem beyond NATO's purview — from disinformation and disruptive technologies to health crises and climate change — they are either skeptical or unaware of NATO's enduring importance, at least in its current form. Being more globally minded and digitally connected to each other than ever before, the next generation arguably still cares about transatlantic cooperation, just on nontraditional military issues. As this next professional class begins to fill the ranks across governments and international institutions, NATO cannot afford to lose their buy-in. Instead, it must adapt to their vision for the future of transatlantic security. NATO needs to become broader, more dynamic, and more global — not only to match the next generation's interests, but to prepare for the challenges to come. Otherwise, NATO, and the international order it safeguards, will not survive the next seven decades.

NATO needs a new agenda built *for* the next generation *with* the next generation. This paper offers 10 strategic priorities

that should form the basis of that agenda. These are priorities inspired by future leaders that current leaders can still get behind. While some of them seek to push NATO in new directions critical to our future security, others recast and expand the Alliance's ongoing efforts in a way that resonates with the leaders of tomorrow. As opposed to a comprehensive strategy, these priorities represent a starting point to inform NATO's ongoing "reflection process," designed to best position the Alliance for 2030. Over time, these priorities should also feed into a new strategic concept for NATO. Using this agenda, NATO must reach out to the next generation and compel them to breathe new life into the Alliance. The fate of the free world depends on it.

## Foundations for a Fresh Vision

The "next generation" of transatlantic leaders is largely comprised of millennials born between 1981 and 1996 and some members of Generation Z born between 1997 and 2012.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the generation before them, they may not have living relatives who fought in World War II or witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall. They have not experienced great power conflict, in large part thanks to NATO's existence, which has made it easier for them to overlook the critical role of NATO as a military alliance today. This does not mean, however, that they do not care about transatlantic issues or the U.S.-Europe relationship. Their take on the transatlantic bond is just different — less characterized by military cooperation and instead centered on shared social, economic, and nontraditional security issues.

In the absence of collective experiences of conflict, young Americans and Europeans have connected in other ways — through vibrant social media platforms, study abroad programs, and other cultural exchanges. They have grown up together

in a globalized world frequently traveling between the United States and Europe, which they still perceive as two of the closest international partners. While most have enjoyed relative peace in their own countries, they have witnessed firsthand that modern threats, including the coronavirus pandemic, do not stay confined to national borders for long. Together, their generation has gone through a number of global challenges: international financial crises, the global war on terrorism, massive refugee and migrant flows, countless humanitarian crises, nuclear threats from North Korea, the effects of climate change, and the rapid proliferation of technology. These shared experiences have cultivated consensus that international cooperation is critical to solving these challenges.

These experiences have also shown the next generation that military force is not always the best foreign policy tool for such diverse, global issues. This has made them more skeptical of the "peace through strength" philosophy that has traditionally underpinned NATO.<sup>3</sup> Still, they do value diplomacy and multilateral institutions as tools for maintaining peace. Growing increasingly progressive on both sides of the Atlantic, the next generation is also more willing than their parents to cede powers to those institutions to achieve a greater benefit for the common good. To reflect a more dynamic and multicultural world, they want these institutions to work for *human security over national security* and to uphold universal values such as freedom and human rights for all.<sup>4</sup>

Although the next generation may not always recognize it, many of these views should lend themselves to support for NATO. Despite its traditional military nature, NATO was established for the collective good of citizens across many nations who believe in freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. It is a cooperative partnership to protect their way of life, safeguard stability and prosperity, and preserve peace by deterring



Soldiers assigned to the 780th Military Intelligence Brigade (Cyber) mentor participants in a «Black Box Challenge» event to provide students exposure to Linux commands, during a STEM event at Frederick High School in Frederick, Md., Oct. 24, 2019. Credit: U.S. Army Cyber Command, Photo by Steve Stover.

future threats.<sup>5</sup> In some ways, this broad notion has translated into a superficially high degree of support for NATO among the next generation in principle, as reflected in recent public opinion polling.<sup>6</sup> Yet, it has not translated into a deep understanding of or appreciation for what NATO is doing today.<sup>7</sup>

Part of this is because the next generation does not perceive NATO as working on the issues they care about. A recent poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs revealed that the top foreign policy priorities among U.S. millennials included: preventing the spread of nuclear weapons (64%), securing adequate supplies of energy (59%), and combating world hunger (47%) — none of which are *traditional* NATO issues.<sup>8</sup> Combined with their lack of historical experiences with NATO, this has meant that most millennials and Gen Zs do not

directly associate themselves with NATO or see how its mission applies to them. Nor do they inherently think to go to NATO to apply their ideas and develop their careers.

