

Benjamin Tallis

# Neo-idealism: Grand strategy for the future of the transatlantic community

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## Executive summary | *sommaire*

**It is time for a new strategic approach** to defend and renew our societies and the free world – a “neo-idealism” for the transatlantic community.

The transatlantic community (broadly speaking, the member states of NATO and the EU), is at an inflection point and faces major tests of its prowess and value: Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine and overt enmity toward liberal democracies, intensifying strategic competition with China, the emergence of new global and regional powers such as India and the growth of the BRICS grouping organization (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the retreat of the free-trade based, neo-liberal model of globalization in the face of growing tensions between the sources of our security and the sources of our prosperity, and the need to master both technological and ecological mega-transitions.

Despite the urgency and scale of the threats, and the good examples provided by some members of the transatlantic community, we have not yet collectively gotten our strategic act together. Key players, including Germany and Canada, suffer from significant strategic deficits that have prevented them from properly recognising and responding to the emerging geopolitical situation. Those two countries are also strategically drifting from the course set by the United States – the most important ally for both countries – as well as from that being charted by France, the United Kingdom, and allies across Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe.

The strategy that the transatlantic community needs must provide a framework for dealing with the multiple threats we face and for radically overhauling our approach to geopolitics and international ordering – the way we try to shape the world and interactions between states. Crucially, that strategy needs to be backed up domestically, thereby ensuring that we have resilient societies that act not only as solid foundations for our strategic action but also as strategic players in their own right, acting in concert with government and business.

I argue that the transatlantic community, therefore, requires a “grand strategy” to guide coherent rather than contradictory action across different policy fields and that not only addresses the threats we face but also tackles the weaknesses in our societies, fixing the cracks in which our enemies work and through which they have fomented discontent

within our populations. Moreover, this grand strategy needs to harness and amplify our strengths, which will allow us to seize existing opportunities and create new ones for better strategic action that serves both our values and interests.

In this paper I propose eight precepts or pillars of just such a strategy, which provide a major development of neo-idealism as a practical approach to (geo)politics and (geo)economics. This is an approach that can not only defend but renew our free societies and help spread their values. The first pillar, value primacy, reflects neo-idealism's morally based approach to geopolitics; it conceives of core liberal democratic values as ideals to strive for – and sees these values as our most fundamental interests.

From this value primacy follows the need for: military readiness, effective internationalism, geo-economic realism, inclusive dynamism, ecological modernization, democratic futurism, and societal cohesion. By combining these tenets, neo-idealism offers an approach that addresses both internal and external threats to our democracies and allows us to marshal the various sources of our power. Neo-idealism provides a way to ensure that the transatlantic community has the means to defend itself in order to survive, but also the moral core and the hope of progress we need to thrive.

I argue that by putting our shared values at its heart, neo-idealism also provides a rallying point for transatlantic allies to work better together and harness what is perhaps our greatest latent strength: the “team power” of democracies working together, in complementary ways, for shared goals. And neo-idealism also shows how to make better allies of politicians, government, business, and civil society, backed up by our populations who, in the ways outlined here, will be able to more tangibly feel the material as well as moral superiority of our system.

This elaboration of neo-idealism thus aims to address the strategic deficit that is hindering the transatlantic community at a crucial time. It provides a framework to generalize good examples that have been shown by several allies in response to the threats we face, but which need more comprehensive linking to other policy areas and backup from allies. Transforming this neo-idealist vision into reality also requires significant strategic capacity-building work in and between the members of the transatlantic community. This paper should thus be seen as an invitation for the kind of discussions that can begin building this strategic capacity – and developing better strategic culture – in a serious way. [MLI](#)

**Le moment est venu d'adopter** une stratégie nouvelle pour la protection et le renouvellement de nos sociétés et du monde libre – un « néo-idéalisme » pour la communauté transatlantique.

*La communauté transatlantique (au sens large, les États membres de l'OTAN et de l'UE) se trouve à un moment charnière – elle doit affronter les dures épreuves de prouesses et de valeur que sont : la guerre sans relâche de la Russie contre l'Ukraine et son hostilité envers les démocraties libérales; l'intensification de la compétition stratégique avec la Chine; l'émergence de nouvelles puissances mondiales et régionales comme l'Inde et l'essor des BRICS (Brésil, Russie, Inde, Chine et Afrique du Sud); le recul du modèle de mondialisation néolibéral et libre-échangiste devant les tensions croissantes entre nos sources de sécurité et de prospérité; la nécessité de maîtriser les méga-transitions tant technologiques qu'écologiques.*

*Or, malgré l'urgence et l'ampleur des dangers, nous n'avons pas encore réussi, collectivement, à ordonner nos stratégies, et ce, en dépit des bons exemples offerts par certains membres de la communauté transatlantique. D'importants déficits stratégiques ont empêché des acteurs clés, notamment l'Allemagne et le Canada, de pleinement reconnaître la situation géopolitique émergente et d'y répondre. En outre, sur le plan stratégique, ces deux pays s'écartent de la voie tracée aussi bien par les États-Unis – leur allié le plus important – que par la France, le Royaume-Uni et nos alliés de l'Europe septentrionale, centrale et orientale.*

*La stratégie que nécessite la communauté transatlantique doit comprendre un cadre pour repousser les multiples dangers qui nous attendent et transformer radicalement notre position à l'égard de l'ordre géopolitique et international – notre approche pour tenter de façonner le monde et les relations entre les États. Mais surtout, cette stratégie doit être supportée à l'intérieur des pays, de manière à nous assurer de disposer de sociétés résilientes qui peuvent non seulement procurer les fondements solides pour notre action stratégique, mais aussi, par leurs agissements concertés avec les gouvernements et les entreprises, jouer le rôle d'acteurs stratégiques à part entière.*

