

NATO and Russia after the Invasion of Ukraine

Liana Fix and Steven Keil

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the culmination of its increasingly militarized foreign policy centered around a small cast of decision-makers primarily in the military and security services close to the president. Its approach is aggressive, risk-tolerant, and deeply revisionist, spanning domains and leaning heavily on brutal tactics to achieve victory.

NATO is now forced to return to its original mission—to defend Europe against an aggressive and highly militarized Russian foreign policy. NATO-Russia relations relatively normalized in the immediate post-Cold War context, resulting in waning European investments in defense capabilities. NATO only began reversing this trajectory in 2014, when Russia first invaded Ukraine, and must now significantly speed up its efforts.

Key priorities include transitioning from forward deterrence to forward defense, augmenting NATO's capabilities in Europe and creating a greater role for Europe, strengthening regional partnerships, reestablishing risk-reduction mechanisms to manage a potential escalation between NATO and Russia, and considering long-term stabilization scenarios.

Introduction

Over the past seven decades of NATO's history, Russia has gone from the center of NATO strategy to the periphery, and back again. With Russia's war in Ukraine, NATO must return to its original mission: defending its member states in Europe against a Russian adversary. In grand strategic terms, Russia and its relationship with NATO will remain highly consequential. But relations will become much more volatile as the war in Ukraine continues and Russia persists in its efforts to destabilize Euro-Atlantic security.

Allies preparing for the upcoming summit in Madrid and a new Strategic Concept must fundamentally rethink the security situation in Europe. This includes addressing shortfalls in capabilities and repositioning NATO along the eastern flank, while preventing escalation between NATO and Russia. At the same time, NATO must reconcile competing demands, especially those facing its largest member, the United States, which will continue to focus heavily on the challenge posed by China.

The question of how NATO deals with an aggressive, escalatory Russia alongside other competing demands is not new. Allies always had to adjust to the reality of having the United States as a lead power with commitments across multiple theaters. But this question is now more urgent as it interacts with the increasingly aggressive trajectory of Russian and Chinese foreign policy. Russia is the more immediate challenge and will therefore require the most significant attention in NATO's short term. This must be reflected in the Strategic Concept.

How should NATO respond to Russia's threat in Europe? This brief examines the development of Russian foreign and security policy with the Ukraine war as an inflection point and suggests a concrete action plan for NATO over the next five years. It addresses what kind of threat Russia poses to NATO specifically and what type of posture, policies, and capacities are needed to counter the threat and meet potential escalation risks. The militarization of Russian foreign policy will continue beyond the war in Ukraine. NATO's mission has never been more relevant.

The Militarization of Russian Foreign Policy

The war in Ukraine is the consequence and culmination of a longer-term trend in Vladimir Putin's Russia: the militarization and securitization of its foreign policy. This is evident in Russia's ever-increasing militarized and aggressive approach that enabled it to play a major role in conflicts around the world in the last decade, such as Syria. But the war in Ukraine demonstrates the extent to which the military, security services, and defense ministry took control of Russian foreign policy making at the behest of the Russian president, completely sidelining more traditional institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Those institutions were already weakened over the past decade with the increasing dominance of the *siloviki* [strongmen] in Russian foreign policy making. But the irrelevance of the traditional institutions reached new heights and became glaringly visible to the outside world during the Ukraine war, revealing an even more centralized decision-making in foreign and security policy than previously assumed.

The basis for Russia's militarized foreign policy has been a continuous process of modernization of its armed forces, which rocketed after its successful but militarily weak campaign in Georgia in 2008. Since then, Russia has invested around \$159 billion per year (based on purchasing power parity)¹ in preparedness, equipment, and mobility for its military. The Russian military doctrine from 2014 reflects this development and the offensive nature of Russia's understanding of warfare, which seeks to "decisively engage and resolve conflicts on terms favorable to Russia."² The most important development in Russia's military thinking after the war in Georgia—as well as Moscow's increased obsession with color revolutions—is the widening of the concept of conflict to include non-military means, such as cyber, and political tools, emphasizing the information environment. As such,

1 Jack Watling, "[Russia's callousness towards its own soldiers is undermining its combat power](#)," *The Guardian*, March 4, 2022.

