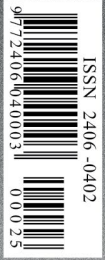


WINTER 2024 / ISSUE NO.25

\$ 12.00 | € 8.50 | 1000 RSD

# HORIZONS

JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



## THE AGE OF MINILATERALISM



*Navigating a  
Fragmented World*



ADEBAJO • ANTIĆ • BYNG • CAO • CHILDS • CHIRAGOV • HAMIDI  
KORTUNOV • MEGRE • QIANG • RIBEIRO • RÜHLE • WEI • ZHIYENBAYEV

# NATO'S FRAGILE REJUVENATION

Michael Rühle

AS NATO's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary approaches, the alliance appears to have found a new lease of life. Russia's assault on Ukraine has reminded many of Europe's continuing vulnerability—and, consequently, of the strategic value of a permanent transatlantic security alliance. Moreover, the allies continue to stand united in their support for Ukraine, and the addition of Finland (and soon Sweden) promises to significantly enhance NATO's military clout. An ever-broader agenda that now even includes critical infrastructure protection and climate security is further testimony to NATO's vitality. Charges that NATO was “brain dead”, in the words of French President Emmanuel Macron in 2019, now look like echoes of a distant past.

Alas, the image of a revitalized NATO hides an inconvenient truth: NATO suffers from a number of structural challenges that urgently need addressing.

*Michael Rühle is a former NATO official. Before his retirement in 2023, he was head of the Climate and Energy Security Section, Emerging Security Challenges Division, at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. This essay originally appeared in Internationale Politik Quarterly, the English-language edition of Germany's leading foreign affairs magazine.*

Uncertainties surrounding the future of the American commitment to NATO, an erratic debate about deterrence, and a narrow focus on containing Russia are threatening to make NATO's current rejuvenation short-lived. Adding ever more items to NATO's agenda will not amount to much if member countries were to disagree on the basics of their alliance.

## SHATTERED ASSUMPTIONS

NATO's current focus on restoring its deterrence and providing support to Ukraine obfuscates the fact that the major assumptions on which NATO's post-Cold War evolution had been based have been proven wrong. These assumptions included that Russia would remain essentially benign; that a new Euro-Atlantic security architecture could be based on the gradual extension of Western institutions; and that, with Europe “whole and at peace,” NATO's future legitimacy would be drawn



Photo: Guiliver Image

*NATO soldiers during the multinational Iron Wolf 2022-II exercise in Lithuania*

largely from crisis management operations abroad. They have all collapsed under the weight of real-world events.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine revealed that Western hopes about a gradual modernization and democratization of Russia were far too optimistic. Russia remains an authoritarian state that is not only challenging the enlargement of Western institutions like NATO and the European Union, but is even trying to roll back some of the key developments since the early 1990s. Finally, the prediction that NATO had to go “out of area or out of business” was buried by the allies'

withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. The disappointing results of this mission—very much like the 2011 operation in Libya—revealed that NATO's military engagement never translated into serious political influence on developments on the ground. As a result, the likelihood of NATO undertaking another large-scale operation such as the deployment of the ISAF forces to Afghanistan looks remote.

## THE END OF NATO'S TWIN PROJECT

In short, what started in the mid-1990s as a promising “twin project” of enlarging NATO's membership as well as enlarging the alliance's missions

has run its course. As much as one may rejoice NATO's newfound relevance as a result of Russia's aggression, the days when allies used NATO as an agent of positive political change in the Euro-Atlantic area are past. NATO is going back to its Cold War roots of deterrence and defense, with little scope left for pursuing grand political designs. Faced with a European security crisis that few had foreseen, and that may continue for at least as long as Putin remains in power, NATO is circling the wagons.

And there's more. Donald Trump's presidency has shown that the United States—NATO's only truly indispensable member—has become a potential security liability. Former President Trump's dismissive views of allies as free riders who are trying to "screw" the American taxpayer are now deeply ingrained in a large part of the American political system. The quip by an astute U.S. NATO watcher some 20 years ago, that "we Republicans actually believe that we own NATO," no longer describes the political reality in Washington. For many in the GOP, NATO has become optional. The Biden administration's pro-NATO stance notwithstanding, from now on NATO will be living under the Damocles sword of a possible U.S. withdrawal—a historically unique situation.

*Former President Trump's dismissive views of allies as free riders who are trying to "screw" the American taxpayer are now deeply ingrained in a large part of the American political system.*

### EXHAUSTED ENLARGEMENT

NATO's post-Cold War enlargement process has also reached an inflection point. Initially a success, it obscured the fact that Russia never acquiesced to it, and that Moscow remains wedded to a foreign policy concept that considers spheres of influence as vital to its national security. NATO's approach, by contrast, remains based on the principle that every sovereign country has the right to freely choose its security alignments. Russian concerns about "encirclement" were taken into account by organizing enlargement in a militarily "soft" way, e.g., without the deployment of substantial combat forces or nuclear weapons on the territory of the new NATO members. Only after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 did allies agree on maintaining a modest military presence in NATO's east. However, even if NATO poses no objective military threat to Russia, it remains a permanent challenge to that country's self-image as a great power.