*À mon avis, la communauté transatlantique a donc besoin d'une « grande stratégie » pour orienter, dans différents domaines politiques, une action cohérente, plutôt que contradictoire, qui non seulement prévient les dangers qui nous guettent, mais aussi combat les faiblesses de nos sociétés, en colmatant les brèches exploitées par nos ennemis pour attiser le mécontentement de nos populations. Cette grande stratégie doit en outre mobiliser et amplifier nos forces pour nous permettre de saisir les opportunités déjà existantes et d'en créer de nouvelles afin de mieux arrimer notre action stratégique à nos valeurs et intérêts.*

*Dans cet article, je propose huit préceptes ou piliers d'une telle stratégie : une extension majeure du néo-idéalisme vers une approche pratique de la (géo)politique et de la (géo)économie. Il s'agit d'une approche qui peut assurer, en plus de la défense, le renouvellement de nos sociétés libres, tout en contribuant à la diffusion de leurs valeurs.*

*Le premier pilier, la primauté des valeurs, atteste d'une approche à la géopolitique fondée sur la morale néo-idéaliste; il conçoit les valeurs démocratiques libérales fondamentales comme des idéaux à atteindre – et considère ces valeurs comme nos intérêts les plus cruciaux.*

*De cette primauté des valeurs s'ensuivent les besoins que voici : une préparation militaire, un internationalisme efficace, un réalisme géoéconomique, un dynamisme inclusif, une modernisation écologique, un futurisme démocratique et une cohésion sociétale. En combinant ces ingrédients, le néo-idéalisme nous offre une approche propre à éliminer les dangers internes et externes qui menacent nos démocraties et nous permet de mobiliser nos diverses sources de pouvoir. Le néo-idéalisme offre à la communauté transatlantique un moyen de se protéger pour survivre, mais aussi un noyau moral et l'espoir de progrès dont nous avons besoin pour prospérer.*

*Je soutiens qu'en plaçant nos valeurs communes en son centre, le néo-idéalisme offre également aux alliés transatlantiques un lieu de ralliement leur permettant de mieux collaborer et de harnacher ce qui est peut-être notre plus grande force latente : la « force collective » de démocraties qui collaborent en complémentarité à des objectifs partagés. Le néo-idéalisme montre également comment faire de meilleurs alliés des responsables politiques, des gouvernements, des entreprises et des sociétés civiles, grâce au soutien de nos populations qui, de la manière décrite ici, seront en mesure de ressentir de manière tangible la supériorité tant matérielle que morale de notre système.*

*Cette extension du néo-idéalisme vise à résoudre le déficit stratégique qui entrave la communauté transatlantique à un moment crucial. Le cadre offert permet de généraliser les bons exemples obtenus de nombreux alliés pour nous protéger des dangers, mais a besoin d'être relié de manière plus compréhensive à d'autres domaines politiques et obtenir l'appui de tous. La concrétisation de cette vision néo-idéaliste nécessite également un important travail de renforcement des capacités stratégiques à l'échelle de la communauté transatlantique et entre ses membres. Le présent document doit donc être considéré comme une invitation au type de discussions pouvant lancer la construction de cette capacité stratégique – et enrichir la culture stratégique – de manière sérieuse. **MLI***

## Introduction

**The 2020s are proving to** be a pivotal decade for the transatlantic community – the member states of NATO and the EU. We face severe and urgent strategic tests, including: Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine and overt enmity toward liberal democracies, intensifying strategic competition with China, the emergence of new global and regional powers such as India and the growth of the BRICS grouping organization (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the retreat of free-trade based, neo-liberal model of globalization and the consequent imperative to develop a viable alternative mode of (international) political economy, the scale of the climate challenge, and the need to master rapidly evolving, disruptive technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and synthetic biology.

Yet key transatlantic powers remain strategically adrift. Germany’s purported security transformation – the “*Zeitenwende*” – is woefully incomplete and dangerously inadequate (Tallis 2023a). Canada has failed to provide materiel to match its rhetorical support for Ukraine and is hamstrung by even lower defence spending than Germany. Both countries need to plug major capability gaps. Neither has moved to adequately deal with the threat created by their infrastructural, investment, technological, and economic dependencies on China, even as they remain dependent on the United States for security.

Germany’s struggles to replace its dependency on Russia’s natural gas with clean supply from friendly countries finds its corollary in Canada’s failure to step up and provide allies with liquefied natural gas (LNG) and critical minerals, which it has in quantity. Neither Ottawa nor Berlin has yet seriously started to reckon with overt and malign Chinese and Russian interference let alone the more subtle modes of authoritarian influence for which they are prime targets.



Canada and Germany did well from the post-Cold War international order but have not yet caught up to the fact that that order is gone. Instead of clinging to the decaying remnants of the world of yesterday, which anyway was unfit for liberal-democratic purposes, both countries need a strategic reboot. This reboot must take into account the strategic direction that the US is pursuing – a path that is diverging from the one being travelled by Germany and Canada.

*“Instead of clinging to the decaying remnants of the world of yesterday, which anyway was unfit for liberal-democratic purposes, both countries need a strategic reboot.”*

Even though the transatlantic community appears ostensibly aligned on Ukraine, failing to win the war will have a more significant – and negative – impact on Germany and other European allies than on the US and Canada, and so mimicking Washington’s approach is not right for Berlin. At the same time, the Biden administration is seeking to confront or at least more firmly stand up to China and is developing a geoeconomic strategy to match. That strategy diverges from both Berlin and Ottawa’s approach to China.

