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Five Long-Term Challenges for NATO beyond the Ukraine Crisis

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Moscow's aggression against Ukraine has truly been a "game changer" for the Atlantic Alliance. Its implications for NATO's further evolution can hardly be over-estimated and after the likely shoot-down of a Malaysian civil aircraft over Ukrainian territory, controlled by pro-Russian rebels, the situation is even more unpredictable. Even if the catastrophe has put heavy political pressure on President Putin to reduce Russian involvement in Ukraine, Moscow is still not likely to revert the annexation of the Crimean peninsula. As a result, the crisis will dominate the international security debate for a long time to come. Thus, signs of resolve directed at Russia, measures to reassure the NATO members in Eastern Europe and indications of further cooperation with Ukraine will rank very high on the agenda of the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014. With the draw-down of the operation in Afghanistan, some Allies tend to see NATO's future role as primarily to preserve the territorial integrity of its member states. Hence, they argue in favour of a "back to basics" approach with an Alliance concentrated on its defence mission, according to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

However, Putin's intention to extend Moscow's sphere of influence and to position Russia as an anti-Western power are not the only reasons for a profound reassessment of NATO's future tasks and missions. There have been other developments which require a reappraisal of the Alliance's role in the post-Afghanistan world. The rising relevance of the Asia-Pacific region and the growing role of China, the worrisome developments in the Middle East and North Africa, the limited success of NATO's operations in Afghanistan and Libya, or the partial re-positioning of US attention towards domestic problems, are other factors that need to be included in the equation which will determine NATO's future.

With the bigger picture in mind, NATO faces the challenge of coping with the legitimate security concerns of its Eastern members, but at the same time not falling into the trap of creating a one-dimensional "Eastern-Alliance". Instead, NATO as a global actor has to preserve its 360° perspective in order to be prepared for the complexities of the 21st century security environment. The three core missions NATO defined in its 2010 Strategic Concept – deterrence and defence, crisis management, and cooperative security through partnerships – will remain relevant. However, a new Alliance consensus needs to be forged on the individual relevance of each of the three pillars and their relationship to each other. All this will have to be achieved against a backdrop of tight budgets and dissent on how much should be spent on security and defence.

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Altering the course of the NATO “supertanker”, with 28 captains steering the ship, will hardly be achieved by September 2014, particularly as some of the developments mentioned above – including the Ukraine crisis – are in full swing with uncertain outcomes. Hence, Wales will not be the “historical” summit it was hailed to be. Instead, it will be a very important meeting, as it will be the prelude to a longer-term process, arguably requiring further summits, where NATO’s political leaders give guidance according to developments in Europe or across the globe.

In this longer-term reassessment of its roles and missions, NATO needs to find consensus on at least five questions which go far beyond the current crisis in Ukraine.

1. How to shape long-term relations with Russia?

Despite positioning itself as an opponent of NATO and of Western principles of democracy and human rights, Russia remains an important player on the international scene. Geographically the largest country on earth, and with the power of veto in the UN Security Council and a strong position as a key provider of oil, gas and minerals, Russia still has an important role to play even if it is no longer the global power which the Soviet Union once was. In principle, four kinds of relationship with NATO are plausible:

- Russia as a *strategic partner*, with privileged access to NATO through the NATO-Russia Council, as in the past;
- Russia as a *partner*, interacting with NATO through the Partnership for Peace programme (PfP) – like Belarus and others;
- Russia as a *neighbour*, without any partnership agreement;
- Russia as an *opponent*, an *adversary* or even an *enemy*.

There appears to be agreement among the Allies that the strategic partnership no longer exists, and that there is no realistic chance of a “reset” or a return to the status quo ante, in the sense of favoured relations – at least not under President Putin. NATO is currently divided over the three remaining options, with consensus still to be found.

It is worth noting, though, that none of the three options precludes cooperation with Russia in areas of common interest, like the managing of Iran’s nuclear ambitions or protecting the Arctic from the potentially negative consequences of new shipping routes. At the same time, each option requires a different set of political and military measures to preserve Alliance security – and arguably, a different level of resources to be provided for defence.

It seems likely, though, that because of geography and historical events, individual Allies will always differ in their perception of Russia – a more adversarial view from countries like Poland or Estonia, and a more cooperative stance in Germany, France or Italy. Still, conceptually, NATO as an Alliance needs to agree on one of the four models.

2. How to deal with the enlargement question?

Until recently, enlargement seemed to be an issue of minor relevance, dealing primarily with the leftovers of previous rounds of accession. In April 2008, Ukraine and Georgia received a pledge from NATO, of being admitted one day into the Alliance without a specific date being set. Georgia’s membership ambitions were put on the backburner after the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008. Ukraine’s new pro-Russian President Yanukovic declared in 2010, that the country was no longer be pursuing the goal of NATO membership and preferred non-aligned status. The membership aspirations of FYROM² are still at a deadlock owing to the dispute with Greece over the country’s name, and the other applicants from the Balkans still have some way to go before having a chance of joining the Alliance.

