

NATO's Adaptation to the Russia Threat

Russia's invasion of Ukraine requires NATO to eliminate doubt about its ability and resolve to defend its eastern territory by outweighing its current personnel and equipment understrength. Sweden and Finland's likely accessions add to this effort. NATO's adaptation will depend on a bigger European responsibility and renewed public discussions about the importance of security and defense.

By Henrik Larsen

Russia crossed a post-Cold War Rubicon with its invasion of Ukraine. Collective defense is again becoming NATO's unquestionable purpose after its more limited adaptation to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia's ambition does not seem to stop with the attempt to subdue Ukraine but extends to a revision of the European security architecture, which it never accepted because it did not accommodate its perceived great-power interests. Russia operates with a revisionist goal compared to the Soviet Union, which sought consolidation of the Cold-War European borders. Russia's pre-invasion demand that NATO withdraw the forces that it stationed in its new allies after 1997 testifies to its ambition to re-establish a sphere of influence in Europe.

At the Summit in Madrid in June 2022, NATO will adopt a new Strategic Concept to lay down its strategic direction toward 2030 and beyond. Collective defense will be the centerpiece of this strategy, although NATO will also have to think about how to manage the rise of China and continued instability on its southern periphery. NATO will be to decide on a new enhanced deterrence concept to strengthen its resolve and ability to enforce redlines that Moscow otherwise may be tempted to test. Finland and Sweden's applications to join NATO show that neutrality or non-



A Danish army member of a NATO enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup during the Summer Shield 2022 exercise in Latvia. *Ints Kalnins / Reuters*

alignment is no longer an attractive option for countries in Russia's geographical proximity. The prospect of their accessions obliges NATO to rethink its entire conventional deterrence concept on its eastern border. NATO's adaptation does not mechanically result from these geopolitical changes but will partly reflect the Alliance's internal power shifts.

Change in Alliance Politics

Russia's conduct has empowered the traditional 'transatlanticists' regarding the design of the alliance's defense posture and political priorities. By contrast, it leaves the belief of some Europeans in dialogue and continued business with Moscow discredited. This concerns especially Germany, whose President Frank-Walter Steinmeier

admitted that the German approach to Russia over the past 15 years had been misguided. Germany's hesitance about weapons deliveries to Ukraine now further questions its commitment to resist Russian aggression and, thus, its credibility within the transatlantic alliance. France's efforts toward 'strategic dialogue' with Russia also proved misguided. On the other hand, the war has given some traction to the French ambition of an EU with the capacity to enact economy-crippling sanctions on Russia, the financing of weapons deliveries to Ukraine, and the gradual reduction of the energy dependency on Russia.

By contrast, the East-European allies, especially Poland and the Baltic States, have been vindicated about their decade-long

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warnings against a revanchist Russia since the war in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The magnitude of its deceptive diplomacy and the brutality of its foreign policy conduct suggests that it only responds to the logic of force. NATO is now likely to enhance its eastern force posture in ways that the continental Europeans previously would have labelled unnecessarily escalatory. The East-European allies find common ground with the United States, whose leadership in European security matters has been revived after the invasion in terms of economic sanctions against Russia and weapons supplies to Ukraine. They also find common ground with the United Kingdom in their principled stance toward Russia, as well as with Denmark and Norway in their support for Ukraine. Their empowerment paves the way for NATO at the summit in Madrid to strengthen its eastern deterrent to an extent that there can be no doubt about its resolve and ability to deny a Russian attack.

Denying Russia

NATO's adaptation effort will likely focus on the justification given by the Russian President Vladimir Putin on 21 February for extending military support to the Donbas breakaway republics, which preceded his invasion of Ukraine three days later. Putin in his speech lamented the allegedly artificial land drawings during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which,

according to him, had bereaved Russia of its rightful lands from when it was a tsarist empire. Although Putin mostly referred to Ukraine, his speech gives reason enough to suspect that he may have territorial ambitions in other parts of the former Russian Empire, particularly in Estonia and Latvia, which both have sizeable Russian-speaking minorities. Russia's pre-invasion demand that NATO withdraws its forces stationed in Eastern Europe after 1997 gives suspicion that it could also threaten Lithuania and Poland on the border with the Kaliningrad exclave.