Barring major policy changes from Germany and Canada, this divergence from the United States’ strategy will continue regardless of the result of the 2024 presidential election. A Donald Trump win would likely accelerate aspects of this process, but it would also continue under a Democratic administration. Either way, the onus will be on Europeans and Canadians to provide for their own security – and develop a complementary geo-economic approach that provides for their own prosperity while properly calculating and mitigating geopolitical risk. In turn, this strategy will need to align with the ways in which the two countries (and their allies) also seek to master the ecological and technological mega-transitions we are facing.

## The transatlantic community needs a grand strategy

**On all fronts, Germany, Canada,** and their transatlantic allies have much to gain from not only sticking together but broadening and deepening their cooperation. And there is plenty of scope to do so: from energy and trade to security cooperation and ensuring that our international institutions are fit for purpose. The transatlantic community can continue to thrive in an increasingly contested world if it effectively leverages its friendships with partners who share its liberal values – *by refocusing on those values.*

Indeed, governments, statespeople, and politicians across the community are openly exploring ways to do, but also to name and conceptualize, just that: Estonia’s “Fit for Freedom” agenda spearheaded by Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna (Tsahkna 2024); Finnish President Alexander Stubb’s “Values-Based Realism” (Pesu 2024); British politicians David Lammy’s “Progressive Realism” (Lammy 2024) and Rachel Reeves’ “Securonomics” (Reeves 2024); as well as US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s alternative to the neo-liberal Washington consensus (White House 2023) all touch on different aspects of this agenda even if they are not yet fully fledged, comprehensive strategies.

If Europeans and Canadians were to craft a credible and comprehensive strategic vision, it would provide the most likely way to sustain mutually beneficial relations with the US. In some conditions, such as with an extreme Trumpist policy, this will be very difficult. Yet, both Germany and Canada (as well as other members of the transatlantic community) must do more for their own security and must truly realize the potential of the economic ties between them in order to loosen dependence on authoritarians. Combining this with more effective commitment to liberal ordering would give relations with the US the best chance to thrive; for the transatlantic community to keep the Russians and Chinese out and the Americans in, the Germans, the Canadians and others must boost it up.

To play this role successfully, Germany, Canada, and their allies need to develop an internationally and domestically coherent approach that allows for complementary – rather than contradictory – action across many different policy fields. What the transatlantic community needs is a “grand strategy.”

“Grand strategy” is a notoriously misunderstood and contested term (Lissner 2018) but, at heart, it is really quite simple (Parkes, Schimmel, and Tallis 2024). It is “grand” in two ways: it encompasses all policy fields (not just the military, security, or economic areas) and it has a vision that extends beyond winning wars. That vision must encompass the kind of peace, the kind of regional or world order, or the kind of situation that the government wants to effect, and go beyond mere victory or survival. It is “strategic” in that it encapsulates the way in which a government seeks to get its country to where it wants go – to reach an objective or desired state.

Beyond simply a national vision, this type of regional strategic approach is what the transatlantic community needs if it is to remain central to a more inclusive democratic world that is capable not only of defending itself, but meaningfully renewing and better spreading liberal democracy. This grand strategy should provide a way to marshal (and bolster) our resources and the sources of power at our disposal (military, diplomatic, economic, societal, scientific, creative, moral, institutional, cultural, natural, technological, etc.).

For it to work best, the transatlantic allies will need to work together to harness what is perhaps our greatest latent strength: the “Team Power” (Parkes and Tallis 2023) of democracies with shared values and interests working together, covering each other’s weaknesses and putting their various strengths to use in complementary ways, to achieve the shared goal of ordering the world in favour of freedom.

## Neo-idealism as grand strategy

**The passionate and principled response** to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine by European leaders such as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (Frum 2022), Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas (Kallas 2022), Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania 2023), and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (Anderson 2022), along with that of many of their colleagues and counterparts,

suggests that a new, values-based approach to geopolitics is afoot, an approach that I have called neo-idealism (Tallis 2022a).

These leaders recognize that without the means to defend itself, including military capabilities, no liberal order can survive. But these leaders also recognize that “without a defensible moral core and the hope of progress, no liberal order can thrive” (Tallis 2022b).

Facing down the multiple threats confronting us requires that we seriously rethink our approach to geopolitics and international ordering (Tsaykna 2023). But, crucially, our success at facing down those threats also depends on how we back that up at home by giving our people the *viable* hope of a better future that ensures they feel the material as well as the moral superiority of our free societies. Moreover, we need to make our (geo)politics consistent with and complementary, rather than contradictory, to our (geo) economics and environmental and technology policy. And we will need to do this in ways that bring our societies together and that enable us to work more closely with our allies while forging new partnerships with other societies that want to live in freedom.

To develop this neo-idealist agenda (Tallis 2023c) with the aim of making it the transatlantic community’s grand strategy, along with the “Team Power” that needs to be at the heart of our approach, I propose the following eight precepts to build upon, advance, elaborate, refine, and augment – or challenge, if there are better alternatives:

1. **Value Primacy;**
2. **Military Readiness;**
3. **Effective Internationalism;**
4. **Geo-economic Realism;**
5. **Inclusive Dynamism;**
6. **Eco-modernism;**
7. **Democratic Futurism;** and
8. **Societal Cohesion.**

# Eight precepts for neo-idealism as a grand strategy for the transatlantic community

*“This divide we often hear about between our values and our interests is, frankly speaking, total crap.”*

– German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, 2023 (Stöckle 2023)

## 1. Value primacy

As neo-idealism is “a morally based approach to geopolitics, grounded in the power of values conceived as ideals to strive for,” it is important to be clear about which values these are, not least because they are the “master” precept of neo-idealism in a strategic sense (Tallis 2022b).

