

The Future for NATO and Russia

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ABSTRACT

In today's world of high militarism and tension in Eastern Europe, the potential for nuclear escalation is high. Therefore, it is necessary that NATO find a way to de-escalate the conflicts in both Ukraine and the Baltics. This paper provides an exposition on the current conflict in Ukraine between NATO and Russia, and provides insight into the Russian government's historical and current view of the West. It then discusses context in the relationship between the two antagonists and how it has culminated in Russian aggression in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and it provides a review of previous works that have analyzed Russian motivations in the region. The paper then outlines how NATO can use the previously established Minsk agreements as a way to negotiate with Russia and slow the progress of the conflict. It then transitions to the Baltics and examines how the current situation in the region is untenable and how Putin's desires for expansion there are apparent. Specifically, the Russian ethnic population in the Baltics and the Russian recession are fueling Putin's aggressiveness, which has resulted in aggressive military actions by the Russian military in recent months. NATO has also contributed to conflict in the region through posture enhancements, according to the review of articles. The paper concludes by suggesting that NATO strengthen its position around the Suwalki corridor while making conciliatory moves elsewhere in the Baltics. The paper provides a nuanced analysis and policy recommendations for NATO in Ukraine and the Baltics.

"This is the most dangerous moment for European security in a generation." These were the words of Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary general of NATO, following the Russian recognition of independence and troop movements in Eastern Ukraine, according to John Haltiwanger, senior political reporter for Business Insider (Haltiwanger). NATO has denounced these actions "in the strongest possible terms," (NATO) and the conflict has generated more tension between NATO and Russia. Paul Goble, an expert in Russian affairs who served as special adviser on Soviet nationality affairs to former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, explains that Putin has adopted "the ideology of post-Soviet revenge" and has become more aggressive in restoring Russia to the power of the Soviet Union (Goble). This has caused Putin to become antagonistic towards U.S. hegemony. Putin is not alone in his suspicion of U.S. intentions, as the RAND institute, a firm that analyzes foreign policy changes to offer research to U.S. armed forces, conducted a meta-analysis of Russian policy and concluded that "there is a consensus view within Russian foreign policy discussions that [...] U.S. hegemony poses a fundamental threat to Russian interests" (RAND 101). Recently, the Russian government has begun to abandon cooperation with elements in international institutions, especially as NATO has expanded—against the wishes of Russia—in Eastern Europe. Escalation in Ukraine has further divided NATO and Russia, and this provokes the question of how NATO can prevent future Russian aggression. NATO must look to prevent Russian aggression in two key regions: Ukraine and the Baltics; in Ukraine, NATO must embark on a collaborative agreement that ensures continued Russian influence in Eastern Europe; and in the Baltics, NATO must be careful to avoid crowding Russia, but it should also increase commitments in the Suwalki corridor.

In order to understand how NATO can prevent future Russian aggression, it is necessary to establish the status quo of NATO-Russian diplomatic ties. Even though Russia remains dissatisfied with the current international order, the two sides share common goals. Similarly to NATO, Russia has generally supported the actions and existence of the United Nations, and the development of key international economic institutions. In fact, Alexander Thalís, recipient of a Masters in International Relations from the London School of Economics, finds that NATO may be to

blame for the separation between itself and Russia. Specifically, in 1990, during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew “380,000 troops from East Germany and approved the reunified, remilitarised Germany’s incorporation into NATO, a hostile military alliance” in return for an end to NATO enlargement, which was promised by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker. Just three years later, however, NATO was willing to extend membership to former Soviet republics of Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic (Thalis). These actions created a contentious relationship between the two countries, a relationship that was not helped by the two sides’ aggressive rhetoric.

The tension between NATO and Russia has culminated in the Russian recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as two independent regions in Eastern Ukraine. The motivation for Putin’s actions in Ukraine cannot be isolated to one specific area, and instead has a multitude of causes. Maureen Groppe, the White House correspondent for USA Today, provides three key reasons for Russia’s actions. The first is the cultural element, as in July of last year, Putin penned a lengthy essay regarding his assertion that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people.” Moreover, Putin is intent on cultivating international respect for Russia within Europe and supranational organizations worldwide, per Alexandra Vacroux, executive director of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian studies at Harvard University. Finally, Russian international strategy has long been to maintain a buffer zone between itself and Western Europe. As Vacroux explains, “Russia has a history of ... feeling encircled by its enemies ... Putin is ... reestablishing a ... buffer between Russia and its enemies” (Vacroux). Putin has long held that states such as Ukraine, Georgia, and the Baltic states should not be influenced by NATO, and instead should be deferential to Moscow’s government (Groppe). Thus, Putin has advocated against NATO enlargement, and is attempting to combat it with military and political action in Ukraine.