2 Congressional Research Service, "[Russian Armed Forces: Military Doctrine and Strategy](#)," August 20, 2022.

Russia's approach grew across domains, and it placed a larger emphasis on non-military and asymmetric tools of warfare. Russia's campaigns in Syria, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine are examples of this "cross-domain coercion" and warfare.³ However, in Ukraine today, Russia continues to lean heavily and foremost on brutal conventional tactics and kinetic means, while still trying to fight across the information, political, and cyber domains, albeit unsuccessfully.

A document crucial to understanding Russia's integrated conventional-nuclear approach is the Basic Principles of State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence from June 2020.

Russia has also developed and/or deployed several new weapons systems after their initial announcement in March 2018, such as the Avangard nuclear-capable hypersonic glide vehicle, the Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile, the air-launched ballistic missile Kinzhal, the long-range, nuclear-powered underwater drone Poseidon, and the heavy intercontinental ballistic missile Sarmat. The strategic stability talks in July 2021 were designed to regulate some of these systems, but these efforts ended with Russia's invasion. In addition, Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapons arsenal is concerning particularly to NATO, as its reading of Russian strategy suggests that Moscow believes these capabilities can be deployed in conventional contexts to precipitate the end of a conflict—a scenario many observers of the war in Ukraine are worried about.

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June 2020,⁴ the counterpart to the US Nuclear Posture Review. The June 2020 document states that Russia's nuclear forces are exclusively defensive and will only be used for deterrence purposes. However, it leaves ambiguity for the use in conventional contexts. In cases where the existence of the state is threatened from an outside "aggression,"⁵ the use of nuclear weapons could be considered. Another provision states that "nuclear deterrence should prevent the escalation of hostilities and allow their termination on conditions acceptable to Russia and its allies,"⁶ again reinforcing Western concerns about Russia's willingness to employ tactical weapons to de-escalate conflict. This has sparked debate about a Russian "escalate to de-escalate" strategy, which would use Russian nuclear forces not only for deterrence, but also to coerce de-escalation by threatening to escalate to nuclear use. The worrisome nuclear signaling by Moscow in the first week of the Ukraine war underscored these concerns and demonstrated that Russia's nuclear forces—and the threat of their use—are a fundamental element in Russia's militarized foreign policy.

Russia's National Security Strategy, released in July 2021,⁷ presented a step further in an increasingly adversarial stance toward Europe and the United States, compared to the previous strategy from 2015. It also demonstrated the dominance of the military and security establishment in foreign policy thinking. The strategy lays out a worldview which perceives Russia as threatened externally and internally by the West. For Moscow, the internal threat is evidenced by color revolutions and Western "ideology" in contrast to traditional Russian values. Externally, the Kremlin asserts an allegedly menacing Western military posture. Therefore, becoming a self-sufficient power and securing

3 Dmitry Adamsky, "Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy," Institut français des relations internationales, November 2015.

4 The President of the Russian Federation, [Executive order on basic principles of state policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence](#), 2019.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 The President of the Russian Federation, [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation](#), July 1, 2022.

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the information space plays a prominent role in the strategy. The way Russia conducts its war in Ukraine and its failures reflect the thinking behind this strategy.

Putin's speeches recognizing the so-called people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and declaring war against Ukraine are the latest verbalized evidence of the military takeover of Russian foreign policy, commanded by a centralized system of decision-making for the purpose of restoring Russia's control over Ukraine and thereby allegedly its historical greatness. The speech was a turning point in Western thinking about Russia's foreign policy aims. Whereas the draft agreements provided by Moscow still convinced some observers that Russia's aims in Ukraine are limited to foreign and security policy goals, such as Ukraine's non-NATO membership, the speech confirmed that Putin's thinking about Ukraine—and thus Russian foreign policy—is rooted in a deep revanchism and ideological understanding of Russians and Ukrainians as one people, denying Ukraine the right to exist as a nation-state. Russia's foreign policy has thus not only been overtaken by the military, but the military is also a priority instrument to achieve broader political and ideological goals.

The war in Ukraine and the full militarization of Russian foreign policy is an entirely new category of challenge for NATO in the post-Cold War era. It suggests that Russia is on war footing with not only Ukraine and the European security order, but with the Euro-Atlantic partners. It also understands war as encompassing geopolitical, economic, information, and military warfare. Even more, Russia's leadership is willing to sacrifice the state's stability and foundation for the pretext that Russia is allegedly threatened and must defend itself through aggression against other sovereign states. Russia's military is not as proficient as NATO forces. But Russia's approach of integrating nuclear threats to coerce and compel rather than to deter, together with an increasingly indiscriminate way of warfighting in its conventional warfare, presents NATO with new conceptual challenges for thinking about the Russian military threat.