Broadly speaking, the values underpinning neo-idealism are the classic values of liberal democracies: fundamental freedoms, human rights, the rule of law, and democratic governance, together with balanced forms of social, cultural, and economic liberalism. Significantly for geopolitics, to these we should add collective self-determination for free societies and, perhaps most importantly (and most unusually), the right of citizens in those free societies to a hopeful future.

Neo-idealism puts these values first as they are the pillars of free societies at their best. These are the fundamentals of societies that allow free and diverse yet equal people to realize their potential, to define and follow their dreams, to flourish in ways of their choosing that advance our common good as well as their individual goals.

These values are, in short, what make our societies different from authoritarian regimes and what make them worth fighting for. That is why these *values* are, in effect, our primary *interests* and should be pursued as such, rather than marginalized (Stamm, 2024). They are ends in themselves but are also vectors of our human progress in other ways. And they set the parameters of both our goals and the means we employ to achieve them.

Clearly there will be debate as to how these values should be defined and how we delineate or adjudicate between them, as well as how they should be achieved. And that is part of the point – focusing on these values, giving them primacy in our strategizing, establishes a common ground upon which people in our societies from different political traditions can constructively engage.

What is also clear, however, is that liberal democracies have not delivered on several of these core values in the recent past. Other values among them need to be reimagined for the present – not least how we understand social, cultural, and economic liberalism. Yet neo-idealists will agree that these values are, in general terms, very much worth striving for and thus worth defending.

## **2. Military readiness: “Freedom must be better armed than tyranny”<sup>1</sup>**

It is no coincidence that many of the leaders advancing a neo-idealist agenda hail from countries that have experienced tyranny in living memory. They understand what it means to be deprived of rights, freedoms, and the hope of progress – and thus why liberal democracy needs to be defended.

This defence relies on a triad: i) military capabilities and the budget to procure and sustain them; ii) the mindset to use them if necessary; and iii) societal backup for doing so. On all three counts the transatlantic community is far from where it needs to be.

In Canada, Germany, and many other allied states, years of under-investment in defence have left us dangerously short of the capabilities we need to effectively protect ourselves. There are exceptions. The Baltic states are re-arming fast and Poland is doing so at scale. But, despite the clear dangers we face, tight budgets, alternative priorities, complacency, and fears over future prosperity are all constraining defence spending in Germany, Canada, and elsewhere across the West.

This needs to change, as does our approach to the production and procurement of the breadth of equipment and depth of munitions we need. For that to happen, our politicians must be honest with our populations about the threats we face and the costs of addressing them – and make clear that the cost of failed deterrence is higher than that of equipping ourselves to properly deter our foes.

For that to appeal to the general public and, thus, make political sense in electoral terms, there can't only be a negative side to the equation. We must be able to show that the costs that will be paid now are actually investments in a better future, which is why it is essential to embed military readiness in a wider strategy for achieving the goals of the transatlantic community and the free world. We must arm ourselves with a compelling and credible vision for our

future. And we need a winning mentality rather than the kind of equivocation that has held back our collective efforts thus far, epitomized by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's failure to commit to Ukraine's victory, which signals weakness and fear.

If we show our populations why we need to prepare ourselves militarily then we can gain society's backing for serious, long-term investment in the capabilities we need to defend ourselves. If we enlist our populations in this endeavour and show that we are willing to fight, we won't have to – because building and showing our strength, as well as our resolve, will credibly deter our enemies.

### **3. Effective internationalism: producing order fit for freedom**

If we are to not only successfully defend the free world but also renew it to make good on our promise of having a superior model, we need to reboot the transatlantic community's international "ordering power." This is our collective ability to shape the world via institutions, rules and norms of conduct in ways that help us manage our complex economic and security interdependence, and that structure relations between states in the absence of a higher authority. Rebooting our ordering power requires that we refresh our understanding of what our international institutions, like the UN but also the EU and NATO, are for. We then need to adjust the ways that we interact within these institutions – and how we try to shape them and their rules – accordingly.

As too many of the people and governments in the West started to lose confidence in our own model, we also lost the drive to help order the world in the interest of free societies and free people. And indeed, we also lost the belief that we could, let alone should, do so. This loss of confidence and drive was accelerated by the catastrophic consequences of the neo-conservative-inspired attempt to impose democracy by force in Iraq and the failure to do so in Afghanistan, culminating in humiliating defeat with severe humanitarian consequences (Boot 2023).

These failures contributed to the rise of the "restraint" school of geopolitics, which further diminished the political impetus to order the world for liberal ends. Without this animating spirit, and conduct to match, what was left was the hollowed out legacy institutions and rules from the great period of

liberal ordering that took place after the Second World War. The result was that rather than treating institutions as the means to liberal and democratic ends, too often international institutions came to be seen as ends in themselves. The UN in particular became an empty shell that prioritized seemingly liberal or at least lawful processes over liberal outcomes, allowing authoritarian states to instrumentalize the institution for illiberal purposes.

