NATO's Past, Present & Future

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has once again put NATO's relevance to European security front and center. Given the situation in Ukraine, the Black Sea, and Putin's behavior and statements about Russia's imperial destiny, it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, for anyone halfway sensible to somehow suggest now that the alliance is "obsolete." or will not remain relevant in the future.

The Past

Looking to NATO's past will help us understand its future prospects. To start, NATO has never been, as brain dead as France's president has suggested. Time and again, NATO has adapted to changing strategic landscapes—from the start of the Cold War, through the era of détente and the later stages of the policy of containment, the end of the Cold War, to Russia's current attempt to challenge the European security landscape.

When the United States has made new tactical and strategic demands, NATO has responded. Alliance partners have never notably constrained US leadership.

In fact, a look at past changes in America's strategic outlook shows just how responsive the alliance has been to US leadership:

In 1950, Truman proposed rearming Germany and by 1955 West Germany had been accepted into NATO with a re-established military.

Eisenhower, in the mid-50s laid down the "New Look" strategy, relying on nuclear weapons to deter the Soviets. When Kennedy came into office, he replaced "New Look" with "Flexible Response," placing a renewed emphasis on conventional arms. In the late 1970's, NATO had to respond to Moscow's deployment of the highly accurate SS-20 missiles. The Carter team and NATO agreed to a "Dual Track" approach that deployed American ballistic and cruise missiles despite Europe's massive anti-nuclear movement…and eventually concluded with the Reagan Administration's negotiation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

The Reagan team then created the "Air-Land Battle Doctrine," which required NATO to adapt to new innovations in war fighting.

Following the end of the Cold War, NATO is told new missions will be "out of area"—that is, not confined to defending allied territory—and the alliance goes to the Balkans, Africa, and Afghanistan. And, at the same time, at Washington's urging moves to eliminate a possible geo-political grey-zone by expanding NATO into Central and Eastern Europe.

Recent Past

Post-2014, NATO began to meet the challenge of a resurgent and aggressive Russia by creating new operational and logistic commands, putting forward new initiatives in cyber & hybrid warfare, pushing deployments into the Baltics and Southeast Europe, and tripling the size of its high-readiness, Joint Force to some 40,000 troops.

NATO has even made progress on its oft-criticized budgeting. The alliance across the board has increased defense spending for the past seven years straight - even with the global economic crisis of the pandemic.

Since 2014, US allies added more than $200 billion to their defense budgets. In 2020, the last year NATO has hard figures for, ten allies spent more than the 2% minimum of their GDP on defense. It's not great, but better than the three allies that met that target circa 2014.

Just as significant, 21 allies now spend at least 20% of their defense budget on procuring weapons and supplies—a huge jump from just a few years ago when military personnel costs from adopting all-volunteer forces devoured the budget.

The Present

The present alliance agenda is obvious: increase deterrence across the Europe's eastern front. While Europe's state and societal resilience in case of conflict remain questionable, these issues are outside of NATO's wheelhouse. The authorities for addressing such issues lie with the EU and individual alliance members.. For now, NATO needs to continue to focus on adequately articulating and addressing its core task of common defense.

NATO will announce a new NATO Strategic Concept at its summit in Madrid. In the decade since its last summit, the strategic environment has undergone considerable change. Members have avoided going through the painful process of producing a new Strategic Concept because of all the fights and

disagreements the process inevitably engenders. However, resolving these disputes clears the path forward for an alliance that works through consensus. Agreeing on a vision makes it considerably easier for NATO to resolve future disputes on operations, budgets, and tactics.

While this can be a contentious process, there are some obvious steps to take to build deterrence on the eastern front. NATO will need a more robust and combat-ready forward presence with more pre-positioned equipment and supplies. But even if NATO has more fighting capability on paper, it remains short on logistics: air transport, electronic warfare, air defenses, ammunition stocks, and even roads and bridges capable of moving and handling large number of forces from Western and Central Europe to the East. Bottom line: allies will have to spend more.