As more next-generation individuals enter the international policy community elsewhere — in national governments, other multilateral institutions, civil society organizations, academia, and industry — their priorities will begin to dominate the transatlantic debates. NATO will have to take note or, otherwise, risk retirement. Looking to the future, NATO needs the next generation. Not only does it require their support to remain politically viable, the Alliance needs their creative ideas, foresight, and innovative spirit to tackle the complex challenges of today and tomorrow. At the same time, the next generation needs NATO. Whether they know it or not, they need NATO to protect

the liberal world order that has kept them safe, free, and at peace. They also need a NATO that can defend against new threats to transatlantic security — an alliance that is broader, more agile, and more global.

NATO must reach out to the next generation and encourage their participation now. To ensure its long-term success, the Alliance must build a fresh agenda *for* its next generation, *with* the next generation. To retain support of current leaders, this agenda should recast and expand NATO's ongoing efforts on issues that the next generation cares about but does not necessarily know about in a NATO context (e.g., arms control, cyber security, and crisis management). Concurrently, it must incorporate new next-generation priority areas critical to the transatlantic community's future shared security, such as technology, hybrid threats, and climate change.

In that spirit, 10 strategic priorities are outlined below to form the basis of that agenda. This list is not comprehensive; rather, it is intended to supplement NATO's baseline conventional military duties. In the short term, NATO must maintain those fundamental efforts, continuing to make the case to the next generation for why its traditional mission matters to them today. But, over time, NATO must begin shifting resources toward these other strategic priorities in order to captivate transatlantic leaders for decades to come.

## Priorities for NATO's Next Generation

### Short-Term Priorities

**Prioritize Human Security and Emphasize NATO's Political Role:** NATO's traditional mission of collective security is not lost on the next generation. They want collective security, but in a much broader sense than military security. Many young Europeans and Americans have met young Ukrainians

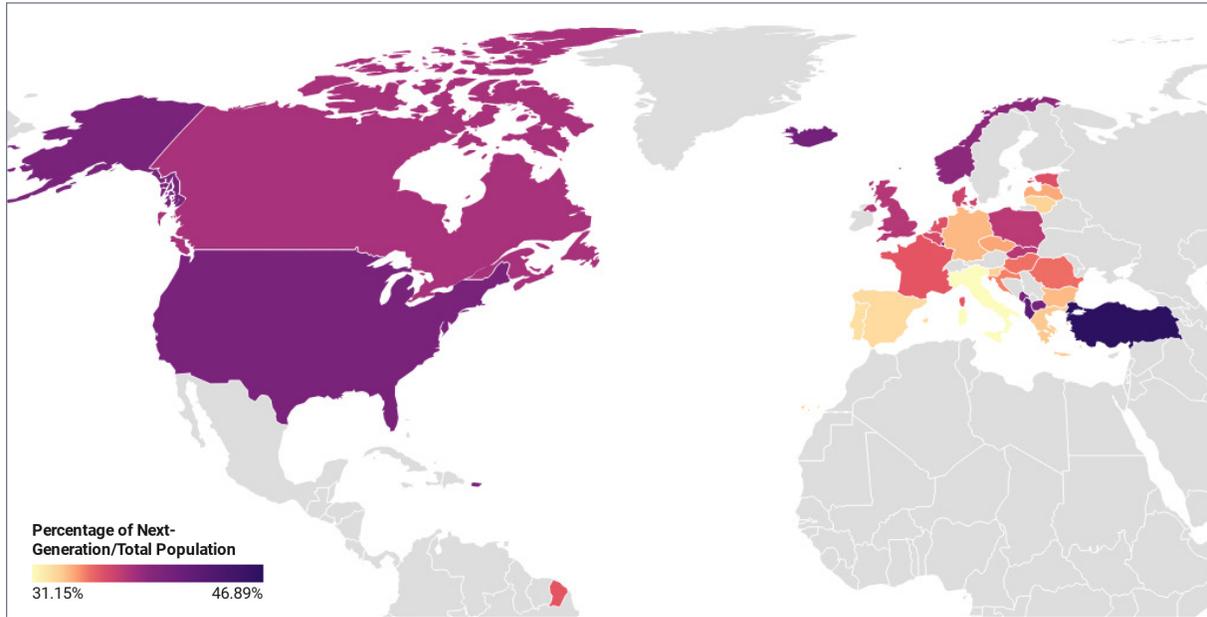
affected by Russia's invasion. They have shared videos of young Belarusians being beaten in the streets of their capital while fighting for democracy. They have even joined photo challenges to support freedom of expression for young women in Turkey. Regardless of their country's membership in NATO, the next generation cares about security for all of those people. They are passionate about ensuring their freedom from need and want at the human level.