At a time when the rules of the “rules-based-order” came to seem to many around the globe as rigged (Colgan and Keohane 2017), we too often focused on the rules themselves rather than the use that was being made of them. In broad organizations, like the UN, that meant that Russia could get away with murder. The UN legal and institutional framework proved powerless to prevent Moscow from attempting to assert an imperial “sphere of influence,” thus further eroding the New York based organization’s credibility. Even in the supposedly cohesive EU, the club’s (inadequate) rules became an excuse for not dealing with political problems, including illiberal action by member states such as Hungary.

“ *To regain our ordering power,  
we need to re-politicize our  
approach to international  
ordering and institutions.* ”

To regain our ordering power, we need to re-politicize our approach to international ordering and institutions – prioritizing outcomes that serve free societies and liberal values. We should not be afraid to say we have the better way, so long as we are willing to let others, who also wish to go this way, join us. Unlike the neo-conservatives, neo-idealists do not advocate imposing democracy by force where it does not exist. The neo-idealist approach is, rather, to defend existing free societies to give them the chance to thrive, and to help those who wish to develop free societies to do so – including by creating voluntary “spheres of integration” like the EU and NATO, which provide a liberal, democratic alternative to imperial spheres of influence.



Building a more inclusive – and no longer “rigged” – global order is essential, but doing so cannot mean “anything goes.” We need to stick to the values outlined above and build the new order accordingly. Rather than compromising in order to accommodate dictators and authoritarians, we must accept that not everyone can be reached, and sometimes, it’s their responsibility to change rather than ours to meet them halfway. We will still need all-encompassing global institutions (like the UN) to manage the lowest-common-denominator relations with hostile powers – and we have to make them work better – but we also need new institutional frameworks that allow us to maximize the power of our friendships with like-minded countries – and to build better relations with those who want to democratize. In our existing clubs, such as the EU and NATO, we need to improve cohesion and effectiveness by developing the powers to ensure that illiberal governments – like Hungary’s – do not undermine them from within. That should include the power to exclude persistent troublemakers.

The transatlantic community’s ordering power needs to serve our values and our political purpose: advancing the security and prosperity of free societies and enlarging the free world to include those who wish to be part of it – and play by its rules. However, we also need to ensure that we have the rules we require and interpret them to serve their purpose, rather than retreating into the “restrictive comfort of legalism”: hiding behind inadequate laws and treating them as being fixed, rather than malleable, which amounts to an excuse not to act in the service of our values and interests.

An indicative example is the need to make the legal case to confiscate Russian state assets, building on the provisions that already exist under international law, and adapting our national legislation accordingly (Burnett 2024). We have the tools to do something that is in the interest of better global order; we have the ability to set a precedent that demonstrates that aggressive powers who go about waging wars will pay for their belligerence. Conversely, we risk setting the precedent that such actions will go unpunished and demonstrate our weakness rather than our resolve – which is exactly what several Western governments, including Germany, are doing by hiding behind restrictive and blinkered interpretations of international law.

In essence, we need to restore our role as producers rather than just consumers of liberal, democratic ordering that can shape the world in our interest. The systemic competition between democracies and autocracies is also about who gets to set the rules – and we can’t be afraid to win it.

#### 4. (Geo-)economic realism: investing in secure prosperity

Liberal democracies need prosperity. Yet the ways we generate that prosperity cannot come at the expense of our security, as has all too often been the case in recent years. The activities of private companies, often encouraged by governments in Germany, Canada, and elsewhere in the transatlantic community, have created dangerous dependencies of several kinds.

In Europe, many countries became dependent on Russian hydrocarbons, especially natural gas. Other resource and component dependencies (notably on China) threaten our security of supply since authoritarian regimes could simply turn off the tap, which, in the case of processed critical minerals, wind turbine parts, or solar panels, would threaten our green transitions as well as our quality of life.

Across the transatlantic community the dependence of large and influential companies on the Chinese market has led our governments to take too soft an approach to standing up to Beijing's bullying of Taiwan, destabilizing activity in the South China Sea and on its abysmal human rights record. Instead, we have allowed Beijing to grow its influence, enjoy trade conditions skewed in Chinese companies' favour and to benefit from technology transfers. The massive investment that some of our most prominent companies continue to make in China, despite the hostile and mercantilist practices of the Chinese government and rising geopolitical tensions, have already created significant risks. Worse, there is the danger – due to their prominence – that these companies would expect to be bailed out by taxpayers should their investments suddenly become worthless.

We cannot allow this situation to continue unabated, as the German government has done by delegating responsibility for calculating and managing China risk to private companies – which has led large corporations such as Mercedes Benz to consider de-risking to mean *more, not less*, presence in China (Barkin 2023). This is emphatically not the de-risking that democracies need and in fact further increases the threats to our prosperity as well as security.

If we are to take de-risking seriously, we need to mandate that private companies undergo audits to identify geopolitical risk. We also need to create the conditions where they properly price in this risk, including by making public the exposure they create for our societies. Large, multinational companies do not necessarily act in the general economic interest of our societies – and what is

good for them may not be good for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that form the backbone of our economies. Democracies of the transatlantic community should explore the benefits of levying taxes to compensate for the externalities (societal costs imposed by private actions) of private companies' dealings with autocratic regimes (Wolff and Spilner 2023).

There are certain sectors where we need to decouple from China and other authoritarian regimes altogether – as the US pushed its allies to do with its much-needed and highly effective “chip choke,” which prohibited exports of advanced semiconductors to China (Miller 2022). We have also managed real decoupling in parts of our energy trade with Russia even if, collectively, we could and should do more. In other areas we need to undertake a proper de-risking by diversifying suppliers and rerouting supply chains and, especially, through “friendshoring” – doing more business with allies and other liberal democracies that share our values and have converging interests.