Returning to its core mission of defending Europe as it did during the Cold War is to some extent well-known terrain for NATO. But today's Russia is not the same adversary as the Soviet Union. While drawing upon lessons from the history of NATO-Russia relations, NATO must understand that this is a new era with a new opponent and a new set of goals. This will require looking back, but also creatively thinking ahead to address this challenge.

NATO-Russia Relations in Perspective

The alliance's *raison d'être* is collective defense and that has always been, at least in large part, about Russia. This started with the alliance's founding purpose, which was to protect Western European nations from the Soviet threat. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet challenge remained a catalyzing feature of relations between Western Europe and the United States.

In the immediate post-Cold War context, US and alliance engagement with Russia was ambivalent. NATO looked for a new purpose as Russia emerged from the Soviet period. Russia no longer seemed like the challenge it once was, with President Boris Yeltsin signaling that Russia might one day join the alliance.⁸ Even short of that, things were fundamentally different. Conversations at NATO, albeit difficult, were about how to establish a new relationship with Russia and incorporate it into partnership structures, not necessarily how to deter it. As NATO reassessed its role in the post-Cold War era, Russia-NATO relations aimed at normalization. This included the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997, which would draw the contours of NATO-Russia cooperation among former adversaries.

While relations with Russia were no longer adversarial in the strict sense, there were tense moments early on. This was particularly true around NATO enlargement and engagement in the Balkans. 1999 was a pivotal year with three significant events: the NATO

⁸ Thomas Friedman, "[Soviet Disarray: Yeltsin Says Russia Seeks to Join NATO](#)," *The New York Times*, December 21, 1991.

intervention in Kosovo, admission of the first wave of new alliance members, and Yeltsin's exit from the Russian presidency, to be replaced by Vladimir Putin.

Putin emerged as a far more vigorous critic of NATO. A year and a half after taking office, Putin made it clear he no longer saw the need for NATO, arguing that Russia should either join NATO, effectively giving Russia veto power due to NATO's consensus-based decision-making model, or NATO should be disbanded.⁹

Even against this more contentious backdrop, the early Putin years saw an upgrade of the Permanent Joint Council (created by the NATO-Russia Founding Act) to the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002. At the NRC, consultations and cooperation focused on risk reduction, including arms control and crisis management, as well as counterterrorism and missile defense. Here, NATO also worked with Moscow on Afghanistan, which facilitated NATO's most significant supply route during the initial International Security Assistance Force mission that ran through Russia. But on other issues like theater missile defense, relations hit another rough patch. In 2001, in order to reportedly deploy systems to defend against Iranian missiles, President George W. Bush announced the United States would withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. While unhappy with the move, Putin initially suggested this decision posed no threat to Russia as Russian missiles could overcome any subsequent defense systems deployed by NATO.¹⁰ But over time, Putin increasingly decried the missile defense project as anti-Russian in nature.¹¹

Meanwhile, Putin's own suspicion grew as color revolutions swept through various post-Soviet states. The liberalization and Western integration of former Warsaw Pact countries was unpleasant for Moscow, but popular uprisings challenging unfair elections

and the oligarchy in places like Ukraine and Georgia hit close to home. These developments had nothing directly to do with NATO, but given that Georgia and Ukraine were both actively and adamantly pursuing NATO membership, it married with an overarching narrative of Euro-Atlantic overreach. Considered by Moscow as a part of a sphere of privileged interests, anything that would move the two closer to NATO's orbit challenged Moscow's own foreign policy vision and regional hegemonic ambitions.

Over time, Putin's public antagonism toward NATO only increased, which often correlated with dynamics in US-Russia relations.