Russia poses a military threat that cannot be defended against with the current NATO forward presence in Poland and the Baltic States (multi-national battle-groups), which is meant as a tripwire for war with the alliance but not to deny Russian land grabs. Not only are the costs much higher of having to liberate than to defend territory, but there will also be doubt about NATO's resolve to do so if Russia would threaten to use

nuclear weapons after its successful seizure of territory. One should not deduct from Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine that it would perform similarly in a conflict with NATO and that it would not be able to improve. To eliminate doubts about NATO's ability to defend against a Russian attack without risking significant territorial loss, the alliance needs to balance out its current personnel and equipment understrength. The alliance needs to do so based on the traditional 1:3 ratio relative to the Russian forces in its Western Military District as well as in Belarus, whose participation cannot be excluded in the case of a NATO-Russia war. At its current force levels, it is urgent that NATO redress its understrength in tanks and artillery units.

All this will likely require NATO to permanently station substantial forces in Poland and the Baltic States, thus in practice abandoning the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which was agreed in 1997 to prevent the re-emergence of post-Cold War tension but whose word Russia has now definitively broken. Some allies may wish not to formally abandon the Act to maintain hope in the revival of the post-Cold War spirit with a different leadership in Moscow. Given that Russia seems unlikely to conquer all of Ukraine, NATO may per-

haps keep its recent battlegroup deployments in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria, which share no land border with Russia, until there is more clarity about how the Ukraine war could end. NATO will also consider its naval presence in the Black Sea depending on how much coastal territory Russia will be able to take and hold in Ukraine.

The likelihood of Finnish and Swedish NATO memberships poses additional questions about the alliance's deterrence capability. The uncertainty about possible Russian reactions in the time between the two countries' membership application submissions and ratification by 30 allies relies on bilateral security assurances from strong NATO allies, the United States or the United Kingdom. If NATO wishes to treat its exposed eastern allies equally, it must eliminate doubt about its willingness to defend Finland and Sweden in the eventuality of a Russian attack. Nowhere is the challenge bigger than on the 1300-long Finnish border. Finland has a strong army and strategic depth by comparison to the Baltic States, which may not require the alliance to station substantial permanent forces on its soil but perhaps a tripwire similar to what currently exists in the Baltic States and Poland. NATO will also have to decide whether to station ground and air forces in Sweden, for instance in Gotland as part of the enhancement of its overall presence in the Baltic Sea.

Reinforcements and Arms Supplies

NATO will need to decide on two further strategic issues in its adaptation to the Russian threat, the first of which is its reinforcement capability. The alliance activated its 40,000-strong NATO Response Force (NRF) after Russia's invasion to prevent the conflict from spreading. Going forward, NATO will need a reinforcement capability strong enough to deter renewed Russian troop buildups or moves that otherwise may give reason to suspect that it plans to attack allied territory. Allies will

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probably seek to boost the NRF to match the Russian troop numbers for the invasion of Ukraine formally mobilized in peace-

time, and take into the account the likelihood that NATO will have to defend its much longer future land border with Russia. NATO will therefore need to significantly increase the number of NRF troops. Judging from Russia's preparation for its invasion of Ukraine, a troop build-up is easily detectable by satellites. NATO will nevertheless have to attribute a percentage of its future NRF as a 'spearhead force' to be deployed within 2–3 days, as the case is today, to reinforce the standing deterrent before significant territory could be lost to an invading force. All this will also require NATO to secure its strategic airlift capability by enhanced protection (missile defense) of its transportation hubs against conventional or nuclear attacks.

NATO's second strategic issue is its readiness to supply Ukraine (or any other significant partner like Moldova or Georgia) with weapons to defend against Russian aggression. The West refrains from a combat role against Russian forces in Ukraine but, emboldened by the country's battlefield successes, is increasingly willing to supply the weapons the country has requested to defend itself. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has said that the war can last years. Assuming the conflict will not escalate to a NATO-Russia war, it may either end in a negotiated settlement between Russia and Ukraine or in a new 'frozen' conflict, depending on the outcome on the battlefield. It is the individual NATO allies that decide what weapons they wish to give Ukraine, but the alliance coordinated intra-alliance capability transfers such as the S-300 anti-aircraft systems that were replaced by the US patriot system. Moreover, NATO has an important role to play in facilitating a strategic discussion among allies on the imagined end goal of their arms deliveries against a nuclear-armed adversary unlikely to accept a decisive Ukrainian victory on the battlefield. Allies act on a strong moral imperative, which needs to be balanced against the risk of escalation against a nuclear-armed adversary.

