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H-Diplo Essay 419- Commentary Series on Putin's War: "Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for NATO."



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Commentary Series on Putin's War: "Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for NATO."

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NATO entered 2022 after two decades of trying to avoid a conflict with Russia over potential Ukrainian membership in NATO. The attempt to appease Moscow failed. In late 2022, when Ukraine was moving no closer to NATO, but its status as a sovereign democracy was growing, Russian President Vladimir Putin massed forces around Ukraine. He promised Russia would not invade and then, without provocation, brutally assaulted its neighbor. Many Ukrainians and Russians see each other as 'brothers,' but this was no act of brotherly love.

This essay, written as the war rages on, asks what the implications of Russia's aggression against Ukraine might be for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. It first discusses what NATO was planning on doing before the invasion, and how the

invasion might affect those plans. It follows with an examination of some of the variables and unknowns that could critically influence NATO's near- and longer-term future.

Business as Usual

Before Putin gave the order to invade,^[1] NATO already had a full agenda for 2022. The 30 NATO members were scheduled to name a replacement for the current Secretary General, former Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg. It was also anticipated that the leaders, at a summit in Madrid in June, would approve a new strategic concept for the alliance.

Stoltenberg appears to have been a very successful secretary general. Until the current crisis, his most important accomplishment may have been guiding the alliance through the American presidency of Donald Trump. Stoltenberg responded to Trump's aggressive attacks on the NATO allies by giving him credit for increases in defense spending, accepting Trump's argument on that point. By feeding Trump's voracious narcissism, Stoltenberg helped protect the alliance from any formal steps by Trump to reduce the U.S. commitment to the alliance.^[2] Trump's former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, reported that the former president was considering starting the process of withdrawal if he were elected to a second term.^[3]

After managing the welcome transition to a Biden presidency and hoping to preside over the process of preparing a new strategic concept, Stoltenberg found himself leading the NATO response to Russian aggression against Ukraine. His confidence and experience showed through very clearly as he helped the United States rally the alliance behind a variety of measures to assist Ukraine without directly confronting Russian forces on the battlefield or in the air over Ukraine.

In the discussion of his replacement in 2021, a preference was emerging around the idea of appointing a woman to lead the alliance for the first time. Another focus was on the importance of solidifying ties with the United States and, therefore, on the recommendation of picking one of the British candidates. Some observers proposed former Prime Minister Theresa May, who checked many of the key boxes under discussion. She, however, might have been too polarizing, particularly for many other European allies. Moreover, with the UK out of the EU, a continental choice would seem more appropriate.

Another question was whether to make the choice one that would confront Moscow directly. The candidates in this case were mainly those from the Baltic States. Even before the invasion of Ukraine, this could have been a strong move for the Alliance, even if it might have been too strong for some allies. Until the Russian invasion, it seemed this might make a Baltic selection unlikely, despite the strengths of a couple of the proposed candidates.

Taking these factors together suggested that the allies might find consensus on former Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. Her experience as a senior NATO official combined with her high-level Croatian posts checked off some significant boxes. One aspect that might make her an attractive candidate to the Biden administration as well as to many European allies is that she has expressed an understanding of how important NATO's political unity is to its credibility. She has been quoted as saying "...NATO is not just a military alliance, it is a political alliance as well as an alliance of values."^[4] To those of us who have made that case over the years, it seems a good starting point for any NATO secretary general. But, of course, a variety of factors not yet in the public discourse may eventually emerge as more decisive.

With the invasion of Ukraine, and the implicit threats to NATO's most northern members, the idea of one of the Baltic candidates might be revived. The search for a new secretary general could be configured to become an important part of the alliance's response to the second Russian invasion of Ukraine – following on Russia's forceful 2014 annexation of

Crimea and support for the breakaway Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. It would be easy to extend the term of Secretary General Stoltenberg for another year, and that may be an attractive option for some allies. Anything is possible given the number of unknowns at this point. But, as mentioned, past speculation has suggested that the next leader of the alliance could, and should, be a woman from an Eastern member of the alliance. What better time and occasion for such a choice? What better signal to Russia? If the United States pushes in this direction, I suspect its allies will follow. But Washington's position would also likely be decisive if the Biden administration decided to keep Stoltenberg on the front line for a further extended period.