The dilemma is obvious. NATO cannot back away from its "open door" policy, as it would consign Russia's neighbors to a zone of limited sovereignty and hold them hostage to Moscow's political designs. At the same time,

keeping the enlargement process going increases the price tag for NATO and the West: it further increases the antagonism with Russia, which is still Europe's most important security variable. Hopes that a new Russian government might display a more relaxed attitude regarding NATO enlargement are likely to be dashed. Even a post-Putin Russia will resist the expansion of an American-dominated military alliance that, in its own words, is "the world's strongest."

### NEW DEFENSE CHALLENGES

At the same time, when it comes to NATO's core business of deterrence and defense, the discussion has become unduly alarmist. The use of worst-case logic—often without any plausible political context—overplays both Russian military capabilities and the country's malign intentions vis-à-vis NATO (as opposed to Russia's erstwhile "near abroad", e.g., Ukraine and Georgia) while downplaying NATO's deterrent.

Such views also conflate Russia's willingness to attack some of its non-NATO neighbors with a willingness to attack NATO proper, ignoring the fundamentally different nature of such conflicts. A confusing debate about "hybrid threats" further adds to the alarmism, as it implies that NATO is already "at war." The

resulting nervousness—which may have more to do with general Western fears of decline than with clear and present dangers—is not conducive to a sober evaluation of NATO's future.

A sober analysis of NATO's current dilemmas does not suggest that the alliance is doomed. No major ally (with the exception of some American voices mentioned above) seriously questions NATO's importance, and all allied governments are aware of the benefits offered by the NATO framework in terms of military protection and political predictability. Hence, as long as allies are generally interested in a strong NATO and in a strong transatlantic relationship, the future existence of NATO remains assured. However, if the alliance wants to become an "agent of change" again and not just a mere military bulwark against Russia, it needs to address three interrelated changes head-on.

*As long as allies are generally interested in a strong NATO and in a strong transatlantic relationship, the future existence of NATO remains assured.*

### RE-INVIGORATING THE TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY RELATIONSHIP

First, given the worrying trends within the American political system, stabilizing the transatlantic security relationship must be NATO's number one priority. A key element of such an approach is a convincing message from

Europe and Canada with regard to the perennial U.S. demands for a fairer sharing of the transatlantic defense burden. While many allies have started to increase their defense budgets since 2014, the numbers still do not meet NATO's own stated ambitions, let alone Washington's expectations. In short, the allies need to do even more.

At the same time, they need to carefully calibrate their message. For example, European clarion calls of "strategic autonomy" are not likely to resonate with American audiences. In the face of Europe's current defense spending, such self-assertive rhetoric rings hollow. After all, if the Europeans do not deliver in the NATO framework, they will not do so in the EU framework, either.

Ensuring the continued interest of the United States in NATO and in Europe will not just be important for the future of Ukraine or for building a stronger defense posture to deter Russia. It will also be important for Europe's broader evolution. For example, if a post-Putin Russia should emerge, a new government in Moscow would most likely first reach out to Washington rather than Brussels. Dealing with China's rise also will require trustful transatlantic relations, as the United

States and its allies may well disagree over how confrontational an approach they should adopt vis-à-vis Beijing. With only a few allies having hard security interests in the Asia-Pacific region, plus the military capabilities to be permanently present there, difficult discussions about NATO's future in that region appear almost inevitable.

Also, a U.S.-focused NATO agenda should entail a public diplomacy effort that puts the American body politic left, right, and center. In particular, it should

include an even greater effort to identify and support American outlets that make the case for NATO. For Europeans to go to Washington and tell Americans how much they appreciate the role of the United States as their protector is necessary, but insufficient. The case for NATO is far more convincing if it is made by U.S. observers, who explain to their fellow Americans why close security ties with Europe remains a key strategic interest for the United States.

**CONDUCTING A SMARTER DETERRENCE DEBATE**

Second, NATO needs to conduct a much more comprehensive debate about deterrence, both conventional and nuclear. While NATO's rediscover-

*While many allies have started to increase their defense budgets since 2014, the numbers still do not meet NATO's own stated ambitions, let alone Washington's expectations.*

*Since deterrence used to be the central paradigm that guided NATO's approach to security in the Cold War, NATO has cultivated a reflex to seek a deterrence solution for almost any problem.*

ery of the importance of deterrence after 2014 was both necessary and timely, the discussion of that concept remains woefully inadequate.

Since deterrence used to be the central paradigm that guided NATO's approach to security in the Cold War, NATO has cultivated a reflex to seek a deterrence solution for almost any problem. This is evidenced, inter alia, by the tendency to connect "new" threats (cyber, hybrid, space) to an Article 5 response, hoping that this would send a stronger deterrence message.

