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NATO's Strategic Deficit

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Abstract

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has a diversity of missions: from combating a refugee crisis to fighting the battle on terrorism. Additionally, NATO has gained 18 countries to its ranks since 1949, expanding organizational interests. The past decade has been tumultuous for NATO. The 2008-2009 banking collapse, failures in Syria and the subsequent refugee crisis, and Russia's annexation have all tested NATO's resilience. In the complexity of today's environment, it can be easy to forget why NATO was formed in the first place. NATO was birthed with the sole mission to halt Soviet Union aggression. This paper argues why NATO should return to its origins and firmly commit to Russian deterrence and de-escalation.

NATO's Strategic Deficit

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has existed for 72 years. NATO engendered the collapse of their greatest existential threat, only to see new dangers and crises arise. Today, the organization has a massive scope of interest ranging from climate change to China's aggressive foreign policy. NATO consists of 30 countries, therefore achieving consensus on solutions to these pressing matters is a complicated endeavor. As a result, NATO consistently lacks unified responses to their own threat perceptions (Morcos, 2020). NATO has a strategic deficit and must change to be an effective organization.

Abbreviated History

Before expounding on how NATO can stay relevant today, it is helpful to detail a brief history. NATO was formed in 1949 with only 12 founding countries. The sole reason for NATO's existence was to deter Soviet Union aggression. The Soviet Union quickly acted in response and formed the Warsaw Pact for collective defense. The Cold War and the spread of communism heightened tensions between the two sides. The budget reflected this contested environment. From its origin to "1992, all NATO countries (except Luxembourg) had defense spending above 2% of GDP" (Wołkonowski, 2018). The United States and NATO were the ultimate winners, as the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact collapsed. There were many factors in the victory, but economic strength and military might proved invaluable. Sykes (2010) states, "there is a great deal of evidence to support this view that the economic inferiority of the USSR was a major factor in its collapse." Through power and subsequent defense spending, NATO was the victor.

When the Soviet Union fell, NATO's defense contributions dropped precipitously. Wołkonowski (2018) recalls that "changes in the international situation at the end of the 20th century in Europe caused a decrease in defense spending below 2% of GDP in the period between 1993 and 2017." With no major conflict on the horizon, NATO redefined itself as a generic force for good. The alliance shifted from protecting territory to "an organization able to run crisis-management missions and promote broader security through cooperation with different countries" (Lorenz, 2016). The next major conflict directly involving one of NATO's members was the War on Terror. Although article 5 was invoked, NATO had limited participation in this war. It was apparent NATO shifted from the geopolitical powerhouse responsible for ridding the world of the Soviet Union to an antiquated and ineffective organization.

Russian Rebound

Russia did not immediately rise to prominence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Shleifer & Treisman, 2005). Leaders in the United States viewed Russia as a destitute country in the early 2000s before its return to communism. Moreover, western countries incorrectly believed a time of peace would follow the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, these sentiments likely eased Russia's path back to the world stage. Additionally, terrorist organizations, a widespread economic recession, and a massive refugee crisis shifted NATO's focus away from Russia. Europe quickly became a volatile and complex environment. Conditions worsened and climaxed when "the shock of Brexit, NATO's failure to dethrone Assad, and a more pugnacious Chinese foreign policy . . . forced Western elites to confront the possibility that the post-Cold War era was little more than another liberal interregnum" (Sussex, 2017). Meanwhile, Russia felt bolstered by the lack of repercussions from their nationalistic agenda. There is no doubt that "Russia's easy seizure of Crimea, its role in Syria and its

ambitious pivot eastward have emboldened Moscow at a time of crisis for the liberal order” (Sussex, 2017). Russia inappropriately projected their power and suffered minimal consequences.