The preparation of a new Strategic Concept was long overdue, as the last one had been forged at a meeting in Lisbon in December 2010.^[5] In the late teens, as the Alliance apparently was nearing the end of its involvement in Afghanistan, Russia was appearing more threatening, and China's growing power was skewing international power calculations, the alliance clearly needed a revised concept. But just as the alliance had postponed preparing the previous Concept until after President George W. Bush had left office, the allies were fearful of exposing NATO's future with Trump in office, as I predicted they would be at the opening of his term.^[6]

Until the Russian invasion, work on the new concept appeared to be progressing in predictable directions. It seemed that it would do several things, including redirecting the alliance's focus back toward collective defense in Europe and away from Southeast Asia, increasing the concern about China's growing power, reflecting a continuing strong American commitment to the alliance, and producing new ideas for ways in which the European allies could enhance their contributions to alliance defense, thus building on the earlier commitment to spend at least 2 percent gross domestic product on defense.

Several outside groups contributed ideas for the alliance drafters to consider. One such effort, mounted by The Alphen Group of European and American strategic experts, former officers, and officials,^[7] produced a "shadow" strategic concept, offering a document that could easily be converted or merged into the formal NATO project. The Alphen Group's shadow concept is very specific about goals that should be met by allies of the United States, as summarized by the group's leader, Julian Lindley-French, calling on "...Canada and the European Allies to invest sufficient forces and resources by 2030 to collectively meet at least 50 percent of NATO's Minimum Military Requirements identified by the strategic commanders." It then gets more specific, recommending that those investments support creation by the European allies of "...a new NATO Allied Command Operations Mobile Heavy Force (AMHF)." The purpose of such a force would be to "consolidate all Allied rapid response forces into a single pool of forces supported by the requisite force and command structures. Critically, the AMHF will act as a high-end, first responder Allied Future Force designed to act from seabed to space and across the multi-domains of air, sea, land, cyber, space, information, and knowledge." The new force would be designed as the first responder to any and all threats to NATO territory. Its design would be such that in a crisis the unit could rapidly integrate with stationed and arriving U.S. forces.^[8]

Following the release of the Alphen Group's report, in February 2022 the U.S. Military Academy at West Point organized a major conference that considered the wide range of challenges that the new concept would be required to meet. Many of the recommendations – which are still awaiting public release – synced well with those of the Alphen Group, including a main political statement produced by one of the working groups of the conference, which emphasized the fact that NATO offers more than just military responses to the challenges faced by the West, and that its value foundation is both a key motivator and fundamental source of strength. The draft included the following affirmation:

Finally, it must be noted that neither China nor Russia has a value base for its pursuit of influence and power internationally. They both depend on coercive means, payment, and hard power to maintain internal control and to

manage their international relations. They offer the world models of political systems that deny individual liberty, democratic rights, the rule of law, and the derivative institutions required to sustain these values. From this perspective, the most imminent threats to the United States and its NATO allies may in fact be those which progressively undermine the values on which the transatlantic alliance was founded. The new strategic concept must recognize this threat and commit to respond to it by reinforcing in both domestic and foreign policies the application of the values on which the alliance's future viability will continue to be based.^[9]

The final version of the new concept without question will have a sense of urgency imparted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine – the largest invasion of one European country by another since 1939. Because events are moving so rapidly, the allies may decide to anticipate amendment or revision of the concept much earlier than usual, perhaps within a year. But they seem likely to complete and release the new concept on time, or perhaps even early, to send another message to Moscow reinforcing the point that Russia's aggression is producing an even more united NATO alliance.

Going beyond 2022

Where NATO will go after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its consequences remains highly conditional on the outcome on the battlefield and in diplomacy. Eventually, the battlefield contests will lead to some negotiated terms that will be intended to govern the future. The range of possibilities is infinite, but for the purposes of this essay I organize them into three simple categories: Putin and Russia win; the Ukrainians win; a draw.

It obviously is both necessary and challenging to define those three potential sorts of outcomes, but let's give it a try.