“*Friendshoring will increase our security of supply and (...) would help reinforce the transatlantic community's role as the core of the free world.*”

Friendshoring will increase our security of supply and, by intensifying our connections to each other, would help reinforce the transatlantic community's role as the core of the free world. As well as doing business with our existing friends, we also need to make new ones, which is where we *can* still make meaningful “change through trade.” With government help to create the proper conditions, our firms can open up new markets that will be alternatives to China and find new suppliers for products and components. This could include signing free or freer trade agreements, providing investment guarantees, or helping reduce bureaucratic obstacles, but we need to be clear about sticking to our values when doing so by actively pushing for (further) liberal change in those countries. Through this new approach to connectivity, we can do well by doing good – with Canada having a key role to play, as allies already recognize (Herwatz 2022).

A neo-idealist approach is thus clear-eyed about the economic threats we face and the ways those threats undermine our geopolitics. But importantly, a neo-idealist approach is not anti-globalist. This is not a call for autarky! Rather, geoeconomic realism in the neo-idealist sense sees the need for a different kind of globalization – redefining those with whom we are willing to do business as already like-minded or potentially like-minded countries. This is, nonetheless, a move away from the neo-liberal model of globalization founded on “free trade,” small government, and getting Western governments out of the way of private business. This neo-liberal model fostered Chinese mercantilism, loaded us with risk, gutted whole sectors of our economies – as well as many communities – and undermined our geopolitical standing.

The neo-idealist approach is clear that a new trade model is needed – and is also realistic in recognizing that there will be costs to doing business in this way but argues firmly that we need to pay this “national security premium” (Burnett 2023) or face the far greater costs of subjugation and potential vassalhood later. However, this approach is not just about avoiding negative outcomes but creating positive ones. Our societies will only pay these higher costs now if we can genuinely show that they are investments in our better future – to not only ensure that our values survive, but that we can thrive by doing so.

## **5. Inclusive dynamism: feeling the benefits of freedom**

It cannot be repeated often enough: liberal democracies need to be prosperous. We need prosperity to sustain and advance our material quality of life and to pay for essential public services – health, education, social care – as well as for the infrastructure that enables us to provide a platform for human flourishing. Prosperity is also essential for fostering research and providing the investment that helps drive scientific and technological progress. And, of course, we need money to pay for our security and defence in an increasingly competitive world.

The prosperity we need will only be created if we harness and leverage one of the key advantages of free societies: the creativity, ingenuity, and drive of free people working in and through free markets. We need entrepreneurs and businesses to drive forward and scale-up innovation, turn science into usable technology, provide employment, efficiently allocate resources, and take risks that advance rather than undermine us.

North America remains strong in this regard (albeit with room for improvement) but Europe has fallen behind, relying on regulation in its foreign relations rather than innovation at home. Europe's approach relies on – and is squandering – the market and economic power that was built up by previous generations. Crucially, across the transatlantic community we would benefit from abandoning neo-liberal economics, leaving behind both its domestic elements and its approach to trade.

“ *It is a mistake to see neo-liberalism as synonymous with competitiveness and pro-market policies.* ”

It is a mistake to see neo-liberalism as synonymous with competitiveness and pro-market policies. Leading economists like Joseph Stiglitz, author of *The Road to Freedom*, and commentators such as Martin Wolf, who wrote *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, have argued compellingly that neo-liberalism created the wrong incentives for business – encouraging rent-seeking rather than innovation. Neo-liberalism may have helped drag millions out of absolute poverty around the world (especially in China), but it also selectively enriched particular segments of our populations while entrenching significant income and wealth inequalities in our societies. Neo-liberalism's dominance also coincided with the destruction of much of our domestic manufacturing base as globalizing corporations offshored production to lower costs.

Governments across the transatlantic community are now trying to woo producers – especially of high-value goods, including semiconductors – to return home. But we also need to take action to address the socio-economic wreckage that sees far too many of our people feeling not only left behind but locked out of future prosperity. It is amidst this wreckage that populists thrive and, if we are to head off their threat and create resilient, just, secure, and prosperous societies, we need a new compact with our populations and companies.

Fundamentally, if we are to honour the “right to a hopeful future” that lies at the heart of neo-idealism, we must ensure that people in free societies are insured against the worst blows of fate, have a meaningful say in defining

the type of progress they want (i.e., what improvement means in practice), and, crucially, that they can reasonably aspire to their own advancement.

The extended fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine have all dealt severe blows to neo-liberalism as a political-economic and trade model for free societies. We have yet to find a compellingly comprehensive successor. To meet the neo-idealist criteria, any new model will need to combine economic dynamism with a better distribution of opportunity, which properly includes our populations in sharing the fruits of freedom, while creating conditions of lasting and structural rather than fleeting and transactional prosperity.

## **6. Eco-modernism: A green future of more**

Too often we hear that our long-term prosperity will need to be sacrificed if we are to achieve ecological sustainability and address the existential threat of climate change. This has not worked as a narrative strategy to convince people to make the sacrifices or, at least, the major behavioural changes needed to secure our environmental future. It is, in many ways, unsurprising that even given the level of the threat involved, people are unwilling to sacrifice or adapt only to find themselves worse off. Even if it makes logical sense to some, many more will not commit to such a program – and certainly not in the wholehearted fashion that is needed.

