



Zeitenwende: Toward a Necessary Reset of NATO's Russia Policy

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On October 3, 1990, the Day of German Unity, when hundreds of thousands of Germans celebrated in Berlin, Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker admonished his compatriots to heed the lessons of history.¹ The Germans, von Weizsäcker emphasized, had a special responsibility to work “for a constructive and common Ostpolitik of the entire West,” building bridges and providing their neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) with clear political and economic perspectives. But they also had to think about a positive relationship with the Soviet Union: “And we all know that future stability in Europe depends on a significant contribution from Moscow. The western border of the Soviet Union must not become the eastern border of Europe.”²

For the past three decades, NATO member states, and Germany in particular, went to great lengths to avoid the emergence of a new dividing line in Europe. They promoted the inclusion of the new democracies in CEE in both the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, while simultaneously trying to nurture a strategic partnership with the Soviet Union, and later the Russian Federation. As the widely shared mantra had it, “Security in Europe is only possible with Russia, not against Russia.”

Neither domestic developments in Russia, nor Russia's violation of the territorial integrity of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, fundamentally changed the general ambition in Western Europe. Russia was often referred to as a difficult

partner, but as a partner nonetheless. In the strategic mainstream in Western Europe, it was an almost uncontested assumption that the West should not abandon the vision of a constructive partnership. As a result, and despite the increasing dismay of Allies in CEE, the Alliance has been careful to respect the (self-)restrictions established in the NATO-Russia Founding Act. This includes the announcement, “that in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.”³ For the member states that joined NATO after 1997, this was always seen as a problem for NATO's principle of equal security for all Allies. Some felt like second-class members.

Although several NATO Allies have pushed for a revision of NATO's commitments, other members have only reluctantly agreed to very moderate adaptations of NATO's posture since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and engaged in a proxy war in eastern Ukraine. These measures included, most notably, the deployment of rotational multinational battlegroups to Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as well as the establishment of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), NATO's “spearhead force,” to reinforce the tripwire forces.

Yet, NATO Allies never agreed to a fundamental reassessment of their

strategic posture that would question the NATO-Russia Founding Act and consider the permanent deployment of substantial combat forces and infrastructure to member states on the eastern flank. Until recently, key NATO governments argued that the Alliance should try to preserve the Founding Act to allow for a potential return to the spirit of the agreement in the future. For many officials in Western Europe, what NATO did in Poland and the Baltic states was to reassure their Allies, not to deter Russia, as they thought that this was a vastly overblown threat.

Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin's insistence on a European security order based on spheres of influence, and Russia's repeated threats against NATO member states or non-aligned states, such as Sweden and Finland, finally forced a reversal of this policy. It has become obvious even to those who wanted to believe otherwise that the Russian government is not interested in a constructive partnership as described in the Founding Act—no matter what NATO does. NATO must adapt to the fact that, for the foreseeable future, security in Europe is not possible with Russia, it needs to be defended against Russia.

Taking the *Zeitenwende* Seriously and Ensuring NATO Cohesion

This shift will require a fundamental reevaluation of NATO's strategic posture, encompassing both strategic culture and specific military capabilities and planning. While the chances for a new NATO consensus have increased significantly and the Alliance has generally excelled at projecting strength and unity in recent months, arriving at a new strategic posture will require considerable alliance management, forging a new consensus

that is both adequate to the task and politically sustainable in the long run.

To begin with, elites in many NATO member states have to reassess some of their core beliefs regarding the post-Cold War security environment in general, and the role of Russia in particular. Lest NATO as a whole miss another "wake-up call," those who have too long neglected key developments in Russia and brushed away warnings from their Allies need to take seriously the full implications of what German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called a "*Zeitenwende*," the turn of an era. Having been "surprised" repeatedly, Allies will have to make sure not to be surprised again but to prepare for worst-case scenarios. In this context, actions speak louder than words. Those NATO Allies who have long been reluctant to strengthen deterrence measures on the eastern flank should not wait for others to ask them for more but rather make specific proposals to ramp up NATO defenses. For instance, a Franco-German initiative to bring significant capabilities to the eastern flank would not only be appreciated by Allies, but would also send a strong signal to Moscow.

At the same time, Allies should try to support those political actors in Germany, France, Italy, and other member states traditionally reluctant to openly oppose Russia who push for the reevaluation of their national strategies. While Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine have already forced a reversal of long-lasting policies in several European countries, and silenced critics for the time being, the changes needed will require a lot of financial and political commitment.⁴ Given the reluctance that elites and publics in Western Europe have demonstrated in the

past when a tougher response to Russian behavior would have been appropriate, it would be surprising if proponents of an illusory return to the status quo ante did not try to prevent NATO member states from engaging in an active and robust policy of containment—even if their position has been severely weakened.

Against this background, NATO members on the eastern flank that long called for a stronger reaction to Russian revisionism would be well advised to invest in public diplomacy in Western Europe. While U.S. commitment remains essential, NATO's most vulnerable Allies will need to count on the support of their European Allies in Western Europe. Proclaiming “We told you so”—although perfectly legitimate and understandable—will not be enough to bring about the far-reaching changes arguably needed.

Adapting NATO's Strategic Posture for the Post-Post-Cold War Era

Russia's aggression against Ukraine marks the definitive end of the post-Cold War era and Western attempts to build a security partnership with Russia. While NATO members need to think harder about what they can do to support Ukraine right now, they should not wait to prepare for another potential crisis beyond Ukraine. They need to reassess their deterrence measures on the eastern flank, devise a plan for a rapid admission of Finland and Sweden (if they decide to apply), and create a strategy for other vulnerable states in the Euro-Atlantic area, such as Georgia and Moldova.

