

# The War Against Ukraine Shapes NATO's Future

The Russian invasion of Ukraine revitalized NATO and marked the return of US leadership in the alliance. However, the coming months may prove more difficult for NATO to navigate due to a series of dilemmas that could endanger its cohesion.

By Dominika Kunertova and Niklas Masuhr

The Russian invasion of Ukraine significantly worsened the security situation in Europe. It has also reminded European countries of NATO's importance as the chief collective defense organization for European security. United against the aggressor, NATO members have started to reinforce their own defenses and have been supporting Ukraine materially. The alliance has thus proved its value in facilitating collective decision-making, providing a forum for information and intelligence sharing, mobilizing institutional resources, and coordinating the bilateral activities of its members. Within the alliance, however, consensus is hard to come by on such matters as how the war should be handled and what NATO's near- and long-term aims should be. As a result, France and Germany in particular have taken positions that are distinct from those of the United States, the United Kingdom, and many Eastern European allies.

*Defense spending.* Several NATO countries pledged to step up their defense spending to 2 per cent of GDP and beyond, such as Denmark, Italy, Latvia, Poland, and Romania. A major surprise came from Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who announced plans to reach the NATO benchmark in addition to setting up a 100 billion EUR special fund for immediate investments in defense capabilities. It remains to be seen how quickly and on which capacities this fund will be spent.

*Defense and deterrence.* NATO's prime political objective has been and continues to be to protect its own members, not to enter a war with Russia over Ukraine. The alliance has clung to this objective collectively and individually, aiming to prevent conflict escalation both vertically (towards the nuclear threshold) and horizontally (geographically). However, since the Ukrainians defeated the initial assault against their capital, the United States and others have more overtly declared their intention to weaken Russian capabili-

## Key Points

- NATO countries should establish a shared understanding of their course of collective action in case the war in Ukraine escalates either horizontally or vertically.
- NATO countries need to step up armaments production to maintain the supply of weaponry to Ukraine while replenishing their own stocks to mitigate acrimonious distribution debates.
- NATO is likely headed towards more contentious political debates on how to position itself *vis-à-vis* both Moscow and Kyiv, endangering its cohesion.
- NATO countries need to be clear in communicating their resolve for deterrence and their strategic objectives to Russia. Draining Russian capabilities in isolation is not a viable way forward.

ties. Some European alliance members, most notably France and Germany, have refrained from embracing this objective.

Following the extraordinary virtual summit of NATO Heads of State and Government the day after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO activated its defense plans, granting the Supreme Allied Commander Europe greater flexibility to act in an emergency and deploying some of its Response Force to increase NATO's eastern presence. At the Extraordinary Summit of NATO Heads of State and Government on 24 March 2022, a month after Russia's invasion, NATO leaders agreed to deploy four battalions in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, in addition to the four already present in the Baltic States and Poland. This means that NATO has changed its posture in the eastern part by switching from "tripwires" deployed in 2016 to a more robust Eastern presence. This means shifting from "deterrence by presence" to "deterrence by defense."<sup>1</sup>

*Biden brought the United States back.* The US commitment to the transatlantic partnership has not been this unquestionable in a long time. The United States doubled its troop numbers in Poland from 5,000 to 10,000 and delivered two batteries of Patriot air defense systems, bringing the number of US troops in Europe to 100,000 soldiers. The 26 April 2022 meeting of 40 countries – NATO members and its partners in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa – at the US air base in Ramstein, Germany formed the backdrop for US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's pronouncement of elevated war aims and the purpose of Western support to Ukraine.

*Supporting Ukraine's self-defense.* Ukraine's defensive war has received support from NATO countries since its beginning. Only Hungary and Bulgaria refrained from sending weapons directly to Ukraine, in part due to domestic political reasons. Intra-alliance capability transfers have played a key role in supporting Ukraine while retaining the alliance's capabilities. For example, Slovakia was able to donate its (Soviet-made) S-300 air and missile defense systems to Ukraine in early April when the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands deployed Patriot systems to plug the gap. Other options mooted include a "tank swap" under which Eastern European countries could immediately send Soviet-era tanks to Ukraine and receive German vehicles as replacements.

In keeping with previous patterns, the United States has spent far more than other NATO members combined for armaments and financial aid. The recently approved 40 billion USD package of security and humanitarian assistance, in addition to 14 billion USD that had already been earmarked for this purpose by the end of April, exceeds the amount that Washington used to spend annually in Afghanistan (46 billion USD). Half of the 14 billion USD has gone into replenishing American stocks and deployed troops to Europe. The vast majority of the new assistance package (20.4 billion USD) will be invested into security and military assistance for Kyiv and for US efforts to enhance security in Europe in cooperation with NATO countries.