Conflicted Allies

NATO’s response to Russia’s current nefarious actions does not mirror its response to Russia during the Cold War. After Russia’s annexation of Crimea, “Europeans still hesitate in sending Russia robust responses or harsh messages” (Vukadinović et al., 2017). This hesitation is particularly true for trade partners and those in close proximity to Russia. Shockingly, a survey conducted by the Körber Foundation in 2016 showed “81 percent of Germans favor closer ties with Russia and see Russia as an equal power with a rich culture and history” (Vukadinović et al., 2017). However, the most disturbing message NATO sent is through their defense contributions. Even after the Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO countries continued to spend less than 2% of their GDP (Wołkonowski, 2018). While a simple GDP metric does not explain the security vacuum in Europe, it elucidates the lack of commitment. Europe’s lack of resolve to Russian deterrence can be explained by the international trade network. Today, the “the European Union now imports nearly 40% of its natural gas from Russia” (Moravcsik, 2019). Europeans’ growing demand for energy coupled with Europe’s proximity to Russia’s natural gas pipelines, create an attractive trade relationship. In addition to a lack of funding and resolve, investing in the defense of Europe is patently difficult. Stringent fiscal rules hamstring investment in equipment and operational expenditures (Becker, 2019). NATO faces several challenges and Russia has sought to exploit these weaknesses.

For Russia

NATO may appear obsolete and ineffective, but it can provide stability for the region. Volatility will inevitably arise in Europe, enabling hostile actors to advance their agenda. It is well documented that financial crises increase the likelihood of conflict (Marks, 2016). Dissuading nations from conflict and conquest, in particular Russia, is NATO's 21st century calling. NATO's attempts to solve refugee crises, fight wars far from Europe, and counter Chinese ambitions for hegemony would be destined to fail. NATO would fail due to lacking unified commitment, not from a faulty strategic analysis (Morcos, 2020). At present, NATO has 30 members. There can be no broad commitment to defense without unity in cause. For example, it is apparent that the most recent country to join NATO, North Macedonia, has separate incentives than its partner member, the United States. Nonetheless, North Macedonia, like all other countries of NATO, has interest in keeping Russia's nationalistic ambitions out of their country. Although new nation-states have emerged, the same geographical regions highlighted in the Cold War are relative today. Indeed, many nations that exist today were once formally a part of the Soviet Union. Thus, returning to the original purpose of NATO is as valid today as it was in 1949. Solidifying resolve and unifying on a common course is the best way to return NATO's prominence. It is important to note there were disagreements between members of NATO when combating the Warsaw Pact; however, mutual interest kept the alliance alive. This same mutual interest exists today within the revival of Russian aggression. Johnston et al. (2019) conjectured that "the degree to which NATO endures or indeed thrives appears to be a function of the continued relevance of the old security agenda." NATO exists today to deter Russia's unethical foreign ambitions, but membership commitment is necessary to meet the demands of the strategic environment.

The battle to keep Russian ambitions in check must couple increased investment and better resource management. RAND Corporation hosted a series of war games in the Baltic states in 2014 and 2015. They concluded the current defense posture of this region was inadequate. Russia could rapidly defeat the Baltic Republics of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia (Shlapak, 2018). The study offered a surprisingly easy solution: bolster the area with NATO brigades to dissuade Russian aggression. The solution required “seven brigades, including three heavy armored brigades—adequately supported by airpower” (Shlapak, 2018). Transforming a no-win situation for NATO to an economically untenable position for Russia mirrors the successful Cold War strategy. The concept of preparing for war against Russia may seem irrelevant today since “Russia almost certainly has no intention of attacking NATO outright” (Shlapak, 2018). However, NATO was birthed during the Cold War to deter indirect Russian aggression. These same tactics remain relevant in today's contested environments.

NATO has several glaring weaknesses, but when unified, its strengths can overcome Russian aggression. Although, NATO has many partners, Russia is relatively isolated, offering NATO unparalleled agility to meet challenges across borders. For example, Germany, England, France, and Italy all have economies larger than Russia's economy. Furthermore, many European countries are Russia's largest customers. Leveraging trade with compliance would have a large impact on Russia's foreign policy. NATO's military is substantially larger than Russia's military. NATO would not fail to stop Russian aggressions if its collective clout was used. However, if NATO continues to lack a main purpose and fails to create global solutions, Russia will continue to advance their agenda.

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