As remote as an attack on NATO may still seem today, recent years have shown that

Vladimir Putin is willing to use force if he feels that he can get away with it. NATO needs to be able to honor its “sacred obligation under Article 5 to defend each and every inch of NATO territory with the full force of our collective power,” as President Joseph Biden put it.⁵ Since the beginning of Russia's invasion, NATO member states have added troops to the multinational battalions in Poland and the Baltic states, and decided to deploy additional battlegroups to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.⁶ But these moderate increases can only be a first step. At the extraordinary summit meeting in Brussels in March 2022, NATO leaders asked their military planners to come up with a “long-term reset of our presence, of our military posture in the eastern part of the Alliance and across the whole Alliance,” to be adopted at the Madrid Summit in June.⁷ Given Russia's blatant violation of the most fundamental norms, NATO must not feel bound by the provisions of the Founding Act anymore but come up with a strategic posture that accounts for the new security environment. In this environment, clearly different from “the current and foreseeable security environment,” NATO leaders described in 1997,⁸ NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) tripwire forces are not enough. They may have been adequate for deterrence by punishment,⁹ but NATO today should arguably adopt a strategy based on deterrence by denial.

At the same time, the Alliance should only leave behind those restrictions that hamper its ability to defend its Allies. For instance, while NATO also needs to think about the best response to developments in Russia's nuclear doctrine and capabilities, it is highly questionable whether it would make sense to negate the

so-called “three no’s” regarding NATO’s nuclear posture.¹⁰ NATO should also make clear to Russia that it remains open to discuss increased transparency in exercises and other basic risk reduction measures.

While protecting the territory of its members remains NATO’s core task, Allies should also discuss the future security status of those who do not enjoy the benefits of NATO’s security guarantee (yet). They should prepare for the potential accession of Finland and Sweden, two countries that have been close NATO partners for a long time and have recently been taking part in all NATO consultations about the war in Ukraine. Should Helsinki and Stockholm express their willingness to join the Alliance, NATO needs to have a plan to make sure that the Russian government understands that these two countries are covered by Article 5, active immediately, and follow up with adequate military planning.

Finally, in addition to supporting Ukraine in the long run, the Alliance and others committed to the basic principles of the European security acquis will also need to discuss the future of countries such as Georgia or Moldova. In both countries, Russian troops occupy parts of their territory, effectively preventing them from securing NATO membership.

The unfortunate situation of countries such as Moldova, Georgia, and, most outstandingly, Ukraine demonstrates that von Weizsäcker’s scenario of a new dividing line in Europe is, from today’s point of view, the best possible outcome. Although clearly not what Western leaders had in mind in the first place, a stable dividing line at the Western border of Russia would mean that the political independence and freedom of as many people and states as

possible would be protected by NATO and the EU. It is, of course, the scenario that Putin always warned of and pretended to fight against. Should NATO members decide to fortify the eastern borders of EU and NATO against the revisionist government in the Kremlin, it will be a dividing line of Putin’s making.

Endnotes

1. In this brief paper, I focus on one of the four questions that the organizers suggested: “How will the conflict in Ukraine change the future trajectory and cohesion of NATO?” For the time being, the most urgent question is certainly what NATO and the EU can do to support Ukraine. Nonetheless, I believe it is important to also discuss the repercussions for NATO-Russia relations in general and think about the changes in policies, strategy, and posture that NATO members need to agree on.
2. Richard von Weizsäcker, “Ansprache von Bundespräsident Richard von Weizsäcker beim Staatsakt zum ‚Tag der deutschen Einheit,“ Berlin, October 3, 1990, https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Richard-von-Weizsaecker/Reden/1990/10/19901003_Rede.html, author’s translation.
3. See, NATO, “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation Signed in Paris, France,” May 27, 1997, https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm.
4. The most dramatic example is Germany. A few days after the invasion of Ukraine, Chancellor Olaf Scholz, in a special session of the German Bundestag, announced a series of fundamental reversals: He committed to spend 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense from now on (which his party had criticized for many years); he announced a special 100 billion euros defense investment fund to fill capability gaps in the Bundeswehr; he suggested to look into buying F-35 jet fighters to ensure Germany’s long-term commitment to NATO’s nuclear sharing (which was hotly debated in the German election campaign last year); and he announced to send weapons to Ukraine (which the government had opposed for a long time). These policies have been strongly supported by public opinion. Yet, in recent weeks, critics have slowly tried to push back against some of the announcements, while most members of the German strategic community would agree that these changes have been overdue and could only be the first step.
5. Joseph R. Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on the United Efforts of the Free World to Support the People of Ukraine,” Warsaw, March 26, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/26/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-efforts-of-the-free-world-to-support-the-people-of-ukraine/>.
6. See, NATO, “Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government,” Brussels, March 24, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_193719.htm?selectedLocale=en.
7. See, “Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg Following the Extraordinary Summit of NATO Heads of State and Government,” Brussels, March 24, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_193613.htm?selectedLocale=en.
8. In recent weeks, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized repeatedly

that Russia had walked away from the NATO-Russia Founding Act and brought about a fundamentally different “security environment.”

9. For a discussion of their role, see, Martin Zapfe, “Deterrence from the Ground Up: Understanding NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence,” *Survival*, vol. 59, no. 3, (2017), pp. 147-160.

10. In the NATO-Russia Founding Act, NATO member states reiterated, “They have no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO’s nuclear posture or nuclear policy – and do not foresee any future need to do so.”