Over time, Putin's public antagonism toward NATO only increased, which often correlated with dynamics in US-Russia relations. This culminated in 2007 when President Putin delivered remarks at the Munich Security conference deriding what he saw as a tendency to substitute NATO for the UN and calling NATO enlargement a provocation. He also claimed that by strengthening anti-missile defenses, the United States was making it possible that "threat from our [Russia's] nuclear forces will be completely neutralized...the balance of powers will be absolutely destroyed and one of the parties will benefit from the feeling of complete security."¹²

From there on, a cascade of events further soured NATO-Russia relations. Events like the 2007 cyberattack against Estonia and the Russo-Georgian war a year later fueled broader concerns about Russian foreign policy and NATO-Russia relations, and NATO's intervention in Libya alarmed Moscow. Things drastically worsened in 2014 when Russia invaded Ukraine—the annexation of Crimea took NATO-Russia discord to new post-Cold War heights. Russia's interference in various electoral processes, alongside assassination

9 Associated Press, "Putin Sees No Need for NATO," July 18, 2001.

10 Terence Neilan, "Bush Pulls Out of ABM Treaty: Putin Calls Move a Mistake," The New York Times, December 13, 2001.

11 Bilyana Lilly, "How Putin uses missile defense in Europe to distract Russian voters," NATO Review, January 29, 2015.

12 Vladimir Putin, [Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy](#), February 10, 2017.

attempts in NATO member states like the United Kingdom and Germany, damaged relations. For NATO, Russia's actions made clear its willingness to employ a range of political and military tactics to undermine NATO members and partners, and in the case of Ukraine, change borders by force.

The annexation of Crimea drove allies toward strengthening deterrence and adding capacity for territorial defense in the Baltics and elsewhere. Enhancing readiness initiatives, increasing defense spending, and rethinking the necessary capabilities to effectively deter Russia became core tenets of NATO's Russia policy and NATO's purpose. The focus was once again on Russia and collective defense, but in a more limited sense. Today, Putin's expanded invasion of Ukraine—and the brazened aims and tools of Russia's militarized foreign policy—demonstrate how broad-reaching Russia's challenge to NATO is and how NATO's strategy and posture toward Moscow must change.

For allies, it is important to understand Russia's motivations and find ways to de-escalate.

Just before the outset of the war, Russia's ultimatums to NATO would require NATO to reset its posture—rotational or permanent—to 1997, alongside the demand that NATO close its open-door policy. These demands demonstrate how incongruent NATO and Russia views of Euro-Atlantic security are today. It also shows how emboldened Putin is to offer such a maximalist position.

Russia's actions in and around Ukraine confirm that Putin has abandoned all notional attachment to the principles that have governed the Euro-Atlantic security order, from the Helsinki Final Act to the Budapest Memorandum. A unilateral disarming of NATO is the opposite of what the current security environment demands. And it is also the opposite of what NATO is doing. In the wake of Russia's invasion, several NATO members—including France, Germany, and the United States—are adding addi-

tional military personnel and equipment to NATO states nearest Russia, through additional deployments or by bolstering efforts through vehicles like the Enhanced Forward Presence. This will also include new battlegroups in southeastern Europe.¹³ NATO has also deployed components of the NATO Response Force, including the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force.¹⁴

As Putin tries to assert a new chapter of Russian foreign policy and revise the post-Cold War reality, efforts within NATO to deter Russia and defend NATO territory will remain central. At some point, so will finding ways to decrease tensions, if possible. But it is increasingly difficult as the space for trust and dialogue, already minimal before Russia's most recent intervention in Ukraine, is all but gone.

For allies, it is important to understand Russia's motivations and find ways to de-escalate. This is challenging because Putin's logic is clearly driven by a multitude of overlapping and expanding concentric circles of perceived interests. To start, Russia's challenge to NATO's open door is motivated by Russia's belief that it has a privileged claim to and interest in the region. As already discussed, Putin's speech justifying the need to recognize the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk exposed how deep-seated this sentiment is, to the point of suggesting that Ukraine lacks sovereignty, a suggestion echoed by other Russian officials.¹⁵ Accompanying such sentiment is the will to use military force to impose quick de facto realities, which it is trying to do in Ukraine. This creates difficult questions for the future of NATO's open-door policy and engagement in the region. It also raises significant

13 Rehanna Jones, [#NATO defence ministers agree to develop options to strengthen deterrence & defence, "including to consider establishing new NATO battlegroups in central & south-eastern Europe," says @jensstoltenberg. #France has already offered to lead a battlegroup in #Romania](#), Twitter, February 16, 2022.

14 Oriana Gonzalez, ["NATO Response Force deploys for first time,"](#) Axios, February 25, 2022.

15 Reuters, ["Russia's Lavrov questions Ukraine's right to sovereignty,"](#) February 22, 2022.

questions for those in Europe that are not currently part of the alliance.