As French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville writes in *Democracy in America*, “No sooner does a government attempt to go beyond its political sphere... than it exercises, even unintentionally, an insupportable tyranny” (Tocqueville). While these words can certainly be applied to Russian imperialist foreign policy, they also ring true regarding NATO enlargement to increase its sphere of influence. Putin’s concerns about a lack of respect could be diminished with greater Russian involvement in international decisions by the UN and WTO, for example. In fact, much of the deterioration that has occurred over the last decade in NATO-Russian relations began with minimal Russian involvement in the NATO-led UN intervention in Libya, per Tom O’ Connor, Newsweek senior writer of foreign policy. Russia opposed many of the decisions made by the UN and NATO in the region, and to secure influence in the area, Russia began intervening in the Middle East (O’ Connor). It is crucial that NATO does not make the same mistake in Ukraine; NATO must involve Russia in any discussion regarding the sovereignty of Ukraine, and collaborate with Russia on designing policy that takes into account Russian interests. A compromise similar to that of the Minsk II agreements in 2015 is necessary to further the stated goals of NATO. Per *Reuters*, the Minsk agreements outline conditions for a ceasefire, humanitarian assistance and a withdrawal of heavy weapons by both NATO and Russia. The conditions include greater decentralization of Donetsk and Luhansk and allow Ukrainian and Russian collaboration on the region’s future (*Reuters*). However, the Minsk accords have key limitations, as Russia has refused to participate in the implementation of these agreements, per Marc Champion, Bloomberg senior reporter on European affairs. This means that any solution must call for active Russian participation, and make concessions to encourage that participation. Therefore, the Minsk agreements cannot be the default solution, and must be improved upon. NATO refusal to account for Russian interests would lead to disastrous consequences. According to Thomas L. Friedman, a three-time Pulitzer Prize Winner for his works regarding foreign policy, the status quo would cause Putin to feel encircled by a rapidly militarizing NATO, while Russia’s military strength is diminished by a long war in Ukraine. And because Putin knows that the Russian populace will not support a military setback, if he does not receive concessions, to avoid humiliation, he may contemplate using nuclear weapons (Friedman).

Ukraine has long been a flashpoint in Eastern Europe and represents a model for future NATO-Russian interactions. This is particularly important, as Robin Emmott, *Reuters* diplomatic correspondent on NATO, explains that Russia’s actions in Ukraine could be a prelude for aggressiveness in the Baltics (Emmott). Taking the Baltics would be particularly valuable to Putin, as Leon Aron, director of Russian studies at the American Enterprise Institute, explains that reclaiming the Baltics would be the most satisfactory way to restore Russian international power (Aron).