If Putin and Russia Win

This essay defines victory for Putin and Russia as including a decisive, if costly, victory on the battlefield followed by a diplomatic settlement that accomplishes Putin's articulated and assumed objectives of establishing a Moscow-friendly regime in Kyiv, bringing Ukraine into a subordinate position to Russia, and blocking Ukraine's potential membership in NATO and the European Union. Such an outcome could emerge from Russia's overwhelming numbers simply allowing its forces, even with the continued relative incompetence already displayed, to overwhelm the Ukrainian regular forces and the resistance. A key part of this outcome could be such elements as strangling major cities with cutoffs of water, food, power, and heat. Part of this campaign clearly would involve attacks on civilian targets, people, and infrastructure. A Putin 'victory' would bring the Ukrainians to the table with a weak position, forcing them to accept cessation of conflict and resistance, imposition of a Moscow-friendly regime in Kyiv, Ukrainian commitments not to seek membership in NATO or the EU, and stationing of Russian forces in Ukraine. Crimea would remain incorporated into Russia, and Donetsk and Luhansk would either be recognized as independent or as part of the reconstituted, Russian controlled, Ukraine.

Ukrainian Victory

A victory by Ukraine is defined here as a battlefield defeat of Russian forces so costly that Putin must send his negotiators to a neutral table to accept terms dictated largely by the victorious Ukrainians. The terms would include withdrawal of all Russian forces from the territory of Ukraine, including from Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk. Some arrangement might be made for Russia to maintain its naval base at Sevastopol in Crimea. Russia would be required to pay substantial compensation to Ukraine for damages to the infrastructure and civilian lives lost. Some of the payments would come from overseas assets seized by Ukraine's supporters in the West. No concessions would be made to Russian positions on Ukraine's membership in NATO or the EU, even if Russia were offered some olive branches to reassure that it would not

face an unprovoked attack from NATO. This scenario could include President Putin losing control in Moscow, with a new regime that is somewhat less antagonistic to the West seeking to restore Russia's economic status that had been badly damaged by sanctions. This is discussed briefly at the very end of the essay.

Draw:

In this case, Ukrainian and Russian forces fight to a stalemate and, after a period of insurgency demonstrating that a Russian occupation of Ukraine would be unsuccessful, the two sides meet at a neutral table, with Ukraine supported by the United States, NATO, and the EU. Ukraine insists on a full withdrawal of Russian forces from all Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, but settlement is reached on restoring something like the status quo ante, with Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk remaining under Russian influence or control. No reparation payments are agreed upon, and the West is forced to support a process of reconstruction and renewal in devastated Ukrainian cities and towns. After Russian troops are withdrawn, NATO supports the rebuilding of Ukraine's military forces, strengthening their capabilities for defense against any future Russian assault.

These three potential outcomes are simply illustrative and should be seen as just suggesting conditions with which the NATO allies might have to cope in each of the cases. Now let's look at how each of those cases might play into some of the major issues around NATO's future. The implications in each case could be partly unique and partly the same. What follows is a summary of potential outcomes for NATO and a brief assessment of how each of the potential war outcomes could play into the area.

Western Support for NATO

During the hostilities, support for NATO in member states was clearly bolstered. The realization that Russia remained a threat, obviously to Ukraine but also potentially to neighbouring NATO states, provided strong reinforcement of the continuing need for the Alliance. NATO and EU members fell in line in support of Ukraine and with concern about Putin's next moves. Even so, there were dissenters. In the United States, a segment of the Republican Party, interpreting Trump's support for Putin, chose to blame Ukraine and accept Russian propaganda about the war. Some right-wing commentators even became media stars on Russian state media with their permissive attitude toward the Russian invasion and support for Putin as some kind of a hero on behalf of radical right nationalism.^[10] Some well-known scholars, coming at the issue from an academic "realist" rather than a political position, blamed NATO, and its willingness to expand to the East for creating Putin's fears that led him to attack.^[11] But on balance, these were minority perspectives, as polling showed around 80% of Americans polled favoring U.S support for Ukraine.^[12]

In the case of a Putin victory, concern in the United States and Europe would simply be made more urgent, as fears of a Russian move against one or more of the Baltic States would rise. The United States and other allies would make permanent troop deployments forward in the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania as a reflection of their commitment to 'defend every inch' of NATO territory, as President Biden promised throughout the conflict. Overall, NATO members, including the United States, would significantly increase defense spending. The fact that Germany did so early in the conflict set an example for the rest of the allies.^[13] The only downside would likely be criticism of the United States and the Alliance for not doing more to help Ukraine resist the Russian assault.