Beyond the open door, allies along Eastern Europe perceive these attempted revisions by Putin as threatening to their own security, particularly for those who are seen as part of the category of former socialist republics, but also any members of the Warsaw Pact. Putin continually recalls 1997. Rather than drawing down forces in these places most threatened, Putin's aims have catalyzed additional NATO presence as an immediate reaction.

But where does NATO go from here? Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the absence of any trust is the defining element of NATO-Russia relations. Defense and deterrence are of primary importance, and NATO will need to frame the threat posed by Russia for its new Strategic Concept in Madrid.

An Action Plan to Meet NATO's Russia Threat

The war in Ukraine has changed NATO's understanding of Russia's priorities, risk tolerance, and ultimate foreign policy aims. This forces NATO to not only return to its core mission—the defense of Europe—but also to adapt its posture accordingly as quickly and sustainably as possible. The militarization of Russian foreign policy and its revisionist aims in Ukraine will prompt NATO to transition its existing strategy of forward deterrence in Eastern Europe to forward defense. NATO must also take seriously Russia's use of nuclear coercion and ensure the efficacy of NATO nuclear policy and capabilities. In the short term, NATO will be required to resolutely and carefully handle any escalatory risks emanating from the war in Ukraine for European security broadly.

NATO should hold fast to key areas of risk reduction where possible and think about long-term avenues to enhance stability. But allies should have no illusion about the likelihood of these scenarios unfolding under Putin. NATO-Russia relations will be defined by confrontation for the foreseeable future. The following action plan should guide NATO policy in the next five years.

NATO should accomplish its transition from forward deterrence to forward defense.

After the annexation of Crimea, NATO established a rotational presence in Eastern European member states known as the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP). Each EFP grouping consisted of roughly 1,000 troops or one battlegroup. The intent of these battlegroups was to serve as a “tripwire” that would engage multiple NATO members in the event of an invasion. This was to signal the seriousness of NATO's commitment that an attack on its eastern members will be considered an attack on all. At the recent extraordinary summit in Brussels, NATO added four similar deployments to countries in southeastern Europe, including Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania.

While the assurances provided by these tripwire forces have been key to the security of countries in the Baltics and Central Europe, now it is time to move from forward deterrence to forward defense. As such, NATO needs to establish a force that would be able to effectively repel an initial provocation or attack while follow-on forces are prepared. This will require substantial and permanent troop deployments in new NATO member states and will mean the formal end of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which has already been fundamentally violated by Russia's war in Ukraine. Rather than withdraw, NATO could suspend the act, as some of the provisions therein may be useful for de-escalation in the future.

NATO should augment its capabilities in Europe.

Alongside the transition to forward defense, NATO must consider what adjustments are needed to meet the current environment, and what capabilities may be required. Unfortunately, procurement processes and capability developments take years. But there are key steps that NATO can take now.

First, given Russia's use of nuclear rhetoric as part of its overall militarized foreign policy, assuring continuity in NATO's nuclear posture is critically important. To these ends, a quick replacement of Germany's expiring Tornado fleet is more important

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today than in the past. It is critical that there is no lapse in NATO's current nuclear posture or policy. Similarly, there should be no change in the US declaratory policy on nuclear first use. However, signaling by other members of the alliance is welcome.¹⁶ The modernization and adaptation of nuclear forces will also grow more important—the United Kingdom's most recent efforts to augment its nuclear forces as part of its integrated review stand out.

Secondly, investment in air defenses (medium- and long-range) and MANPADs should be on the agenda after witnessing their importance in Ukraine. This should include ramping up or reopening production lines of Stinger (anti-air) and Javelin (anti-tank) missiles.¹⁷ Here, NATO can support partners and replenish their own stocks. Beyond this, deploying and augmenting air-defense systems and sensors along the eastern flank will also be important, particularly in areas of the greatest potential for friction or escalation between Russia and NATO.

NATO should create a larger European role in Euro-Atlantic security and defense.