### NATO must reach out to the next generation and encourage their participation now.

To appeal to that sentiment, NATO should emphasize the role it can play in defending all humans that share transatlantic values — not necessarily through military interventions but through diplomatic, humanitarian, and political means. While critics may argue that human security is better addressed by humanitarian organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union (EU), and NGOs, NATO has an important part to play alongside them. Its current capacity-building, civilian protection, and “women, peace and security” efforts cross over into human security issues every day, obligating the Alliance to operate in this space. NATO has an equally important political role in human security issues, as a platform for international dialogue and coordination, powerful public statements, and collective influence on the world stage. Already undertaking a “reflection process” that seeks to explicitly enhance the Alliance's political role, NATO should further prioritize human security across its strategy and activities.

**Adapt for Hybrid Threats:** Hybrid threats, such as information operations,

**Figure 1.** NATO's Next Generation



Source: Quinquennial Population by Five-Year Age Groups - Both Sexes, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Dynamics, UN, 2020. <https://population.un.org/wpp2019/Download/Standard/Population/>; Total Population - Both Sexes, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Dynamics, UN, 2020. <https://population.un.org/wpp2019/Download/Standard/Population/>.

political subversion, economic coercion, and critical infrastructure attacks, have become staples of the modern security environment. More than traditional military threats, millennials and Gen Zs have been inundated with talk of “fake news,” election interference, and energy and trade manipulation. This not only reflects the next generation’s broad understanding of what security looks like, it represents a new reality to which NATO must adapt. Some argue that NATO should prioritize conventional threats, which it does best, deferring to the EU and nations to more appropriately respond to hybrid issues. Yet, as NATO has acknowledged, these hybrid threats from Russia, China, and their proxies are part of deliberate campaigns to undermine the transatlantic community.<sup>9</sup> To avoid losing its competitive edge and defend against these ongoing hybrid attacks, the Alliance needs a more proactive and robust approach, which

should be coordinated with the EU. NATO already has a mandate to do so, based on its Article 3 “resilience” clause, which requires allies to “maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.”<sup>10</sup> At the 2018 Brussels Summit, allied leaders also pledged to assist allies at *any stage* of a hybrid attack.<sup>11</sup>

To effectively support allies, NATO needs to broaden the aperture of its counter-hybrid efforts to include threats that are more political and economic in nature but have security implications.<sup>12</sup> NATO should develop a net assessment capability to understand the Alliance’s competitive advantages and vulnerabilities in the hybrid domain. To support this, NATO should conduct more campaign analysis and focus on the interaction of hybrid activities across domains. This will pave the way for the Alliance to enhance situational awareness, forge a common

comprehensive threat picture, and develop continuous hybrid response plans. Next-generation leaders can play a key role in helping NATO do that. For example, NATO should employ next-generation social media experts to track and potentially remove disinformation on its networks, when it is deemed detrimental to an ally's national security or fundamental democratic processes. NATO should acquire in-house network specialists to put nations' electric grids back online during crises and reduce vulnerabilities to future critical infrastructure disruptions. The Alliance should enlist special analysts to constantly monitor flows of illicit finances, energy, weapons, and other data to detect hybrid campaigns targeting NATO nations. These steps would allow NATO, at the very least, to play a stronger role in gathering intelligence and facilitating broader transatlantic consultations to tackle hybrid threats.