In the case of a Ukrainian win, NATO allies would tend to judge, at least publicly, that the alliance had done what was necessary to assist in the victory. Discussion of Ukrainian membership in NATO and the EU would get very serious, along with plans for a Marshall Plan-style recovery program for Ukraine, supported partly by Western generosity and partly by

seizure of Russian assets. Russia would be perceived as a wounded bear, defeated but still dangerous. This would sustain support for increased defense expenditures on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the case of a draw, NATO's efforts would be regarded as having helped Ukraine avoid being subsumed once again into a Moscow-dominated arrangement but would also be faulted for not having done enough. Fears of further Russian expansionist moves would persist, sustaining support for increased defense spending. Public support for the Alliance would continue strong in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Members of NATO and the EU would work as a coordinated reconstruction and relief mechanism for Ukraine. Russia would be seen as not having accomplished Putin's objectives, but having avoided a complete defeat, thus remaining an ominous threat for the West.

Relations with Russia

In the case of a Russian victory, the United States and its allies would at least initially maintain heavy economic and financial sanctions against Russia, hoping to help inspire a change of leadership in Moscow. The West would try to make Russia pay for its devastation of neighboring Ukraine. The West likely would seek to maintain at least basic diplomatic relations with Russia to keep open channels of communication, but Russia would be perceived as a threatening pariah state.

If the Ukrainians were able to defeat Russia on the battlefield and at the negotiating table, the West would focus most closely on supporting Ukraine's recovery and rebuilding while protecting its independence. This would be reflected in diplomacy toward Moscow. If Putin and his government showed any remorse for their aggression, Western governments would start looking at ways to progressively reduce the sanctions imposed on Russia, all done conditioned on "good behavior." This outcome would in general produce some desire in the West to bring Russia back into the international political, economic, and financial communities, but on terms set by the West.

A draw in the war that essentially led to a *status quo ante* in Ukraine would likely find Western countries very wary of Russia and unwilling, at least initially, to remove financial and economic sanctions. Western powers would maintain open diplomatic channels to Moscow, seeking to pressure Russia toward a less aggressive posture toward the West. A carrot and stick approach might come to characterize the Western approach, offering Moscow sanctions relief in return for Russian acceptance of blame and responsibility for its actions leading to the war.

European Defense Efforts

It has been speculated during the conflict that the war initiated by Russia might lead Europeans finally to find the political will to organize their defense efforts more effectively. The initial European response in all three cases would likely be to lobby for more and more permanent US deployments in Europe. After all, even if the Europeans found the political will to make the sacrifices of sovereignty and dedication of resources required for more serious European-level defense efforts, the desired product of a more credible defense against external aggression would not emerge for many years, perhaps decades.

Perhaps the most important impact of the war would be reducing European, and particularly French, rhetoric about European "autonomy" in defense. The word and concept have clearly been targeted at achieving a stronger European voice in defense relations with the United States. In some instances, it could even be seen as based on anti-American sentiment, growing out of a judgment that American hegemony has stood in the way of European unity. The temptation to take this

approach would be severely diminished, and the political and strategic motivations would move strongly toward a focus on the Russian threat.

The bottom Line, For Now...

As anyone reading this essay will know, anything written at these times is likely to be rapidly overtaken by events. This essay is offered up with this fully in mind, but in the hope that some of the speculation held within will provoke further analysis and conclusions as time goes by.

This essay would not be complete without briefly addressing a critical wild card in the deck. It seems possible, even if not likely, that Vladimir Putin could be removed from office because of a strategy that has worked so thoroughly against Russian national interests.^[14] This outcome would, presumably, be another version of a Ukrainian victory, or even of a stalemate. The main difference for NATO from the Ukrainian victory consequences discussed above is that NATO nations would undoubtedly reach out to the new leadership in Moscow to try to establish grounds for future cooperation and progressive removal of sanctions. Given that a replacement regime would come to office based on promoting Russian nationalism by means other than the aggressive militaristic ones pursued by Putin, there still would be differences on a whole range of issues with the West. But there would be a chance for a new start for Ukraine, Russia, NATO, and the international system.

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Notes

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[8] The full report, prepared by The Alphen Group and published by the German Marshall Fund, can be found at

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