Putin's desire to annex the Baltic states is furthered in two key ways. The first is by the cultural independence Estonia and the Baltics have attained. The song of freedom at the Estonian Song and Dance Festival has become crucial to the cultural concept of fierce Estonian independence. Consequently, the cultures of Estonia and Russia have further diverged, and patriotism in the Baltics has grown (Nikon). Tocqueville confirms the importance of patriotism to a country's culture, explaining that it facilitates greater levels of associations and strength within a country (Tocqueville). These associations have allowed the Baltic states to develop infrastructure and create a government independent of Russian influence. This has provoked Putin, since the Baltic states have significant ethnic Russian populations, with Estonia and Latvia having ethnically Russian populations of 31% and 25%, respectively, as Jeff Diamant, senior writer and editor at Pew Research Center, quantifies. Putin's aggressiveness is further encouraged because substantial proportions in each country "do not consider them citizens of the countries where they reside" (Diamant). Furthermore, his incentive to invade has increased with Russia's economic crisis, and the growing need for oil and gas exports. Jeanne Whalen, global business reporter for the *Washington Post*, following sanctions from Western governments due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, reports that the value of the ruble declined by 30 percent from its previous value, and many experts have estimated that Russian gross domestic product will contract by over 15 percent this year. The recession has only been curbed by Russian oil and gas exports, which primarily go to the European Union (Whalen). Even before the war, Greg McFarlane, international financial analyst, found that two-thirds of Russian exports were petroleum or petroleum-based products (McFarlane). Crucially, however, the Russian city Kaliningrad houses the only Russian port that does not freeze during the winter, but Russian access was limited following the invasion in Ukraine. Lithuania cut off Russian access to its airspace, forcing a longer detour for Russian petroleum, per Andrius Sytas, *Reuters* correspondent for the Baltics (Sytas). Consequently, Russia has begun fortifying Kaliningrad, its exclave in the Baltics, to use as a possible base for military operations. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that just a day after the sanctions began, Russia sent three large natural gas tankers to Kaliningrad to maintain fuel supplies in the region (Wallace). Thomas Newdick, an aviation and defense writer, corroborated that, for the first time, Russia sent fighter jets and hypersonic missiles to Kaliningrad, allowing for rapid targeting of the Baltic states, including through nuclear warheads. Russia placed similar weapons in Ukraine prior to its aggressiveness in Donetsk and Luhansk, indicating potential for a Baltic invasion (Newdick).

To prevent escalation in the Baltics, NATO should examine its previous missteps. Bryan Frederick, a senior political scientist with a PhD in International Relations from Johns Hopkins, analyzed Russian responses to NATO posture enhancements in the Baltics and explained, "Russian leaders are ... more likely to see malicious intent behind U.S. force posture enhancement ... [Thus,] NATO enlargement is often cited as clear evidence of NATO's pursuit of aims that threaten Russian security" (Frederick). Ted Galen Carpenter, senior fellow at the CATO Institute found through a meta-analysis that much of Russia's aggressiveness results from NATO's "alarming number of provocations in recent years," as NATO has frequently crowded Russian airspace. Therefore, Carpenter suggests that "the Western powers must make the first conciliatory moves" (Carpenter). NATO's strategy in the Baltics must be to find ways to avoid provoking Russia. Some argue, however, the threat of Russian aggression will remain constant even without NATO provocation, and that NATO should maintain commitments in specific areas. Russia would seize the Suwalki Gap, a land link between Kaliningrad and Belarus, which would cut the Baltic states off and isolate them from the rest of NATO (Emmott). Russia has already shown signs of aggressiveness, as Russian and Belarusian troops practiced closing the Suwalki Corridor and attacking from Belarus per Richard Milne, Baltic correspondent for the *Financial Times* (Milne). John R. Deni, research professor at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute, provides a solution for defending the Suwalki Gap. Given the potential for Russian invasion, NATO should strengthen its position around Suwalki by officially disbanding the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which has already lost much of its credibility due to Russian aggression. Afterward, NATO should deploy one brigade of 5000 British, Canadian, and U.S. troops. Improving NATO infrastructure maintains the Suwalki corridor, protecting the Baltic states without provoking Russian retaliation (Deni). Without protection for the Baltic states, the impacts would be catastrophic. Hal Brands, professor of foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University and Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, explains how a nuclear war in the Baltics could arise. In the status quo, NATO lacks the ability to prevent

Russia from quickly overrunning the Baltic states, which could occur within just three days, according to NATO simulations. Devastatingly, if NATO attempted to respond in a counteroffensive, Russia, understanding that it would lose a long war against NATO, would begin to use nuclear weapons in response to “preserve early gains in ... the conflict.” This could initiate the use of nuclear options in the region, increasing the potential of nuclear war (Brands). Therefore, even while maintaining a general strategy of aerial withdrawal, NATO must reinforce ground commitments in the Suwalki.

Any NATO solution to rising escalation must ensure that collaboration with Russia is possible. In Ukraine, NATO should advocate for principles similar to the Minsk II agreements, and enforce Russian participation in those accords. In the Baltics, NATO should reduce airspace control, but ensure commitments in the Suwalki Gap are maintained. NATO must be careful not to provoke Russia to prevent further escalation, but its strategy must reinforce commitments to Ukraine and the Baltics.

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