



NATO Gets A New Lease On Life – For Now

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An Alliance, If We Can Keep It.

Since its start in late February, Russia's "special military operation" against Ukraine has reshaped the prevailing security order in Europe. The conflict, and Moscow's glaring military missteps in its early stages, helped puncture the perception of Russian military invincibility that had prevailed in both Europe and the United States since the end of the Cold War. It galvanized international support for Ukraine, which for years had clamored for sustained global attention to – and backing for – its Euro-Atlantic trajectory. And it helped to unite a previously fragmented West behind an unprecedented raft of penalties and punitive measures that cumulatively have set Russia on a course of protracted decline, irrespective of the ultimate outcome of the current conflict.

Perhaps the most profound impact of Russia's new war, however, has been to revitalize the West's oldest and most enduring alliance. Until recently thought by many to be on its deathbed, NATO has found renewed purpose in deterring a revanchist and neo-imperial Russia, and convinced skeptics of the indispensable role it should play in maintaining global security.

Hang Together or Hang Separately

The purpose of NATO, its first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, famously quipped in the bloc's formative years, was to "keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." That formulation reflected a core ethos that, by the time the North Atlantic Charter was signed in April of 1949, had come to animate the Alliance. It was underpinned by the understanding that the USSR, despite its tactical wartime partnership with the West, was no friend to liberal democracy, and needed to be prevented from subverting its foundations. At the same time, a defeated Germany had to be contained and engaged in order to prevent a repeat of the same domestic grievances that had given rise to the Third Reich. America, meanwhile, was the indispensable partner whose continued attention needed to be cultivated in the face of isolationist currents powerful enough to have nearly prevented U.S. entry into the Second World War.

In the decades that followed, Ismay's formula helped transform Germany into a crucial ally and successfully deter Soviet aggression. But it more or less fell by the wayside with the collapse of the USSR, replaced by the broad objective of establishing — and subsequently broadening — a zone of peace and stability across the European continent, and eventually beyond.

Though undeniably laudable, that goal reflected an erosion of strategic vision. The bloc, which for close to half a century had oriented itself around the strategic threat posed by the Soviet Union, found itself adrift following the USSR's collapse. It compensated via a series of initiatives, some of which — such as the Partnership for Peace that integrated Eastern European nations into the bloc — were successful. Others, like the bloc's bid to engage countries in the Middle East and North Africa via Mediterranean Association Agreements, proved less so. But all were animated by an organizational quest for continued relevance.

At the same time, a clear vision of the shared challenge posed by Russia receded significantly. To be sure, lip service was still paid in assorted European capitals to the idea of maintaining a united front against Moscow. In practice, however, the objective declined in importance for the Alliance's member states, while the desire to forge a qualitatively new relationship with Russia grew over time.

A Bear at the Door Once More

That changed, albeit temporarily, with Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. The Russian offensive, carried out in response to Kyiv's "Maidan Revolution," took the form of a "hybrid war" that saw the Kremlin insert anonymous paramilitary elements into separatist enclaves in Eastern Ukraine, occupy and seize Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, and subsequently annex the territory via a stage-managed referendum. NATO's response included a suspension of cooperation with Russia, stepped-up military training with regional partners, and the provision of defensive military materiel to Kyiv. It did not, however, spark a fundamental rethink of the Alliance's deterrence posture vis-à-vis Moscow.

The consequences were profound. Three years later, in 2017, a simulated wargame carried out by the RAND Corporation found NATO still woefully unprepared to effectively counter a Russian land offensive against the Baltics — and warned that its defenses would collapse within 36 to 60 hours of a Russian invasion. And in the fall of 2019, outgoing Joint Chiefs Chairman General Joseph Dunford told *Newsweek* that "the NATO advantage over a resurgent Russia has eroded."

Part of the problem was budgetary. As of mid-2019, according to official NATO estimates, the median defense expenditure among the Alliance's member states was a paltry 1.63 percent of national GDP, and just eight countries — the U.S., Greece, Estonia, the United Kingdom, Romania, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania — were spending more than the recommended two percent of GDP annually on defense. This undercapitalization had corrosive effects on the Alliance's readiness, its deterrence posture, and — perhaps most importantly — on Moscow's perceptions of the Alliance's ability to resolutely respond to its expansionist impulses.

The other part of the problem was conceptual. Over time, at least some European leaders began to express doubts regarding the durability and vitality of the Alliance. In a now-famous 2019 interview with *The Economist*, French President Emmanuel Macron warned that the bloc was becoming "brain dead," and urged Europe to rethink its approach to Russia. Those sentiments were, naturally, music to the ears of policymakers in Moscow, who both applauded and amplified them.