### Brave New World

In many ways, responding forcefully to the Russian invasion in political terms has been easier for NATO and the West more broadly than fashioning a military response. If and when the shock effect from the brutal invasion dissipates, domestic and intra-alliance debates will likely become much more acrimonious – especially once increased energy prices start to bite.

This growing polarization will affect national debates on how to handle Russia. Beyond calls for sanctions relief from business and industrial associations and political parties generally predisposed towards a softer course on Russia, there are strategic arguments in favor of resuming trade with Moscow once its invasion of Ukraine reaches an acceptable end (or stalemate). For example, the necessity to regulate NATO-Russia relations to prevent the latter from fully embracing its partnership with China have already come to the fore and will increasingly do so. This argument will have to contend with criticism of selling out Ukraine. Beyond these political debates, the future of rivalry and deterrence dynamics will act as a limit to what NATO can do. Politically, retaining cohesion within the alliance will thus likely become a more difficult and potentially toxic task.

Specifically, neither Russia's geographic position nor the fact of its nuclear arsenal will change. Future relations will always include a nuclear dimension. To date, the Russian nuclear posture has not changed materially, but certain conditions could increase incentives for the regime to make more explicit threats towards Ukraine or even NATO. Pre-war concerns that Russian President Vladimir Putin could resort to the threat or even the use of nuclear weapons if he perceived his regime to be under threat still hold. While the Kremlin has managed to weather the storm of its botched initial invasion and even increased public support substantially,<sup>2</sup> its security in the medium term is not assured. This may be especially the case once economic sanctions start to degrade Russian economic and living standards materially.

Beyond the war itself, the attrition of Russian conventional capabilities in Ukraine is not necessarily good news for NATO. In brief, a Russia devoid of the ability to escalate with armored brigades will look sooner to nuclear weapons. This has implications for strategic stability between NATO and its adversary, with Russia's nuclear threshold being consequently lowered – provided its political aims roughly remain the same.

### Mounting Dilemmas

At present, advocates of a harder stance towards Moscow hold the argumentative high ground. While efforts to deter Russia's invasion of Ukraine failed, those countries that had, implicitly or explicitly, advocated a lighter political touch seem especially discredited. Within the alliance's consultative bodies then, emphasizing deterrence and defense over concerns about possible Russian reactions will hold a high degree of credibility. This is further reinforced by the fact

that many past and present proponents of increased military postures who are located in close vicinity to Russia can now claim to be vindicated. However, a more “robust” military set-up potentially comes with dangers of escalation. Certain actions, such as placing ground-based strike missiles in Poland or the Baltics, would likely be seen as exceeding a threshold of tolerance by Moscow.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, US weapon manufacturers have seen their stock prices ramping up as the war in Ukraine continues and Western countries are increasing their defense spending. However, they are also starting to encounter supply chain disruptions, labor shortages, and rising prices. For instance, it has become difficult to find titanium, a material that is necessary for manufacturing Stinger missiles, that is not from Russia. According to estimates, a quarter of stockpiles has already gone to Ukraine. This also means that some weapons will need a redesign to compensate for supply chain issues.<sup>3</sup>

European countries have increasingly found themselves in a precarious position as a result of having to balance their own defense equipment needs against the needs of Ukraine's forces. This is of special concern for countries like Germany that have especially limited stockpiles of spare parts available.<sup>4</sup> A particular problem in this regard is a general shortage in ground-based air defenses, since the doctrine of NATO forces has long assumed air superiority. The long-term response to these challenges should include building stockpiles, diversifying suppliers, simplifying arms designs, plug-and-play modular platforms, sticking to common standards, and increasing joint acquisition.

Until then, the perceived reticence of European countries in delivering weapons to Ukraine in spring 2022 may end up as the harbinger of a permanent dilemma within NATO. When should newly developed and/or manufactured weapons systems be delivered to Ukraine, the non-member frontline, and when should NATO forces themselves be equipped? Both questions have a certain degree of legitimacy. Even a continuous Russo-Ukrainian cold or low-intensity war would continue to tie down the weakened Russian (conventional) military – and thus, increase NATO's securi-

ty. At the same time, most European armed forces are not luxuriously endowed with certain systems and would require new material to underpin their own force (re-)generation. While Ukraine can legitimately claim to indirectly defend NATO, the latter cannot rule out deliberate or accidental escalation with Russia and thus keep at least one