**Go on the Cyber Offensive:** Cybersecurity is a significant interest for the next generation as it impacts so many aspects of their everyday lives. Some of their concerns include hacks, cyber espionage and theft, manipulation of devices across the Internet of Things, and reliability of networks.<sup>13</sup> It is important for NATO to be more present on these issues. NATO has already taken some important steps, including helping to shape rules and norms in cyberspace, standing up a Cyberspace Operations Center, and defending NATO's networks.<sup>14</sup> To be a truly meaningful cyber player, however, NATO needs to recognize that it is facing continuous attacks and intrusions in cyberspace from Russia, China, and nonstate actors. To compete in this environment, it needs a more active defense posture that can shock its adversaries and dissuade future attacks. The Alliance must take the initiative in cyberspace, as opposed to reacting to the Kremlin's and the Chinese government's actions.

Some allies remain skeptical of a more offensive cyber strategy for NATO as a

defensive alliance; however, a number of allies have already agreed to provide offensive cyber effects in support of NATO missions. Relying on those allies to implement the offensive actions, NATO could design and coordinate such a strategy without going on the offensive itself. Drawing on the United States Cyber Command's strategies of *persistent engagement* and *defend forward*, allied leaders should work with next-generation cyber experts, coders, and white-hat hackers to develop a similarly proactive cyber strategy for NATO.<sup>15</sup> This could involve creating templates for national cyber-resilient architectures, employing "active cyber defenses," using NATO as a planning hub for more proactive cyber maneuvers, and coordinating multinational cost-imposing measures against offenders.<sup>16</sup>

**Reinvent Arms Control:** Many young Americans and Europeans view preventing the spread of nuclear weapons as an important foreign policy priority.<sup>17</sup> With the end of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the U.S. withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty, the possible expiration of the New START Treaty in 2021, and the rise of new nuclear players, current nonproliferation policies need a rethink. To help preserve global security and stability, NATO has a role to play in reinventing a modern arms control architecture that current and future leaders support.<sup>18</sup>

While NATO itself should not formally propose or become party to any nonproliferation treaty, it should facilitate dialogue and coordination among its members and partners who can. NATO should leverage its collective nature, expansive partnerships across the globe, and well-established consultative capabilities to facilitate political commitments and shepherd new arms control treaties. Drawing on the input of next-generation leaders, these agreements must be more global and complex to meet today's geopolitical realities. In addition to



KFOR providing assistance to local communities in Kosovo to help fight the COVID-19 pandemic. *Credit: NATO.*

Russian strategic nuclear weapons, which have been a traditional concern for many allies, a new arms control regime must account for Russia's growing low-yield tactical nuclear weapons. It should also factor in the nuclear capabilities of China, North Korea, and, potentially, India and Pakistan. Next-generation experts can bring fresh perspectives on emerging and technological issues, such as the coupling of nuclear and hypersonic capabilities, the use of stealthy delivery platforms to deliver stealthy missiles, and ambiguous dual-capable missile systems.<sup>19</sup>

## Medium-Term Priorities

**Enhance NATO's Crisis Management Capabilities:** Looking to the future, experts predict that "soft" security issues, such as global health, climate change, and migration, will become more prominent than "hard" security issues like military

invasions.<sup>20</sup> While some leaders argue that the EU is better suited to tackle these soft issues, NATO already boasts crisis management as a core task. It has several useful mechanisms and competencies that should be better utilized in concert with the EU. As these threats continue growing, it is important for NATO to do more in this area — not only for the next generation but for our future security.

In one survey, U.S. millennials indicated they would support using the military to respond to humanitarian crises (65%), stop governments from using chemical and bioweapons against their people (73%), and counter Islamic extremism (60%).<sup>21</sup> These are all areas where NATO can expand its crisis management efforts, not only through its military tools but through its civilian emergency response tools. NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center (EADRCC),

an example of one civilian tool, has played an important role delivering medical equipment to allies and partners during the coronavirus pandemic. In the past, these tools have also provided natural disaster relief and food supplies, supported refugees and migrants, and contributed to new telehealth technologies.<sup>22</sup> Transatlantic policymakers, alongside next-generation leaders, should rethink how to empower, invest in, and reinforce these types of capabilities at NATO going forward.