Those who continue to advocate for green policies that will deliver a future of less, often predicated on an anti-materialist, de-growth agenda, are then left with few options other than command and control. Such a combination of imposition and prohibition is not a viable or appealing prospect for free societies whose lifeblood is maximizing human potential and flourishing.

“Eco-modernist” approaches that seek to harness the power of technology to both protect nature and continue to deliver social and material progress are a better alternative. We need a mixture of carrots and sticks that can help drive behavioural change, investment in research, and the development of usable and scalable technology that can help us master our green transitions while supporting rising standards of living for more of our people.

A key to this, especially in Europe, will be freeing capital markets and structuring them in such a way as to increase their risk preference and thus increase investment in emerging technologies, which will help our most

innovative firms make the leap from start-up to scale-up. If we do not do so, we'll end up continuing to be reliant on technologies from elsewhere and, thus, only paying for rather than also profiting from our green transition – and potentially having it weaponized against us.

From transport to domestic heating to industrial production, the question of how to move to a sustainable energy mix remains key – but must also be considered in light of geopolitical risks, economic dependencies, and our overall strategic aims. For this, among other reasons, many countries in the transatlantic community have prudently backed up their transition to renewables with nuclear power. Others look to natural gas as the cleanest of the fossil fuels, whereas noted above, Canada's potential to play a significantly positive role has not yet materialized.

Ending holdouts and exceptions for ecologically unsustainable industries or technologies such as combustion engines – especially where vested interests exercise undue influence and effectively block change to more environmentally friendly tech – will be essential. So too will subsidies for our people to equip themselves to reduce their carbon footprints. Nonetheless, there will still be costs for taxpayers to pay if our green transitions are to work. This is why they have to be convinced that it will be worth it and as a result they will have a better future, not just more of the same inadequate status quo – or even something worse than they have now.

## **7. Democratic futurism: Embracing technological change**

Developing a credibly positive vision of the future is also essential if the transatlantic community is to turn the immense and numerous technological shifts that we are undergoing to the advantage of democratic societies. This will be a challenge because change itself is now perceived as something to be wary of (Tallis 2020), given that many in our societies have lost faith in our ability to improve our situation.

Yet if we don't rekindle our love affair with the future and our desire to shape it in our interests and in accordance with our values, then others, including authoritarians, will shape it for us – and we will not like the results. It is not that artificial intelligence, synthetic biology, nanotechnologies, and virtual reality (to name just a few) will pass us by, but the chance to harness those technologies for our liberal purposes will be lost. We need to embrace and

influence these emerging and maturing technologies, rather than overly rely on negative regulation (limiting the use of these technologies in our societies and thus curtailing our development of them). We must aim for true democratization by exploiting their potential for democratic goals – and putting our people in a position to exercise control over them in their daily lives.

The development of the free world’s significant advantage in “the world’s most crucial technology” – semiconductors – should provide an object lesson here (Miller 2022). That technology only got off the ground through the interaction of scientists at well-supported, elite research institutions with government (and especially military) actors who not only funded but also then used and aided the development of practical applications for silicon chips. Silicon Valley only became what it did because of subsequent development by visionary entrepreneurs (often funded by visionary venture capitalists), determined to sell into large, free markets and who were able to internationalize production and supply chains (to friendly countries). This public-private nexus laid the groundwork for the crucial lead in advanced chips that the transatlantic community and its Asian allies were able to maintain over the Soviet Union during the Cold War and that we still hold over China now.

Yet there are also cautionary tales from the growth of social media giants whose record on empowering citizens and upholding democracy is distinctly mixed (despite the undoubted benefits they also bring). We need to invest in the training and education to give our people the confidence that they can understand and engage on their terms with extant and emerging technologies. At the same time, we must ensure that our regulations don’t focus only on the negative. To invent the train was also to invent the train crash, but that’s no reason to regret the introduction of rail travel.

And, as with our technology-enabled green transition, we need to ensure that our capital markets are optimized for developing the technologies we need, which will boost both our security and our prosperity. Instead of “picking winners” and launching into scattered, un-strategic investments, we should focus on creating the conditions in which those investments and the technologies they encourage can arise.

We should be clear about the need for this nexus of actors involved in technological development – public and private, individual and collective – including universities, scientists, research institutions, experts, firms, entrepreneurs, managers, marketers, skilled workers, politicians, governments,



armies, soldiers and thinkers. We should emphasize the importance of preventing any single entity from dominating the process, as this will skew the path along which technology evolves – and the purposes it serves – as has come to be the case with the social media companies that now dominate Silicon Valley. Democratic control but also democratic empowerment of technological progress, for the good of people in free societies who can exercise control over technology, is essential if we are to ensure our material as well moral edge in the systemic competition.

## **8. Societal cohesion: Resilient, diverse, and proud**

“Un-cancelling the future” – reviving the viable belief among our societies that we can aspire to progress and that our children can live better than we do – will also be crucial in another way (Tallis 2020; 2023b). In the absence of a positive outlook, there has been a proliferation of populists offering backward-looking politics of nostalgia. Pessimism about the prospects of our national societies and by extension, the transatlantic community, have unleashed defensive and divisive chauvinistic politics. Negative outlooks and nativism go hand in hand; when people expect that there is less to go around, some try to keep more for themselves and those they see as being “like them” while denying it to others.

This is just one of the many forms of division that we are seeing in our societies (in addition to the economic disenfranchisement mentioned above). Divisions open cracks that malign, anti-democratic and illiberal forces take advantage of, both from within and outside our countries. To build truly resilient societies, we need buy-in from the populace – from people who can see the realistic prospect of a better future and are invested in bringing it about, together. That means we need to fix the cracks we have made or allowed to spread. We need to offer unifying, positive visions in their place – and have the substance to back them up.