#### **Military Aid to Ukraine Over Time**

Western-supplied weapons provided significant support to Ukraine's troops in fending off Russia's initial invasion. Shoulder-fired anti-tank and anti-air systems caused high casualties among Russian forces during their muddled rush for Kyiv. Beyond prominent Stinger, Javelin, NLAW, and TB2 drone deliveries, NATO countries supplied Ukraine with large quantities of small arms ammunition and so-called non-lethal aid: chiefly protective gear, medical supplies, and communications equipment. Countries such as the United States and United Kingdom had made such deliveries even before the war – its infantry-centric nature driven both by logistical constraints and by the assumption of the eventual need to support a guerilla war. The transfer of operational MiG-29 fighter jets was blocked due to fears of escalation, partly because they would have constituted a dramatic qualitative jump from what was supplied in the early stages of the war and partly due to problems inherent in the transfer of combat aircraft. However, the Ukrainian defenses held, with the war moving into a more mechanized phase along the Donbas front, placing the focus of Western supplies onto heavier weapons. Apart from military utility, one key element in the Western supply question has been the weapons' compatibility with Ukraine's existing systems, which has been an argument in favor of supplying Soviet- and Russian-made equipment. This has been pertinent especially for Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, which have been able to sell legacy equipment and spare parts. Slovakia, for example, donated Soviet-era air defense systems, while Czechia sent its T-72 tanks and armored infantry vehicles and also offered to repair Ukrainian T-64 tanks. With the war progressing and attrition taking its toll on Ukrainian equipment, NATO members have gradually started to ramp up supplies of their own systems and to train Ukrainian personnel in their operation and maintenance. This has coincided with a shift in the war due to Russia focusing on the east and the concomitant increase in the relevance of heavy equipment necessary for mechanized warfare. This has included for example the United Kingdom, Czechia, and the Netherlands sending armored vehicles, as well as US-delivered 155mm artillery and standoff weapons such as loitering munitions and even anti-ship missiles (from the United Kingdom, United States, and Denmark). In terms of quantities, the United States and the United Kingdom, together with the Central European and Baltic countries, have been leading military assistance efforts to Ukraine. France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Denmark, Italy, and even NATO partners Sweden and Finland have sent man-portable missiles. For the first time, the EU is funding lethal equipment using the European Peace Facility; thus far, it has approved 2 billion EUR to allow Ukraine to procure weapons and equipment.

eye on its own military capabilities. This is a fine line to walk, and potentially the source of increasingly bitter diplomacy going forward.

### Kyiv Going Forward

NATO countries have clearly stated that the alliance does not want to enter into a war with Russia, and it has therefore excluded either putting boots on the ground or enforcing a no-fly zone in Ukraine. Either step would be inherently escalatory and could trigger a direct war between NATO and Russia. Below this level, there is a spectrum of support for Ukraine's defensive war. This naturally includes dealing with its leadership, which justifiably has priorities that may not align with those of NATO as an alliance or with the priorities of individual members in every case. Indeed, Kyiv's diplomacy has identified "good partners" to exert pressure on those that fall short of such a description. Aligning the United States and its allies' stance on Ukrainian requests and demands (in both style and substance) will likely become a more challenging proposition. Scenarios that would exacerbate this dynamic are easy to envision: The debate on sanctions relief coming this fall will necessarily include the consideration of not only European but also Ukrainian interests. Likewise, disunity may arise among NATO members over the definition of a Ukrainian victory. This is especially the case regarding NATO's view of whether Kyiv may regard Crimea and other territories as "fair game" or whether offensives to retake such areas would present intolerable risks of escalation. Ultimately, even after a potential ceasefire, Ukrainian forces will need military capabilities to remain able to defend against future Russian aggression. These debates will thus not be limited to times of active hostilities.

### Beyond Ukraine

This series of dilemmas requires NATO to offer clear, unified expressions of its priorities regarding Ukraine's defensive war. Russian nuclear rhetoric is an indication of Moscow being worried about NATO's conventional capabilities. In such a volatile situation, "speaking deterrence" will become more important. The US and others attempted to outright deter a Russian invasion by making troop movements and likely plans public, and such strategic use of transparency may be valuable going forward. This is espe-

cially true because the present war may be viewed as establishing norms for a more contentious phase of rivalry going forward. Importantly, NATO needs to maintain vigilance regarding Russia's attempts to exploit disagreements among NATO countries to gradually build tensions and upset the alliance.

On a similar note, weakening Russia without a broader strategic goal is flawed policy. NATO has to take the dilemmas created by Russia's war into account to create a minimum degree of stability – both internally and with Russia, which in its present form will likely remain a hostile power. Despite these considerations, Moscow should not be rewarded for resorting to the invasion of a peaceful neighbor. For as long as Russia stays on its present course, a post-war order will have to manage to keep Moscow at bay while re-introducing an element of strategic stability. In all likelihood, Moscow will continue to play the role of chaos agent. Thus, NATO has to find a way to deter a conventionally weakened Russia from doing so on the nuclear level. Within this asymmetric rivalry, calibrating deterrence thus becomes an even more difficult proposition than it was prior to 2022.

At present, imposing pre-conditions on resuming the US-Russian Strategic Stability Dialogue seems like the most promising route for Washington to pursue. Such pre-conditions would have to include the termination of the war in Ukraine and agreements on the country's eventual reconstruction or at least a certain degree of Russian restitution.

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