**Innovate and Invest in Defense Technologies:**

Organizations all over the world are now looking to the next generation to innovate for tomorrow's challenges, and NATO should be no exception. To maintain its strategic edge over competitors like Russia and China, NATO needs to harness the innovative spirit of the next generation. NATO must articulate an overarching emerging and disruptive technologies framework with a clear agenda agreed by member states. In practical terms, this requires giving tech leaders appropriate authorities and resources to act. This should also involve hiring more rising tech and security experts, creating exchange programs with innovators in Silicon Valley, and bolstering NATO's public-private partnerships. NATO should also initiate a dialogue with the EU on defense tech to address, for example, regulatory policies, data-sharing issues across platforms, and collaboration around research and development. To foster a more creative work environment and cultivate new talent, NATO should transform a wing of its headquarters into an incubator designed to support new start-ups and tech initiatives that could directly contribute to NATO's activities. This would give NATO's Innovation Hub — currently at NATO's Allied Command Transformation in Virginia — a more operational sister office closer to the heart of NATO decision-making, increasing the work's visibility and impact.<sup>23</sup>

Substantively, the Alliance's defense tech work should focus on building a clear

picture of its competitors' capabilities and intentions with regard to unmanned air and maritime systems, hypersonics, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, bio- and nanotechnology, robotics, and other disruptive technologies. NATO should utilize next-generation tech experts to investigate the Alliance's vulnerabilities and how those same technologies can enhance the Alliance's own defense. In addition to its current work on conventional military applications for defense tech, NATO must focus on how defense tech can be applied to below-threshold threats. For instance, NATO should explore how AI and synthetic environments can be used to build indications and warning systems, improve exercises, automate and digitize planning, and support decision-making around hybrid threats. NATO should also explore how emerging defense tech systems and platforms — from drones to AI applications — can be made more standardized, interoperable, and resilient for use across the Alliance. To bring these capabilities to fruition, NATO should incentivize investment in new technologies by adding more innovation-driven metrics to NATO's benchmarks and capability targets. For instance, it could mandate that 5% of each country's total defense spending must go toward innovation and new defense or dual-use technologies.<sup>24</sup> NATO should also count nations' research and development funds for dual-use technologies, which may fall outside of traditional defense budgets, toward its 2% of GDP defense-spending threshold.

**Build a Digital NATO:** To get the tech savvy, instant gratification-craving next generation on board, NATO needs to go digital, faster. Internally, NATO should develop a more advanced digital infrastructure. This would improve NATO's ability to gather and process information and enhance key functions, such as command and control, planning, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). NATO's digital efforts

should include transitioning to cloud technologies, creating a NATO-restricted common business network, and developing a secure app to facilitate internal processes and improve efficiency. Priorities should include features to reduce paperwork, fast track decisions, simplify classification issues, and enhance communication and collaboration among NATO entities. In an era of algorithmic warfare, NATO must also think of data as a strategic capability. It should build data storage cells, processing units, and sharing channels, enabling NATO to use data as an information source and a defense tool. To boost its agility in a rapidly changing world, NATO should also streamline decision-making by taking advantage of digital tools. For example, NATO should preserve its coronavirus-era video teleconference capability (VTC) not just for ministerial meetings but for real-time crises, too. To address concerns over cyber vulnerabilities, NATO should work with next-generation experts to develop protocols for securely handling sensitive information digitally. This will require addressing the diverse challenges of each nation's firewalls and protection systems.

## The Alliance cannot risk losing the next generation of transatlantic leaders

As part of this digital transformation, NATO should further invest in its digital communication capabilities for public messaging. It has already begun to embrace storytelling and social media to reach the next generation, but it should expand those efforts by rebranding its content based on the next-generation-inspired priorities outlined in this paper.<sup>25</sup> In the end, the number of NATO's online followers does not matter if the substance does not resonate with its target audience. While some NATO officials might be resistant to

such digital change, this kind of innovation is imperative for NATO to operate efficiently in a modern world.

## Long-Term Priorities

**Embrace Climate Security:** Climate change is considered a critical issue by 54% of U.S. millennials alone, and young Europeans share their concerns.<sup>26</sup> While critics have argued that climate change falls far beyond NATO's mandate, NATO has acknowledged the potential for the effects of climate change, such as water scarcity and restricted energy access, to disrupt the future of international security.<sup>27</sup> These phenomena can impact Alliance operations and planning. For example, melting ice and rising sea levels can affect access and activities around Allied naval bases, such as Norfolk. As a result, NATO must be part of the solution to climate issues.