Internal Strength

Meanwhile, NATO cannot separate the deterrence of Russia from the rise of China, which pulls US military resources toward Asia. The growing defense expenditure following Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows that Europe is adapting to a reality in which it will have to carry a bigger or the main burden in the defense of its own con-

continent. On the other hand, there seems to be a growing realization that 'strategic autonomy' is unrealistic, and that Europe is better off instead conceiving its investments as efforts toward 'strategic responsibility'. The first reason is political: all European states prefer a continued US direct involvement in NATO's deterrence. The second reason is military: the European states do not possess the necessary capabilities for autonomous action but continue to rely on the United States for a reliable command structure, strategic airlift and, not least, nuclear umbrella and missile defense.

Europeans wishing to assume strategic responsibility have the potential to do so by seeking to provide the bulk of the future ground and tactical air forces required for the deterrence of Russia. Leveraging the existing US defense backbone holds the prospect of a more equitable transatlantic burden sharing, where the United States has less reason to believe it carries a disproportionate bigger share and where no European country is left in doubt about Washington's commitment to its defense. The increases in European defense expen-

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diture, if they are sustainable over time, would enable such an effort. Due to its size and geographical position, Germany seems to be naturally placed to lead the European eastward deterrence, but much depends on the durability of its so-called *Zeitenwende*, whereby the country is supposed to spend more than two percent of GDP on defense.

NATO's internal strength is also a question of its ability to match its competitors across multiple domains of warfare, both military and non-military. Nowhere is the challenge more obvious than Russian temptations to test the resilience of soft targets on its eastern territory, notably in Latvia and Estonia with significant Russian-speaking minorities. Russia will likely be more cautious about trespassing NATO than non-NATO territory and still prefers to rely on disinformation and subversion to stir ethnic-political discord as well as special-operation incursions modeled on the Crimea seizure in 2014. NATO needs to train and structure a part of its future forces in the Baltic

Further reading

John B. Gilliam and Ryan C. van Wie, "Feasible U.S. Steps to Strengthen NATO Deterrence in the Baltics and Poland", *Brookings Institution*, March 2022

Henrik Larsen, "European Strategic Responsibility Must Focus on Russia", *Brussels School of Governance*, April 2022.

Barry R. Posen, "A new transatlantic division of labor could save billions every year!", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 77 (5) (2021), pp. 239–43.

Stephen M. Walt, "Exactly How Helpless Is Europe?", *Foreign Policy*, 21 May 2021.

Pierre de Dreuzay et al., "War in Europe: preliminary lessons", *NATO Defense College Report*, no. 23 (2022).

States, in cooperation with the local authorities, to prepare for grey-zone warfare eventualities that may precede Russia's use of kinetic force. Integrating grey-zone and conventional warfare gives NATO the opportunity for a resilience concept closely tied to the alliance's core mandate on security and defense.

The rise of China gives NATO an additional opportunity to find niches within resilience where it can bring comparative value. NATO is naturally placed to ensure interoperability and the development of norms for the responsible use of Artificial Intelligence and other so-called Emerging and Disruptive Technologies where China is leading. NATO has no role to play in transatlantic trade and technology other than in preventing that North America and Europe drift apart in terms of standards and norms for future war technology. China's growing capabilities in cyberspace and outer space open further areas of cooperation with relevance for collective defense such as the risks connected to its 5G telecommunications technology, Chinese acquisitions of transport hubs, and its capacity to neutralize or jam NATO satellites.

Strategic Forward Thinking

NATO's coherence will depend on its ability to deny Russian aggression across multiple domains of warfare while keeping an eye on China for as long as necessary. Moscow must get a sound understanding of the West's lines, similar to the situation during most of the Cold War, while NATO must reach a better understanding of Russia, its foreign-policy rationale, and the extent to

which it can contain its expansionist tendencies. The United States and other allies demonstrated impressive intelligence revealing the details of Russia's military buildup around Ukraine and Russia's mili-

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tary activity, which seem to be crucial for Ukraine's defense effort. On the other hand, Russia's intentions took NATO by surprise. The huge economic and human costs related to Russia's reassertion seem

ludicrous with Western eyes but not from the perspective of Vladimir Putin.

Most NATO allies misjudged the strategic thinking predominant in the Kremlin and Russia and, in the coming years, are likely to enhance their intellectual subject-matter investment in think tanks, foreign services, and international institutions. The bigger effort, however, lies with Western governments and their abilities to educate the public (especially in continental Europe) about the importance of security and defense policy and the naivete about being able to separate it from commercial interests. This applies to Russia as

much as to China. Much like during the Cold War, governments have a role in shaping the public debates about the external threats to Western cohesion.

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