



How the War in Ukraine is Affecting NATO's Future Trajectory and Cohesion

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While I was studying in Denmark in 1994, an old Danish professor explained to a group of Baltic students why the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was founded in 1949. He taught us that NATO was created in order to keep Americans “in,” Russians “out,” and Germans “down” in the European security architecture. Later, I had the honor to work at NATO Headquarters in the 2010s and spent the best part of the 1990s building the Estonian Ministry of Defence from scratch. Back then, we were not thinking too much about the origins of NATO, but, instead, we concentrated on NATO's enlargement and its future role securing the continent.

Unfortunately, harsh Cold War truths have resurfaced recently, with the beginning of a new era in European security, which started on February 24, 2022. We have not named this new post-post-Cold War era yet, but there is a shared understanding that Europe cannot go back to its previous carefree days where war belonged to history books. Keeping Americans “in” and Germans “down” militarily has been certainly achieved by NATO, also after the Cold War. German self-depreciation in military terms has been an unfortunate feature in post-Cold War European security that has weakened European standing in the world.

During the last 30 years, NATO has been operating in a complex security policy

landscape, where threat perceptions differed widely among Europeans, depending on their historic experience. While nations in Eastern Europe were trying to join NATO in order to be a part of its collective defense clause, in many Western European countries, military threats were not perceived as central, and the populations had grown more pacifist. There are few brilliant explanations for the reasons behind pacifism in the Western Europe, among them also a long period of military security provided by NATO.¹ It is important to understand this phenomenon in order to grasp European post-Cold War security dynamics. The majority of West European decision-makers in office today grew up on a post-Second World War continent, which was divided and where their nations' security was guaranteed by the U.S. and NATO, which kept Russia at bay with nuclear deterrence.

The narratives of avoiding the horrors of another war and having the U.S. forces to protect Europe were deeply ingrained in European thinking during the Cold War. This kind of security order ended in 1989-1991, but the mentality of relying on someone else providing a security umbrella has stayed, facilitating the sense of pacifism in many European countries. The economic integration facilitated by the European Union has contributed to the rise of welfare states, and, for many decades, Europe has lived in a unique bubble with both economic and military

security guaranteed. New post-Cold War European generations born into this unique welfare island did not have to worry about being drafted to conscription armies or being left without a job after graduating university. Discussions on post-modern European pacifist values made a nice conversation subject in chic cafes and old universities, but did not assess adequately the changing geopolitical realities in the world.

The U.S. has complained for decades about the low level of European NATO Allies' defense spending, for good reason. Only the United Kingdom, France, and a few others have been investing in military capabilities that enabled them to keep modern defense forces. During the last three decades, the low defense budgets of Western European Allies show that military security was not a priority for them.² Meanwhile, new NATO members from East and Central Europe have modernized their defense forces, trying to meet the 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) threshold. But their GDPs were not comparable to those of Germany, Italy, or the Netherlands. With degraded Western European military capabilities, and with enthusiastic, but still relatively poorer Eastern and Central European armies, Europe is currently not in the greatest shape to either defend itself or help Ukraine.

The last two months, of course, have once again reminded electorates and politicians in Europe that peace has been a hard-won prize on this continent and should never be taken for granted.

Cohesion of NATO

The cohesion of NATO has faced a fair number of challenges during the last 30

years. Achieving cohesion of decision-making is always a result of complex negotiations in any large multinational organization. Finding consensus among 30 nations demands the organization reach agreement on detailed matters of military interoperability and defense planning among a diverse collective of nations. Bickering over small-detailed questions in numerous NATO subject-matter committees is the bread-and-butter of military officers and diplomats in the Brussels-based headquarters. This contributes also to a mutual learning process about defense policy and military planning as well as familiarizing the Allies with each other's security concerns, historic realities, and sensitivities. This is how the large NATO family grows and adapts to new military requirements and political goals.

During the decades since the end of the Cold War, diplomats serving in NATO would often describe how consensus was difficult to achieve in the committees and how Allies were not always helpful during negotiation processes due to political differences. Many lingering political issues slowed down NATO debates, such as diverging views on cooperation with the EU, the Turkish-Greek dispute over Cyprus, or defense spending differences. Some Allies' defense policies were supporting their armed forces to adapt to technological changes and modern warfare, while others were still preparing for the last war.

Allies also had diverging views on the origin of threats. The majority of Eastern European nations still consider Russia a major threat to democracies in Europe and to the Euro-Atlantic security community. They reminded other Allies that NATO should stay focused on

military threats in the first place, before taking up non-military security challenges. Many nations on the Southern flank of Europe were concerned about terrorism, migration, and regional conflicts in North Africa and Middle East. During the last 2-3 years, NATO embarked upon discussions and debates about the role of China in technology and warfare and global geopolitical competition between democratic and autocratic blocs of nations. All this was certainly adding to the number of debates at the already busy NATO table, with its relatively small international staff and Allies' missions in Brussels being overwhelmed with ever-changing focus of summits and ministerial meetings.