NATO is best placed to strengthen the eastern flank. Its planning process (the NDPP) is also best situated to create key targets for capabilities. But it should be in NATO's interest, especially against the backdrop of the challenge by China, to integrate a greater non-US ambition. Augmenting the role of European allies must be a priority. This should include European efforts in territorial defense and crisis management. Fundamentally, a more robust European security and defense ambition in NATO (and beyond) must be the result of the current security environment. Current signals across the alliance, particularly in places like Berlin, to spend more are welcome, but the spending must

be directed at well-placed capability targets.¹⁸ They should also be aimed at complementing or freeing up US capabilities.

Consequently, thinking more deliberately about mechanisms to enhance non-US capabilities in NATO, including collective European capability targets or a measurable war-fighting competence (for example, the old European Security and Defence Identity or ESDI)¹⁹ or a revised ESDI+ concept²⁰ would be an important step. This could simultaneously enhance NATO while creating avenues for EU-level capabilities that can be used in a more ad hoc fashion. Ultimately, NATO would be well served to focus less on spending metrics and more on capability targets, particularly those that enhance European contributions to high-end capabilities such as precision-guided munitions (also including long-range strike capabilities), air defense, air refueling, drones, and strategic airlift, as well as other key enablers.²¹

NATO already coordinates with the EU on critical issues for European security, but for a new posture on the eastern flank, military mobility will continue to play a large role in defense, supply, and reinforcement efforts. The EU remains central here. Forward defending the eastern flank will take a serious coordinated movement from numerous European states. Moreover, preliminary plans overcoming bureaucratic hurdles and improving infrastructure to provide the much-needed forces forward in the event of a conflict is of the utmost importance. And while some progress has been made since the launch of the Military Mobility Permanent Structured Cooperation

16 Geert de Clercq, "France says Putin needs to understand NATO has nuclear weapons," Reuters, February 24, 2022.

17 Craig Hooper, "Ukraine's Use of Stinger and Javelin Missiles is Outstripping US Production," Forbes, March 8, 2022.

18 See Steven Keil, "NATO Burden Sharing in a New Geopolitical Era," in Jason Blessing, Katherine Kjellström Elgin, and Nele Marianne Ewers-Peters (eds.), *NATO 2030 Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond*, Johns Hopkins University SAIS/Brookings Institution Press, 2021.

19 Karl-Heinz Kamp, "Closing Ranks: Aligning NATO and the EU's Strategic Priorities," German Marshall Fund of the United States, March 2015.

20 Keil, "NATO Burden Sharing in a New Geopolitical Era," pp. 227-228.

21 Derek Chollet, Steven Keil, and Christopher Skaluba, "Rethink and Replace Two Percent," Atlantic Council, October 14, 2020.

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project, much more needs to be done to move these key efforts forward.²²

Transatlantic allies should work hard to avoid becoming embroiled in age-old debates about (the lack of) European investments in security and defense. Instead, the United States should create real political support (and guidance) for Europe, working closely through NATO to achieve maximum impact across institutions.

NATO should strengthen relations with partnership countries, especially Finland, Sweden, Georgia, and Ukraine.

With regard to partnership engagement with Finland and Sweden, the case for eventual NATO membership is obvious. Both countries are highly integrated with NATO and work as closely as possible with the alliance as any non-member. Should Sweden and Finland's decision around NATO membership change in the future given rising domestic support, NATO should be prepared to admit them. They would provide a valuable contribution to regional security and demonstrate that NATO is not giving Russia a veto right on its own affairs. Especially as Russia has threatened Finland and Sweden in the past, cooperation should be enhanced where possible, keeping the door wide open.

A more difficult question is how best to engage Georgia and its prospective NATO membership. At the moment, granting a more serious prospective membership would put Georgia at serious risk if it were not accompanied by an immediate willingness by NATO to defend the country, which is unlikely. NATO therefore needs to maneuver very carefully in engaging Georgia if it is not willing to admit Georgia as a member. This could include helping Georgia enhance its own defense through military aid and additional training and assistance across multiple

domains including conventional, cyber, and information. The Russian military's shortcomings in Ukraine provide several examples of how to boost the quality of Georgia's defense in concrete ways.

Given that there remains no consensus in NATO over Ukraine's membership prospects, future engagement with the alliance is to be mostly determined by Kyiv. NATO should stand by and support Ukraine as long as necessary and as comprehensively as possible with military aid and intelligence. Depending on the outcome of negotiations with Moscow for a potential end to the war, Kyiv has already signaled that removing its ambition to join NATO from the constitution could be a possible concession. In this case, NATO should continue assisting Ukraine as a close partner country, ensuring that Ukraine remains in a position to defend itself against any future renewed Russian attack.