Finally, the alliance will need to overcome Turkey's "hold" on Sweden's and Finland's membership applications. Unlike more recent additions to NATO, both countries will add to the security of the alliance. Both field serious militaries and provide increased capacity in the Baltic Sea region and the High North. They complicate Russian military planning, which obviously benefits NATO as a whole. And, while formally neutral, both countries have been working with each other, NATO regional allies, and the US for several years now. NATO must move these applications along quickly, lest public opinion in the two countries reverts back to ambivalence on NATO membership, giving up an "own goal" to Putin.

The Future

The most pressing problem facing NATO in the years ahead is that, while the US military remains the world's preeminent military, it no longer is decisively dominant.

Although the US increased its defense budget by $90 billion in a two-year period (2018 & 2019), the increase only brought the budget back (in inflation-adjusted dollars) to its projected 2012 levels, from before the cuts and constraints mandated by the 2011 Budget Control Act. The 2012 budget came on the heels of the Pentagon and the Obama administration admitting that the US military would no longer have the capacity to handle two simultaneous major conventional wars. They made the case that, since Europe was no longer an arena of security competition and because the US would be pulling out of the Middle East, the US military could and would focus its attention to East Asia and China. Of course, those rosy predictions for Europe and the Middle East did not last long, but the trend line of US military capacity and budgets continued downward. Nor has the Biden administration substantially reversed course. The top line has been flat, and, now with inflation, the Defense Department's spending power is decreasing by the tens of billions.

Given the cuts in military spending in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008–09 and the enactment of the 2011 Budget Control Act, the active-duty force today has not grown over the past decade. Because of self-imposed budget constraints and the intent to develop and procure even more advanced weapons in the 2030s, the Biden team has started cutting planes and ships from the force structure to save money. While there have been some qualitative improvements in weapon systems and platforms, the American military's core capacity has remained largely stagnant for a decade even as the global security environment becomes appreciably worse. Quality of course matters -- having a fleet of F-35s, for example, is extremely important. But as many have noted, quantity has a quality all its own, and planes, ships, and men cannot be in two places at once.

Europe will need to fill the gap in American strategic posture and capabilities. And with uncertainty about whom might be elected US president in 2024, Paris has once again taken the lead in pushing for finally creating a real EU military and defense industrial capacity. (The irony is it was the French who, in 1954, killed the idea of a European army.) From the EU there are new calls to spend more and cooperate on defense investments. And a recently approved EU document aims to build up Union-wide capabilities in cyber, intelligence, space, and maritime security, along with developing a rapid response force of 5000.

However, the obstacles that have long frustrated the creation of significant EU "hard power" capacity have not, and will not, go away. Defense program cooperation is still largely determined by the interest of each nation's industrial base, with fragmentation of development, work, and manufacturing still the norm. Brussels has no power to sort out programs for efficiency and priorities. And even if it possessed a real military force, the EU's constitutional constraints would prevent its decisive employment.

In contrast, NATO has long operated under the planning guidance that an attack on a member state would It's no surprise then that, facing the Russia's militarized revanchism, Sweden and Finland turned to NATO rather than holding out hope that the EU would become something it has not ever been. Nor it is it a surprise that Central and Eastern Europeans do not want to put their most important security eggs in the EU basket when the major EU military powers, France and Germany, even now have been hesitant in how to respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Considering the need for NATO's European allies to assist with this current effort and other security crises that might (and inevitably) will pop up, will Germany, the continent's largest economy, will step up to plate?

The answer is inconclusive.

On the one hand, in the aftermath of the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014-15, Germany has increased its defense spending by a third. Germany also headed one of the NATO multinational battlegroups deployed to the Baltic States and agreed to lead the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) on multiple occasions. It has also taken the lead in sponsoring NATO's Framework Nation Concept to drive multinational capability and formation development. Now, in the wake of the Russia's most recent invasion of Ukraine, the relatively new coalition government in Berlin announced a *Zeitenwende*, a historic turning point in its defense policy. To give substance to that change, the government moved to amend the German constitution to allow it to create a 100-billion-euro fund for new military investments and acquisitions. Among the announced acquisitions will be the American produced 5th generation F-35. This was a reversal of an earlier decision to postpone acquiring an advanced stealth jet until a European consortium had developed its own—a process that would not have come to fruition (at best) until the late 2030s. Filling in holes in supplies, ammo, air defense, and helicopter lift, Germany will be spending more than 2% of its GDP on defense for the first time since 1991.