Neo-idealists are committed to social and cultural liberalism and thus to societal diversity and equality of opportunity and participation regardless of gender, race, or sexuality. Nonetheless, this diversity needs to coalesce around a common commitment and buy-in to the values that make up the core of liberal societies. We should be confident enough in those values as our societal base that we are not afraid to insist on them – and enforce them by policing our societies accordingly.

That confidence in those values should also apply to the way we approach migration. Our countries need migration for both economic and cultural reasons (Balarajan, Cameron, and Goldin 2011) and migration can also help us in the geopolitical competition by attracting the talent we need (BerlinsideOut Podcast 2024) and by creating constructive personal links with other countries. But for this to work, migrants must also be willing, able, and supported in integrating into our societies and adhering to the values on which those societies are based. We urgently need honest conversations that go beyond the poles of “open-border evangelism” on the one hand and “fortress nativism” on the other. We need to examine the benefits that migration brings as well as the challenges it creates and explore how to manage those challenges in the interests of the security, prosperity, and freedom of our societies.

In much the same way as the transatlantic community needs to shake off the vestiges of neo-liberal economics, it also needs to free itself from the so-called identitarian politics (Fukuyama 2022) that has had such divisive effects in recent years. This is, in effect, a form of plural, sectarian relativism that focuses on supposedly immutable and exclusive forms of identity via particular and damaging perspectives on race and gender. It makes those essentialized characteristics the defining – and unbridgeable – feature of peoples’ lives as well as the basis for grievance politics.

Meaningful prospects of (material) betterment are essential in creating cohesive societies: If you have a future, you stop endlessly litigating the past. That’s why it’s crucial to ensure that everyone, regardless of gender, race, or sexuality, has access to public services, is well served by modern infrastructure, and has the means to live a decent life. It is also essential that we bolster feelings of attachment and collective belonging to our societies, and strengthen the means of participation, in order to counter exclusion and marginalization (whether among migrant and minority groups or among native and majority populations).

The latter requires a rethink for many liberals, not least in Western Europe, as to how they view national identity. Rather than seeing patriotism as a problem and national identity as something outdated and thus to be overcome, neo-idealists should embrace civic forms of identity as rallying points from which to drive societal progress. The key is ensuring that these identities are performative and inclusive (so that people who wish to can join by integrating with them by acting in certain ways over time), rather than

exclusive or essentialized (limiting them only to people born in certain places or with particular characteristics).

Ukraine provides an example of how to accelerate the consolidation of civic nationhood – overcoming past ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious divisions and integrating greater sections of its society into a common struggle. In Ukraine’s case this has been necessary to have the chance to prevail in the worst of times. But we should also use the power of this key point of identification and unification for positive change. Across our societies we must show we have more in common and can meaningfully do better together than when we splinter into mutually exclusive and antagonistic factions. The corollary of this, however, is properly managing migration and being able to determine who comes in and can stay – and who cannot.

This civic national pride will be essential to our resilience but also to developing the multi-dimensional military readiness we need to defend ourselves. Moreover, civic national pride does not automatically lead to the conflict that is too often lazily associated with nationalism. Western Europeans, especially Germans, should embrace the concept that diverse yet cohesive nations can positively collaborate with other proud nations in the transatlantic community. This cooperation extends to allies and partners around the world.

## **Conclusion: Envisioning a world in which free societies can thrive**

**In order to build** – and to build upon – more cohesive societies capable of defending ourselves and offering our people the credible hope of a better future, we need to enlist societal stakeholders – business and industry as well as our general populations – as strategic players who buy into and work towards our common goals. And in our international relations, we need to work as a team with the members of the transatlantic community and with our allies across the free world.

For this to happen, we need to be clear about our common goals – and they must be shared in order for these different players to commit to achieving them.

That is why a key part of (grand) strategizing is to set a vision for what could and should be collectively achieved. In the case of the transatlantic community, and to update former US President Woodrow Wilson's famous maxim in a neo-idealist way, this could be as simple as "a world safe for democracy in which free societies can thrive."

Such an overarching vision would engender the kind of precepts detailed above and help communities set objectives and gather the resources to achieve them. Putting that together in a comprehensive strategic approach would allow scarce resources to be prioritized sensibly and would act as a lodestar for coherent policymaking across diverse fields and adaptable to national contexts. And it would provide the rallying point needed to bring together our national, transnational, and international players to work for our common good.

To transform this neo-idealist vision into strategic reality, however, much work is needed to build the capacity to develop and sustain this grand strategic approach – within but also between the states and institutions that make up of the transatlantic community. Strategy has become something of a lost art in many of our capitals. Where it endures, it is often either outdated or mired in practices and perspectives that are either too narrow (limited to military, defence, and security matters), or falls back on assumptions – narrowly defined, defensive, and short-sighted self-interest, tragic and chauvinistic "realism," self-loathing, and cynical "restraint" – that bring out the worst rather than the best in our societies.

That can – and must – change. We need to develop the skills, knowledge, networks, and culture to create and sustain a democratic strategy that unites our societies and brings them together as allies – to defend, renew, and spread liberal democracy, thereby serving the security and prosperity of our free societies and giving our peoples the right to a hopeful future. [MLI](#)

## About the author



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## Endnote

- 1 As Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a leading neo-idealist, memorably put it (Zelenskyy 2022).

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