NATO should manage escalatory dynamics with Russia through risk-reduction mechanisms but communicate a redline on "limited" nuclear use.

Russia's threats of nuclear use have demonstrated that the current situation of conflict extends beyond Ukraine and escalation dynamics—both conventional and nuclear—can become a serious concern for NATO. Russia's draft agreements to NATO and the United States prior to invasion suggest multiple European security crises down the road. Most importantly, NATO should seek to maintain military-to-military contacts when possible and rely on bilateral channels of member states. The US-Russia military channels established during the Ukraine war are a good example. Further escalatory dynamics across multiple domains, especially along the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian borders and the Baltics, are easily imaginable. (Re)establishing risk-reduction mechanisms, where possible, such as on the prevention of unintended incidents on land, air, and sea, are necessary in this era of escalation risks.

The possibility of Russia stationing nuclear forces in Belarus should also be taken seriously. Such a move would indicate that Russia is only growing more

22 Sebastian Sprenger, "US-European momentum on military mobility still stuck in bureaucracy," *DefenseNews*, August 25, 2021; and Curtis Scaparrotti and Colleen Bell, "Moving Out: A Comprehensive Assessment of European Military Mobility," *Atlantic Council*, April 22, 2020.

unpredictable and moving further from the norms of the late- or post-Cold War era. Any potential regional use of non-strategic nuclear weapons in a supposedly “limited” way should be communicated as a horrific and unacceptable breach of international norms that would lead to a full military involvement of NATO. Current reports suggest that the United States and NATO nations are already thinking through this.²³

NATO must think about stabilization scenarios in the long term.

Historically, periods of escalation, such as those during the Cold War, were followed by periods of stabilization. In this current phase of escalation, scenarios of stabilization will not materialize for several years, if not decades, down the road. NATO must prepare for a long confrontation and posture itself accordingly. It should think ahead but look to the past to see when and how windows of opportunity for stabilization have opened and which conditions and measures were conducive to stabilization. At the top of the list, such measures include (re)building transparency, like the measures anchored in the Vienna Document, and arms control agreements in the long term. It is also in the interest of all sides to maintain the New START treaty beyond its current expiration date of February 2026. For now, offers to discuss missile defense and work on a new, reciprocal INF-regime (as outlined in the US and NATO responses to Russia’s draft agreements) are out of question. As long as Russia’s brutal campaign in Ukraine marches on and the Kremlin continues its nuclear saber-rattling, those discussions are impossible. But in the long term, these ideas can and should be revived. Even if not part of the immediate policy toolbox, stabilization should not be forgotten as a long-term strategic goal.

Is NATO entering a Cold War Redux?

The trajectory of NATO-Russia relations has been gradually souring since Vladimir Putin took the pres-

idency in 2000. With the war in Ukraine, they have reached a new level of confrontation not witnessed since the most difficult days of the Cold War. Historical analogies to describe the current situation—whether the beginning or end of the First or Second World War—do not neatly fit. If anything, as a potential reference point for NATO, the current period best mimics the early Cold War, which lacked the stability of the late 1980s. It was marked by continuous escalatory risks and unknowns.

And while this is true today, that period was also marked by war exhaustion. Current Russian foreign policy follows the opposite trajectory. When drafting its Strategic Concept, NATO must prepare to confront a new era that only appears similar to the Cold War. In reality, NATO faces an adversary determined to rewrite the terms of the post-Cold War era and willing to use all military means necessary to achieve those ends. Today’s Russia is more unrestrained, risk-prone, and escalation-driven than the late Soviet Union. It is also optimistic about its own trajectory in world politics and in its historic mission to upend the post-Cold War order. In its wake, Russia’s war and its militarized foreign policy is leaving untold destruction and suffering in Ukraine and raising NATO-Russia tensions to new heights. Russia revisionism and revanchism requires NATO to find new purpose and a new posture. This may not be a Cold War redux, but the challenges ahead are no less dangerous than the ones NATO met during its founding years. Relations between NATO and Russia will be defined by confrontation for the foreseeable future, and NATO must prepare accordingly.

23 David Sanger et al., “[US Makes Contingency Plans in Case Russia Uses Its Most Powerful Weapons](#),” The New York Times, March 23, 2022.

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