These disputes have certainly changed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine when military threats to European security became reality, not chapters in history books. NATO's reaction during the first weeks of the invasion has been decisive, with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declaring the NATO borders a red line and promising significant military help to Ukraine. It certainly had a calming effect on a continent in shock. Three days before the invasion, after Vladimir Putin's delusional revisionist speech, President Joseph Biden stated that NATO will strengthen its military presence on the eastern flank.

NATO leaders strongly communicated their red lines to Russia in the beginning of the war, and the Allies came together in unprecedented unity when confronted with the existential threat. The difficulties reaching cohesion seem to be over for now.

Future Trajectory of NATO

Many observers ask now where NATO will go from here, and what will be its future trajectory?

First, in the next decade, NATO will become a much more important organization than it was perceived as during the post-Cold War years. It will be a central international organization guaranteeing European security and ensuring unity among the Euro-Atlantic security community. NATO's growing strength is manifested, for example, by the current discussions of Finland and Sweden joining NATO. So far, these countries had sought to rely on the EU security architecture and continued their neutrality tradition originating in the Cold War.

There was a moment in history before the Russian wars in Georgia (2008) and in Ukraine (2014), when NATO seemed to be diminished to a global peacekeeping organization with rusty military machinery, dispatching expeditionary forces to various hotspots around the globe. Training missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its role in the Balkan wars earlier, had cemented the understanding that the organization would become a global policeman sending troops to various regional conflicts. In this context, the calls for more European strategic autonomy with bolstered defense capability were made by France, and heated debates took place in the EU corridors whether the EU—originally designed for economic decision-making—could become a political-military organization with its own military structures. These debates have stopped now, and the relevance of NATO as a primary political-military

organization in Europe is restored.

The second important development will include NATO resuming its primary focus on military threats and collective defense. During the last decade, after Russia's increasingly hostile rhetoric, one of the most central debates in NATO has been whether military planning is still relevant. Central and East European countries started to raise concerns over Russian military power after the 2008 Georgia war and warned about the possibility of a new military collision in Europe. For many other Allies, this was largely seen as paranoia by the former socialist bloc. A handful of strategic thinkers in the U.S. and UK turned their eyes back to Russia, a few studies on hybrid threats were called, but otherwise NATO continued with business as usual.

It was not until the 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine when Russia was back on the radar of leading NATO nations as a credible threat to European security. Even then, business interests and the naïve belief in economic interdependence leading to appeasement prevailed in Western Europe. With the initial enthusiasm for sanctions fading away, European politicians had a tendency to shelve Russia's 2014 aggression as a "hiccup of losing the empire."

Meanwhile, the Baltics and Poles were tirelessly asking for NATO military defense plans, troops on the ground, and investments into military capabilities. This resulted in the decision to place rotating multinational troops in NATO's eastern flank countries, the creation of the Enhanced Forward Presence. Generations born in free Eastern European countries had to undergo an 11-month military

training as part of compulsory conscription service. Voluntary territorial defense paramilitary troops stepped up weekend exercises close to the Russian border.

No one doubts today that NATO countries should increase defense spending, invest in military capability development, and enforce the defense of the soon joining Nordic nations and the eastern flank of the Alliance.

The third element in the new NATO trajectory should be to bring back the Western strategic-military thought leadership that had limited importance during the relatively peaceful post-Cold War decades. Similar to the Cold War days, NATO countries' capitals and headquarters should develop new generations of thinkers who draw from historic examples and mistakes. NATO could become the center of Western political-military thinking on modern warfare, technological change affecting defense capabilities, and necessary strategic adjustments to defend the community of democratic nations. NATO's numerous partnerships with Asian countries and Australia should also facilitate further exchange on military thinking and deterrence among democracies. Whatever the outcome of the current war in Ukraine, the Russian threat will not go away any time soon. It might re-emerge for NATO countries in new forms, such as hybrid attacks or destructive cyber operations. In addition, while dealing with a revanchist Russia, NATO countries should be able to concentrate simultaneously on a rising China that poses a different, systemic challenge to Western democracies—increasingly so in military terms.

An outstanding unanswered question remaining for the future of European security is how NATO nations' will shape their future relationship with Russia after the war? Will it be another extended Cold War or some other arrangement of co-existence with Russia? If there will be regime change in Russia, would it be possible to bring Russia peacefully to the European security order? There are no easy answers to these questions.

Despite many unknown factors of the future European security, the newly found relevance of a political-military North Atlantic Alliance with steady roots in the Cold War will be one of its constants.

Endnotes

1 An excellent analysis by Ulrike Franke at <https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/a-millennial-considers-the-new-german-problem-after-30-years-of-peace/>

2 <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>