On the other hand, with the 100 billion being special budget item, there has been little said about sustaining a buildup after this money is spent. Indeed, the extra-money will go rather quickly if the proposed acquisitions go forward – especially because much of the 100 billion could go just to digging the German military out of the readiness hole it is currently in.

A truly transformational change will require an equally significant shift in German political culture regarding military matters. Merkel avoided addressing the topic and, typically, handed the defense ministry to members of her cabinet with little political pull. In the aftermath of the first invasion in 2014, German elites spoke of a need for their country to step up and play a larger role in maintaining the international order Germany benefitted from. But Merkel's lack of leadership dissipated this so-called Munich Consensus. In 2023, the German government will produce what many are calling the country's first national security strategy. It could provide the roadmap to make *Zeitenwende* more than a word. Yet, without sustained resources and political backing, it will be just another blip in post-war German history.

Germany of course is not alone in not doing enough to support its military. The fact is, other than the Poles, who recently announced their defense budget would increase to 3% of its GDP, the major military powers in the alliance, including the UK and France, fall substantially short of the monies to meet their own strategic plans. By any honest assessment, the NATO 2% mark should be seen as the bare minimum for member states, not a goal. Modern militaries are expensive and 3% of a nation's GDP ought not be seen as an unreasonable burden.

Now, none of the problems facing NATO are insurmountable and these problems are no greater or any less serious than past challenges. That said, Washington will need to interact with NATO much more directly moving forward. The Biden administration came into office saying that it wanted to reinvigorate transatlantic ties. However, whatever progress it made on that front was undermined by its precipitous decision to pull out of Afghanistan. And while the US has taken the lead in giving financial and military assistance to Ukraine, the President has not made a sustained and coherent public case to explain to the American public or allies why these sacrifices are in our mutual interest.

Undoubtedly, the White House is preoccupied with its failing marks on the domestic front and the upcoming November congressional elections. Indeed, one has the sense that instead of using the Ukraine crisis as an opportunity to show leadership, the White House political team is more worried that it will be seen by the public as an unnecessary diversion from troubles on the home front. Of course, it need not be either/or. An administration ought to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. And a president has far more sway over public attitudes in foreign and defense policy when he or she makes an effort to do so. The sentiment for retrenchment in America is a problem but polls also show it is neither as widespread is sometimes bruited about nor, more importantly, deeply held. But it will not be overcome without the White House taking more of a lead than it has.

Conclusion

The alliance has much to do. And critics will undoubtedly observe, correctly to a point, that NATO is not nimble enough to fix all these gaps. But, based on how NATO has acted in the past, it will adapt enough to increase the alliance's capabilities and its deterrent posture *vis a vis* Russia. How fast or slow it does so will depend in no small measure on the leading European powers: Germany, France, and the United Kingdom.

NATO's reputation is largely defined, in public opinion, by its obvious problems and by the expectation that it should be more responsive and efficient in meeting security threats. We should be clear about what the alliance does and less critical of what it's not: an alliance that will always act in clear, immediate harmony. And, indeed, we take for granted existing alliance working relationships, forgetting that they had to be established, institutionalized, and become part of our transatlantic DNA. Does anyone think that Europe's response to the invasion of Ukraine, as uneven as it has been, would have been as substantial as it has been in the absence of those ties or the Article 5 security guarantee that underpins those ties?

We ought to understand that NATO is not some thoroughbred racehorse but, rather, a mule: often slow to move, often stubborn in its ways, but ultimately, with a persistent push from a lead hand—the United States in particular—it's capable of carrying much of the burden when it comes to transatlantic defenses.