2 Turkey recognizes The Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.

The Ukraine crisis has added new dynamics to the issue. Georgia is even more committed to joining NATO and has tried hard to fulfill the requirements. As a result, in Wales, it will receive a number of concessions from NATO to make it plain and clear that the country has made significant progress on its way towards membership. Ukraine is likely to revise its 2010 decision of non-alignment and will insist on NATO's membership guarantee of 2008 – even if no timeframe was given. This will bring up the fundamental question of whether or not a country of the size of Ukraine, with border disputes on its territory, a partly dysfunctional state and under threat of further disintegration, can be integrated into NATO at all. NATO members might be able to postpone the issue for a while but, sooner or later, they will have to face it.

Furthermore, in Sweden and Finland, the number of those who argue in favour of NATO membership is rising constantly. Should the two countries make a serious bid for membership, the implications would go well beyond the immediate issue of enlargement and Russia's potential reactions. Given that the US Senate, which has to ratify any accession, has defined a defence budget level of two percent of the GDP as mandatory for every membership candidate, both countries would have to raise their defence expenditure significantly. Should they do so, this would increase the pressure on other NATO members to reach the two percent target as well – something NATO Allies have promised time and again. It is ironic that most of NATO's current members would not be able to join the Alliance today in view of the hurdle put up by the US Senate.

3. How to cope with Washington's pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region?

The US announcement in 2012 to pay more attention to the rise of China and to rebalance – or as it initially said, to “pivot” – American focus and resources away from Europe and more towards the Asia-Pacific region, has had a major impact on the transatlantic relationship. Even if Washington appears to adapt this strategic shift to the new developments in Europe and the Middle East – some call it the “pivot from the pivot” – the core questions remain: how should NATO, or more precisely the European members of NATO, react to the increasing relevance of the Asia-Pacific? What attitude should be held regarding a region whose stability is of vital importance for all NATO members (the Strait of Malacca carries more than 40 percent of the world's trade, with 50 000 merchant ships plying through there every year), but where only the US has the capabilities to be regarded as a power with real clout? How does one achieve fair burden sharing between Europe and North America, given that the US defence budget is under heavy pressure as well?

So far, NATO has carefully avoided discussing these issues seriously but the fallout from the Ukraine crisis will place them prominently on the agenda. European NATO members expect credible security commitments from the US, as the world's largest military power. Moreover, many Alliance members encourage the US to share their newly gained wealth in energy resources by exporting more liquefied gas (LNG) in order to help reduce Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies. The United States will do both, but only in exchange for Europe sharing the burden by providing more resources and showing more engagement in other areas. In the long run, this will include higher defence spending and greater responsibilities for Europe on the international scene. Since virtually no European NATO member has the means for long distance power projection to Asia, the bargain could be that Europe ensures the stability of its neighbourhood, in Africa or the Middle East, thereby freeing up US resources to be deployed further away in the Asia-Pacific. The initial debate in Germany, where prominent voices are arguing in favour of greater German responsibility in foreign policy issues (which does not necessarily mean more military engagement), is going in that direction.

4. How to adapt NATO partnerships to the post-Afghanistan world?

One of NATO's true success stories is the establishment of close partnerships with a host of nations around the globe. Through the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), NATO partners with countries in North Africa and the Middle East. On a global scale, NATO

cooperates with countries like Australia, Japan, New Zealand or South Korea. In most cases, partnership has been a win-win situation. NATO provides know-how in what it does best: multinational military action using common standards and common procedures. In turn, many partners contribute to NATO's crisis management operations. The global partners, in particular, provide crucial assistance and efficient military forces for NATO's mission in Afghanistan.

In the future, this success story might be challenged from two angles. First, NATO has not yet found a fully satisfying mechanism to cooperate with its global partners once combat operations in Afghanistan have come to an end in 2014. So far, NATO has conferred with them as contributors to the Afghanistan operations and has also been using these meetings to discuss issues that go beyond immediate operations in the Hindu-Kush. After 2014, there will no longer be any contributors' meetings. Thus, the question is how to include important partners like Japan or Australia in NATO's decision-shaping if neither common institutions like the PfP, nor common military operations, exist? Ideas for the creation of a special cooperation forum for those partners who are capable of contributing to common efforts and who are politically like-minded, regardless of their geographical origin (i.e. countries like Sweden, Finland, Austria, Japan, South Korea, Australia), have long been dismissed as outdated attempts at re-creating the "political West" or a "league of democracies". With Russia positioning itself explicitly as an anti-Western and anti-democratic power, they certainly deserve reconsideration.