These parallel declines in capability and credibility doubtless contributed to Russian President Vladimir Putin's conviction that his plans for the "demilitarization" and "de-Nazification" of Ukraine would not meet with a resolute response from the Alliance. And they may not have, were it not for the spectacular battlefield stumbles of the Russian army in the war's early phases.

Yet if elites in Western Europe had become sanguine in recent years regarding Russia, their counterparts to the east certainly did not. From Poland to Georgia, officials in Moscow's former satellites and territorial holdings were nearly unanimous in their warnings about the persistent danger posed by Russia's imperial vision, and the imperative of guarding against it.

It's a message that other nations have, belatedly, begun to grasp. With the start of the Ukraine war, it has become widely accepted that — 31 years after the Soviet collapse — Russia is animated by a neo-imperial ethos that rejects the sovereignty and independence of its former subjects. It is a realization that has led vulnerable states on Russia's periphery to gravitate toward the safety provided by collective defense.

One such state is Finland. Though Helsinki had long eschewed the idea of joining NATO, the Ukraine war has helped to catalyze a robust Finnish national consensus in favor of membership. In response, following an April debate in the country's parliament, Finland's ruling Social Democrat Party formally announced its intention to apply for NATO membership.

Sweden has followed suit. In Stockholm, where attitudes toward the Alliance have long been deeply ambivalent, Russia's invasion of Ukraine led to a new appreciation of the security imparted by NATO participation. By April, a majority of Swedes had gravitated to the idea that their country should abandon military neutrality and join NATO for protection, a national poll commissioned by the *Aftonbladet* newspaper found. The government of Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson formally applied for Alliance membership the following month.

Predictably, Moscow has railed against these moves, and threatened dire consequences if Helsinki and Stockholm follow through with their plans for NATO accession. Russian officials have warned both countries that they were making "a grave mistake," and held out the possibility of new nuclear deployments in the Baltics in response. These threats, however, appear to have had the opposite of their intended effect, and reinforced to the Nordic states that the surest path to security lies in collective defense, rather than submission to Moscow.

A Turkish Fly in the Ointment

Their hopes have hit an unexpected speed bump, however, because Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has emerged as a vocal opponent of Swedish and Finnish accession to the Alliance.

At least publicly, Turkey's opposition stems from its anger at Sweden and Finland's stances toward its own principal security threat, the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). "We have every right to expect those countries, which will expect NATO's second-largest army to come to their defense under Article 5, to prevent the recruitment, fundraising and propaganda activities of the PKK, which the European Union and America consider a terrorist entity," Erdogan wrote in a May 31st article for *The Economist*. More broadly, experts believe that Erdogan is using the accession debate as an opening to improve his position vis-à-vis the United States, with whom relations have soured in recent years over a range of issues.

American and European officials have waxed optimistic that Turkey's complaints are transient in nature and will be overcome in short order. Perhaps they can be. But Erdogan's intransigence has also shed light on a deeper problem afflicting the Alliance: that of Turkey's troublesome role in it.

It was not always this way. For decades during the Cold War, Turkey played an indispensable role in NATO, serving as the bloc's southeastern flank and geopolitical outpost in the Middle East. Over the past 15 years, however, Turkey has transformed into a less-than-reliable strategic ally.

The reason has everything to do with domestic politics. Since the early 2000s, under the guidance of President Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey has trended in a distinctly anti-Western political direction. Once eager for membership in the European Union, the country has tacked east in recent years, expanding its outreach to — and influence over — the greater Middle East. As part of this reorientation, Ankara has taken a series of steps (ranging from the acquisition of advanced Russian air defenses against NATO's urging to adopting a permissive attitude toward regional extremists) that have collectively injected doubts into the notion that Turkey remains a Western ally.

For the time being, at least, NATO officials have glossed over these problems, preferring to paint a rosy picture of Alliance solidarity. In the face of Russia's current aggression, there is certainly reason to do so. Over the longer term, however, the bloc faces a serious reckoning over its internal contradictions — of which Turkey is undoubtedly one.

Nevertheless, it's clear that, through his latest invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has managed to do what successive world leaders have not, and convinced NATO's members and the broader world that the Alliance remains an integral element of Western security. As a result, the Alliance now has a new lease on life — and a renewed sense of purpose.

How durable both turn out to be, though, is very much an open question.