Allied leaders should use NATO as a platform to engage national governments on climate action. The Alliance should work with the next generation to develop a coherent approach to help reinforce climate security.<sup>28</sup> Drawing on its civil emergency tools and expertise, NATO's efforts could include dedicated capacity-building efforts to help member and partner nations prevent environmental security crises; collecting and analyzing intelligence to mitigate the effects of climate change on allied activities; creating sustainable operating guidelines for allied nations' militaries; and mainstreaming sustainability requirements into capability targets and defense-spending benchmarks.

**Expand Partnerships:** The globally minded next generation values international cooperation with a wide range of diverse stakeholders in the Euro-Atlantic area and beyond.<sup>29</sup> NATO should draw on this sentiment to expand its partnerships for the future. Some may argue that adding more partnerships would be too burdensome and costly for allies already grappling with their own security challenges at home. Yet, as strategic



NATO Allies and partners help Georgia contain a major forest fire in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region in 2017. *Credit: NATO.*

competition intensifies in the future, reality will demand greater cooperation with non-member countries outside NATO territory. In this environment, adopting a more strategic approach to partnerships is in the Alliance's direct interests. These partnerships, which help NATO project stability beyond its borders and give non-member countries access to certain expertise and support, are far less costly than fighting major conflicts. NATO must come up with new ways to identify, plan, fund, and incentivize partnership activities across the globe.

To help counter Russia in Europe, NATO should deepen its current limited, ad hoc cooperation with Eastern partners, such as Moldova, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The next-generation populations across these countries are more pro-European than

their predecessors and represent new opportunities for collaboration with the Alliance. To counter instability in the Middle East and North Africa, NATO should revive its Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, which have long been stuck in gridlock. To transcend the constraints of current political leaders in these formats, NATO should leverage its next-generation citizens' interests and people-to-people connections in the Middle East to unlock a new wave of cooperation. To counter China's rise, NATO should expand its engagement with democratic partners in the Indo-Pacific, such as Australia, New Zealand, India, South Korea, Japan, and Mongolia. Many young Americans and Europeans have a growing interest in Asia and could bring new avenues for cooperation there, too. Next-generation leaders can help NATO come up with creative ways to engage all of these

partners — from tech-focused exchanges to energy and environmental collaboration to virtual capacity-building programs.

**Make Inclusion a Reality:** The next generation is passionate about diversity and inclusion. However, unlike the generation before them, who thinks of diversity as based on demographics, millennials and Gen Zs perceive it as diversity of thought, perspectives, and insights. Already the most racially and ethnically diverse cohort of professionals, millennials care more about subjective factors related to inclusion. In the workplace, this means employee engagement, a positive work culture, and opportunities to contribute ideas.<sup>30</sup> If NATO wants to attract the next generation of transatlantic leaders, it has to make that kind of inclusion a reality across the organization.

For NATO, which has a highly militarized and hierarchical culture, such transition is difficult. While NATO's commendable efforts in this space have created statistical progress, the Alliance has a long way to go in shifting its mindset. In 2019, most of the 26% of women employed across NATO's nearly 6,000-strong civilian staff remained in administrative support roles or "women, peace and security"-specific positions.<sup>31</sup> Next-generation voices are invited to join NATO conversations often only under that label, in a separate youth-dedicated format. At NATO, age, gender, and years of experience in many ways still dominate who is afforded meaningful opportunities to share ideas. With millennials predicted to make up

75% of the workforce in the United States alone by 2025, this will have to change.<sup>32</sup> Using the priorities listed above, NATO should work to integrate more diverse and next-generation voices into *substantive* roles across the Alliance. This will not only create a more intellectually vibrant, creative, and inclusive environment for all NATO citizens, it will better equip NATO to tackle the complex challenges of today and tomorrow.

## Conclusion

To survive the next 70 years, NATO must do what it has always done — adapt. The Alliance cannot risk losing the next generation of transatlantic leaders. To attract future leaders and prepare for the security challenges of tomorrow, NATO must become more global, dynamic, and diverse. To ensure its long-term success, the Alliance needs a new agenda that sends a clear message to the next generation: the world needs NATO and NATO needs them. The agenda outlined above gives NATO a framework to convey that message. These strategic priorities offer the Alliance a graduated plan to begin integrating next-generation priorities without abandoning key efforts that keep current policymakers onside. As NATO looks to 2030, it must increasingly look to those who are under 30. They will be the ones responsible for preserving transatlantic cooperation for decades to come.

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