Second, the Ukraine crisis has highlighted a question which has been papered over for a long time: does a NATO partnership, particularly a privileged one, imply any form of NATO security assurance for the partner country? In the case of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, NATO refused any kind of commitment, implicitly arguing that Ukraine was not a NATO member state and could, therefore, not hope for Alliance solidarity according to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. This was broadly accepted, not least because there appeared to be only limited strategic interest in Ukraine on the part of most NATO members—still this was not fully correct. The PfP Framework Document, the basis of NATO's Partnership for Peace, which has also been signed by Ukraine, states that every PfP member can call for individual consultations with NATO in the event of an immediate security threat. NATO offered this back in 1994, partly because the creation of the PfP was also a way to postpone the enlargement process and buy time for further deliberations on which countries should join NATO and on how to soothe Russia's concerns. After 1999, when the accession of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic sparked a debate on the NATO membership of the three Baltic States, NATO members became even more explicit—at least on the declaratory level. Torn between the pressure of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia for membership on the one hand, and harsh Russian protests on the other, NATO officials argued that even if the Baltic states did not join the Alliance, the difference between membership and non-membership would be "paper thin". This was a promise—some say a sedative—to the applicants, that NATO would not remain passive if one of the three Baltic states came under threat, even if they did not yet formally belong to the Alliance.

5. What will NATO's role be in the Middle East?

Developments in the so-called MENA region (the Middle East and North Africa) are even more challenging. With Libya and Iraq in shambles, Syria falling apart, Egypt facing an unclear future and Islamic extremists proclaiming Caliphates which transcend national borders, the situation is becoming dramatic.

Recent developments indicate that the region is not so much confronted with local crises or revolutions, which sooner or later will lead to new orders and governments, instead, the MENA region is facing the more worrisome trend of a general erosion of statehood. So far, NATO has engaged in the region, mainly through its two partnership programmes—the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). In addition to these long established partnerships with states, NATO has been carefully approaching partnerships with regional institutions like the League of Arab States or the African Union. Another NATO task was crisis management, in the form of a military intervention in Libya which successfully stopped the violence of the regime against its own population. In Syria, the Alliance gave

serious consideration to an intervention but could not, finally, agree on taking military action despite the brutality of the Assad regime.

Neither efficient partnerships nor military intervention for crisis management purposes may any longer be possible. If governments disappear, or are replaced by militias or religious zealots, or are primarily occupied with providing for their own survival –who is NATO going to partner with? What will be the practical content of the existing partnerships under such circumstances?

Consensus on crisis management operations, namely military interventions to stabilize regions abroad, is hardly likely to be found again. The deeply-felt “intervention fatigue” in NATO and the EU is not only the result of the colossal amount of resources those operations consume but first and foremost, of the limited results that have been achieved so far. NATO nations have become very humble with respect to the gains in security and stability that can be achieved through interventions abroad. After 13 years of fighting in Afghanistan and billions of dollars and euros spent in nation-building efforts, it still remains to be seen whether the undisputed accomplishments will be lasting, once the combat missions are over. In Libya, the country has proven incapable of building a new political order since the Gadhafi dictatorship was successfully removed. Almost three years after NATO’s successful intervention, Libya is still torn apart by tribes, clans and religious groups, with no prospect of creating a stable order soon. The disastrous results of the post-intervention phase in Libya are one of the reasons why NATO was so hesitant to intervene in Syria, even if the death toll was significantly higher than in Libya.

NATO’s leeway for military interventions will also be affected by the Ukraine crisis. Moscow (together with China) has already blocked a United Nations mandate for taking action in Syria. Russia’s increasingly confrontational course of action makes it even less likely that it will ever again vote in the UN Security Council in favour of a Western military intervention. Hence, in addition to extensive “intervention fatigue”, NATO will lack the legitimacy for military crisis management, since it is extremely unlikely that the Alliance would ever agree again on an intervention without a UN mandate, as it did in Kosovo in 1999.

Russia’s neo-imperial undertakings in Ukraine and elsewhere have not only re-emphasized NATO’s relevance as a Euro-Atlantic defence Alliance. The current crisis also highlights other core questions that NATO has, so far, dodged or not discussed with the necessary rigor. Hence, NATO’s two-fold challenge will be to preserve the territorial integrity of its member states against external threats, while simultaneously remaining an important stability provider on the international scene. The key to NATO’s success over more than six decades was its ability to adapt to changed circumstances. Russia violently changing the borders in Europe is one such change, but the other five, mentioned above, need to be tackled as well.