



Richard Ullman, a great scholar of US foreign policy and international security, liked to warm up an

audience by recounting a favorite cartoon. A man is falling from a tall building. Halfway down, another man pops his head out the window and asks, “How’s it going?” The falling man responds, “So far, so good.” Ullman found this cartoon an appropriate opening to his talks because it captured several features common to international politics. Short-sightedness. Unwarranted optimism. Impending doom.

One might hear echoes of “So far, so good” in Russian President Vladimir Putin’s attempts to gloss over the poor early performance of his military in its war against Ukraine. Putin may be correct in his belief that he can conquer parts of eastern Ukraine. But whatever gains Russia may eventually make from its brutal invasion, they are likely to be offset by enormous costs of economic isolation and the hardening of Western opposition.

At the same time, I worry about premature optimism in the United States

and the West as well, and not just about the outcome of the war. The Russian invasion of Ukraine came in a period of increasing division both within the United States and between the United States and its allies. Many observers, myself included, have been worried about the long-term effect of political polarization on US foreign policy. Increased partisanship and animosity between Democrats and Republicans makes it harder for presidents to get bipartisan support for foreign policy initiatives or to make credible commitments to allies and adversaries that can endure beyond a single administration. Polarization also created an opportunity for foreign meddling in the US political system and can hamper a unified response, as the 2016 election showed.

Recent years also resurfaced questions about the purpose and cohesion of NATO. The presidency of Donald Trump brought to the fore not just long simmering disputes over burden-sharing but also deeper questions about whether continued leadership of NATO was in America’s interests. Even as President Joseph Biden sought to mend fences, the long-awaited “rebalancing” of US attention to Asia was likely to raise

concerns about the US investment in NATO and the ability and willingness of European countries to shoulder more of the burden.

In the short run, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has counteracted these trends. The effect on NATO has been most pronounced, with the alliance showing an impressive degree of unity both aiding Ukraine and guaranteeing the defense of members that sit on Russia's borders. Pledges of increased defense spending and recent moves by Sweden and Finland to join the alliance show that the threat from Russia has breathed renewed purpose into the bloc and reminded Europeans of its value. In the United States, too, the response has been broadly bipartisan, with most Republicans joining Democrats in denouncing the invasion, supporting US military assistance to Ukraine, and re-affirming the importance of NATO. Republican criticism of Biden for not doing more and their unwillingness to let him blame Russia for higher gas prices are pretty typical politics, not a worrying pathology.

So far, so good.

The longer term question is whether the closing of rifts within the United States

and NATO is enduring or temporary. There is more reason to be optimistic about NATO. As long as Putin is in power, his belligerent rhetoric denying the sovereign rights of not just Ukraine but all former Soviet republics is a threat that will generate cohesion and a greater willingness to invest in defense. The brutality with which Russia has prosecuted the war may spur an economic decoupling that will last for some time.

It is less likely that this event will usher in a more durable healing of divisions in the United States. The underlying causes of polarization are complex, rooted in changes in the economic and demographic make-up of the country. Some have suggested that the end of the Cold War removed a unifying force, hastening the process, and that the emergence of a new foreign threat of similar magnitude would slow or reverse it. But this seems unlikely. As we saw after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks—a much more direct threat than anything posed by Russia—the reduction in partisan tensions was short-lived.

Furthermore, while much of the Republican party has supported the effort to defend Ukraine, the party contains a prominent faction that is skeptical of the

US commitment to NATO and/or admires Putin as a defender of traditional values. Whatever the size of this faction, it has a powerful voice in Republican-aligned media, and it is in sync with the de facto leader of the party, Donald Trump. Due to some mix of ideology and personal admiration for Putin, Trump as president evinced sympathy with Russian perspectives, even if his policies often did not, and he was impeached for an attempt to extract political concessions from Ukraine in exchange for military assistance. He has struggled to condemn the invasion, and he continues to be the standard bearer of the “America First” foreign policy that questioned the value of NATO. Trump also has a good chance of winning the Republican nomination for president in 2024, if he wants it.

Thus, the future could hold a partisan truce over foreign policy while deeper divisions persist in other areas, or it could witness continued instability as the parties diverge on basic questions about America’s role in the world. Much depends not only on who wins the 2024 presidential election but also who the Republican nominee is. A second Trump presidency could induce a large change in US foreign policy and signal that swings

due to partisan turnover are likely to continue. A more traditional Republican president would differ from the Biden administration more on means than ends. Even a Trump candidacy could see a deep showdown over basic questions about the US approach to Russia and NATO and America’s role in the world. Although these questions are worthy of debate, such a campaign might attract a good deal of foreign meddling. On top of that, there is the risk that Trump would not respect an electoral defeat, leading to a constitutional crisis that would harm America both at home and abroad. This is the looming sidewalk.

Kenneth A. Schultz
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