NOVI Backgrounder Series, Paper 2

Western Incohesion

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NOVI Headquarters:

You said the West is losing cohesion. It was the winning side in the Cold War and it seems to be a major global player, so what's going on?

NOVI Field Team:

During the Cold War there was a clear West. It was the group of countries which shared a perception that the USSR, and communism more broadly, were serious threats to their sovereignty and freedom of action, and affronts to their values and principles. The US and NATO were at the core of the Western bloc, but it included Japan, Korea and several other Asian countries, and a number of Latin American, Middle Eastern and African countries whose governments felt threatened by Soviet proxies or subversion. The US and NATO formed a cohesive and vigilant alliance, and the US wielded considerable binding influence with other bloc members.

There is still a West comprising roughly the same players, but it is incohesive and sluggish by comparison to its Cold War manifestation. Once the USSR collapsed, it seemed like its mission, and raison d'être as a bloc, were over. The notion that the world had entered safer times and there was no need to maintain costly vigilance was very durable, and led to complacency when new threats arose. Thus, Western countries continued to treat Russia and China like business partners long after it was clear to experienced national security professionals that both saw the West as an adversary. There was no impetus to retain the old Cold War bonds.

Another factor in weakening Western cohesion was the US emphasis on the "War on Terror" following the 9-11 attacks. Had the US response not included invading Iraq, it might have been easier to switch gears back to dealing with great power rivals, a game that is best played with robust global alliance

networks. But years of arduous counter-insurgency across three US administrations, and the sheer distraction of trying to manage and then extricate from a Middle Eastern quagmire, created strategic tunnel vision (Afghanistan is also relevant but Iraq was by far the bigger distraction). Without the US urging other Western countries to keep up their guard in that period, few did. Domestic political competition and by extension economic growth continued to be far more relevant to other Western countries than international security, even if they cooperated on counter-terrorism initiatives.

Eventually the West did wake up to the gravity of the threat posed by Russia and China, but by then, there was a new force challenging Western cohesion, and indeed the cohesion of individual countries within it. This was nationalist populism, usually of the hard-right, illiberal and somewhat xenophobic variety. We touched on this phenomenon in *Paper 1* which discussed the international system, and will briefly build on that here.

Socio-economic frustration in Western countries had been growing even before the 2008 financial crisis. The global spread of liberal economics, as an aspect of the wider globalisation phenomenon, had helped millions of people around the world out of poverty. But following the widespread uptake of neoliberal economics (one could say ultra-free market economics) in the 1980s and '90s, societies in developed regions began to notice a marked reduction in social mobility, job security, and public services, and a steep increase in inequality. The 2008 crisis was icing on an already problematic cake, and many people blamed governments and indeed entire political establishments – governments were beholden to big money, which, with financial deregulation, had run amok with zero regard for social obligations or impacts. That almost sounds like a Marxist critique, but it was right-wing nationalists who managed to articulate grievances in appealing ways, and who turned the dour mood to their political advantage. They added immigration to the set of grievances, as well as centrist governments spending more time and energy on global issues and partnerships than on dire domestic problems.

Fast forward to 2025, and the effects on the West as a strategic bloc are blatantly apparent. In the US, Trump is well into his second period in office. He is a hawk on China, but ambivalent towards Russia and he does not seem to mind if Russia gains from the war in Ukraine. His tariff policy towards, criticism of, and even threats against, erstwhile US allies has made some other Western countries reticent to fully commit to countering China, mainly because relations with China might help offset the economic effects of US trade policy. Brexit, pushed by the UK's nationalist right, took the UK out of the EU in 2016, and a number of European hard-right nationalist parties are pressing for an end to formal international security cooperation and for withdrawal from the EU and NATO. Several such parties even see a natural

ally in Putin, although they have had to rein in their open admiration of him since the invasion of Ukraine. Even though hard-right parties have not won power in more than a handful of European countries, they have swayed the whole political spectrum – centrist parties are increasingly catering to anti-globalist, hard-right agendas in order to prevent voter desertion, and this hinders the political will to jointly act on common security concerns.

The Trump administration published its national security strategy in December 2025, a week after the above paragraph was written. It reinforces the emerging split between the US and Europe, which the administration regards as led by liberal-globalist elites at odds with the US' (or the Trump administration's) own political and cultural values. The document still refers to Europe as an important ally, but it strongly suggests that the US will actually assist the European hard-right to make political inroads. The document is a statement of intent, not official policy yet, but nonetheless it paints an even starker picture of the demise of shared values as a basis for Western cohesion and the resulting gap opening up between the US and longstanding allies.

Asia-Pacific members of the West, principally Japan, Korea and Australia, have faced criticism from the Trump administration for not spending enough on defence. However, they have in common with the US a very direct threat perception of China. Thus, even if they and the US diverge in terms of values, shared transactional cooperation on regional security is likely to remain strong. On broader issues beyond regional security, cooperation will be strained by the US' self-centric conception of national interest.

When the effect of nationalist populism is added to the longstanding Western, and especially Western European, proclivity to procrastinate on recognising and dealing with threats, the result is slow and incoherent responses to the much more focused moves of the West's great power rivals. Since the Ukraine War started, Europe has been increasing military spending and cooperation, and the US under Trump is also modernising and growing its defence sector. But this does not add up to a joint strategy or joint commitment, and for Europe in particular, how long Germany, France and other major European states will remain committed to stronger defence cooperation is hard to say, mainly because the hard right remains a wild card in European policy continuity.

Under the grandstanding and doublespeak of high-profile politics, there is still much practical security cooperation between Western countries, and this has even intensified despite the political ambiguity. However, ultimately political commitment matters. A shared sense of mutual angst and urgency might be enough to mitigate Trump's aversion to mutual defence commitments, to persuade European

populations to stop supporting movements that undermine European security, and to get European leaders to make defence an urgent priority. Russia's war on Ukraine seemed to that decisive kick in the collective behind, and yet it turns out that even that was not enough. In short, there is still a West, but it is not what it used to be, and "the West" usually needs considerable qualification.