Whether such approaches work, is doubtful at best. For example, the increasing number of hybrid actions against allies suggests that there is not much deterrence at play in the first place. The weakness of the current deterrence debate is also manifested in the use of many unquestioned assumptions, such as the existence of seemingly impenetrable Russian "Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) Bubbles," which the war against Ukraine quickly revealed as exaggerated.

The most important gap in NATO's current deterrence debate, however, is the lack of precision with

respect to the opponent's interests. For example, the frequently made assumption that a militarily stronger NATO could have deterred Russia from taking Crimea in 2014 or invading Ukraine in 2022 display an overly simplistic—and thus misleading—understanding of deterrence.

Such views put Western behavior and posture ("resolve") at the center of the story, and make Russian behavior appear merely as a function of Western policies. They reduce Moscow to just an opportunistic predator

that strikes whenever and wherever Western negligence allows it to. Most importantly, however, the notion that NATO could have deterred a third party from attacking another third party ignores the political dimension: Russia's willingness to take risks in order to prevent Ukraine's integration with the West was far greater than allied interests in going to war over a non-NATO country.

As long as the deterrence debate remains stuck in emotions and unproven assumptions, NATO will not only risk missing the essence of deterring Russia, but will also be ill-prepared to deal with new deterrence challenges posed by other actors, such as China.

**FOCUSING ON BROADER SECURITY OBJECTIVES**

Third, NATO must revisit its role in building a new European security architecture. The old mantra that security in Europe could only be built together with Russia can no longer be the guiding principle for Western policies. For the foreseeable future, European security will have to be organized against Russia.

However, this should not be misunderstood as an excuse for NATO to focus solely on restoring its military power.

Russia—before and even more so after its war against Ukraine—remains vastly inferior to NATO, which makes a direct assault on the alliance appear rather unlikely. Moreover, too much alarmism risks alienating parts of NATO's own populations, who may not at all feel reassured by NATO's desire to respond to Russia's alleged military prowess, in particular if this response should entail a nuclear dimension. Finally, turning NATO again into the "single issue" institution it used to be in the Cold War could hasten the alienation of NATO's southern allies, who worry about security challenges other than Russia.

Even if a direct aggression by Russia against NATO may seem remote, other challenges remain, such as Moscow's

attempts to subjugate countries in its "zone of privileged interests," its support for dubious regimes in Africa and the Middle East, and its veto power in the UN Security Council. Such a set of challenges, however, would suggest that the West continue to seek a dialogue with Moscow. Even on Ukraine, where Russia's behavior has destroyed its cred-

*The most important gap in NATO's current deterrence debate is the lack of precision with respect to the opponent's interests.*

ibility as a guarantor of agreed norms, a lasting solution will require some form of agreement with Russia, notwithstanding Western security guarantees or even NATO membership for Ukraine.

Clearly, NATO is too narrow a framework for such a dialogue. Its focus on deterring Russia, as well as the lack of positive incentives that it could offer in exchange for Russia's cooperation, make NATO ill-suited for such a complex endeavor. Only a diplomatic effort by the United States and key European allies can sustain a long-term conversation on the future of European security.

However, NATO should at least seek to create conditions that would help rather than hinder such a conversation. While NATO cannot renege on previous commitments, such as the "open door," it can choose to implement such policies in a way—and at a speed—that at least minimizes

the frictions they are likely to cause. Similarly, NATO should refrain from taking decisions that, while not of vital interest to allies, may cross certain "red lines" of Russia, and possibly others (warnings by Bill Burns, then American ambassador in Moscow, from early 2008 are still relevant).

Such an enlightened policy would require a keen awareness by allies that NATO's own actions can sometimes lead to unintended consequences. It also would require an awareness that NATO's historic success in keeping the

Cold War from getting hot was not due simply to its military capabilities, but to the combination of military deterrence and mutually acknowledged spheres of interest. Hence, while dismissing the latter as anachronistic and immoral is entirely legitimate, it also means that

*The old mantra that security in Europe could only be built together with Russia can no longer be the guiding principle for Western policies. For the foreseeable future, European security will have to be organized against Russia.*

security becomes entirely dependent on military deterrence. It is doubtful that most allies, including an increasingly overstretched United States, will feel ready to shoulder this burden.

**SHAPING THE PEACE**

Russia's attack on Ukraine has sparked the rejuvenation of NATO. However, if the allies do not address NATO's major internal challenges, such as the uncertain role of the United States, the confusing deterrence debate, and the lack of a broader vision for European security, this rejuvena-

tion could be short-lived. The single focus on deterring Russia may be tolerable in the short term, yet it will soon run counter to the strategic interests of many allies, who want NATO to be an alliance that not only keeps the peace, but also seeks to shape it. ●