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Atlantic Council
IN TURKEY

NATO IN AN EVOLVING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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FOREWORD

By Rich Outzen & Can Kasapoglu

The end of 2024 has brought significant changes to the security landscape for the United States, Turkey, and their partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine have escalated sharply, with Iran and Israel exchanging attacks, sustained warfare along multiple flashpoints the Middle East, and the introduction of North Korean troops into fighting near Kursk. Under the Siloviki rule of Soviet-remnant spy chiefs, Moscow shows no signs of backing off the expansionist strategy of restoring Russian control in post-Soviet space. Pyongyang and Tehran are now direct threats to European security. Meanwhile, wars and counter-terrorism campaigns in Africa and the Levant pose continuing challenges, and the risks of a major war in the Indo-Pacific remain high. All in all, while the world tumbles into escalating conflicts, hard power geopolitics and political-military issues have become more important than ever.

As the start of the second Trump Administration approaches and anti-Western forces tighten their coordination around the globe, the need for military readiness and closer coordination among NATO members grows to defend our homes, nations, and values. This issue of the Defense Journal provides assessments and analysis of how the Alliance is responding and adapting to this era of persistent conflict. We hope the articles here will broaden understanding of these pressing strategic matters!

Rich Outzen & Can Kasapoglu are Co-managing editors, *Defense Journal by Atlantic Council IN TURKEY.*

Rich Outzen

Can Kasapoglu

HOW NATO LEARNS AND ADAPTS TO MODERN WARFARE

By General Chris Badia

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have had strategic consequences far beyond the region, showcasing the complexities of modern conflicts, where conventional battles are intertwined with cyber warfare, information operations, and hybrid tactics.

No doubt, Russia's actions have reshaped the global geopolitical landscape. Yet NATO's capability to adapt has been central and the basis for its sustained relevance and success as an alliance since its founding in 1949. And now, seventy-five years later, NATO continues to lead in learning and evolving to address emerging challenges in the future operating environment.

As with past conflicts and Russia's evolving war against Ukraine, NATO's mechanisms for lessons learned and transformation serve as a critical means to adapt and prepare the Alliance to counter every aggression in the future.

But how does NATO, with thirty-two member nations, learn lessons? While NATO's internal learning process is informed by its members and their own experiences, the situation in Ukraine now demands the ability to learn lessons from others' experiences. In short, this external learning process is achieved by Alliance-wide lessons sharing and collecting through a dedicated NATO lessons-learned portal. These national observations and experiences are collected, evaluated, consolidated, and then transformed into actions to be applied in NATO's activities to transform, adapt, and prepare for the future.

The organization's military learning and adaptation process is strategically led by Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in the United States in Norfolk, Virginia, with a dedicated subordinate command as the Alliance's center for enabling and supporting the NATO lessons-learned policy and capability: the Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC) in Lisbon, Portugal. By systematically collecting reports from open sources, partners, and allies, and sharing them in the NATO lessons-learned portal, all member nations can benefit. A dedicated analysis team gleans insights from the vast amount of

data to enhance NATO's understanding of Russia's war against Ukraine, and thus, where applicable, inform and influence the development of new strategies, doctrines, and training programs. Recently, JALLC is also benefiting from inputs delivered by a Ukrainian nongovernmental organization focused on analysis and training.

NATO's decision to establish the NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis Training and Evaluation Centre (JATEC) will soon play another crucial role in ensuring that NATO remains informed, agile, adaptable, and effective in addressing contemporary and future security challenges. JATEC thus represents a significant commitment by allies not only to improve the interoperability and effectiveness of Ukrainian forces but also to enhance the Alliance's capability by learning and applying lessons.

The lessons-learned process is also supported by various national NATO-accredited Centres of Excellence (COE). These COEs, under the coordinating authority of ACT, specialize in various military areas of expertise, such as cyber defense, command and control, air power, medical support, etc.

Altogether, ACT with the JALLC in its overarching role, the contributions by the nations, and the NATO-accredited COEs with their specializations, create a comprehensive system for ensuring lessons are captured and disseminated to operational forces, fostering a culture of continuous improvement within NATO.

The basis of a successful alliance is a common understanding and principles, which are laid out in doctrines. Therefore, doctrine development is a critical component of NATO's adaptation and transformation process. By continuously updating doctrine based on real-world experiences and lessons learned, NATO ensures that its operational principles remain robust and effective in the face of evolving threats. With regard to Russia's war in Ukraine, Russia's use of hybrid warfare tactics, which combine conventional military force with irregular tactics, and cyber and information operations, has prompted improvements in NATO doctrine governing how NATO shares intelligence and counters disinformation campaigns to strengthen NATO's response toward hybrid warfare tactics.

Furthermore, lessons from Russia's war against Ukraine underscore the importance of agile, integrated command and control systems capable of coordinating operations across multiple domains: land, sea, air, cyber, and space. NATO needs command and control structures that are flexible, resilient, and capable of rapid decision-making. Advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning are being leveraged to enhance shared situational awareness and streamline decision-making processes to maintain an advantage.

Lessons learned will be injected into NATO exercises and training to generate high-fidelity training scenarios allowing NATO forces to "train as they fight." Besides improving interoperability, certifying NATO forces, and demonstrating NATO's fighting credibility, NATO exercises also challenge training audiences to face operational dilemmas that reflect the complexities of modern warfare. JALLC reports summarizing lessons from the war in Ukraine are being used by the Joint Force Training Centre (JFTC) and Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) to update and improve NATO exercises. The increased use of drones, private-sector support for military operations, the battle for both cognitive and information superiority, sustainment, and civilian resilience are key features, which have already informed changes in NATO exercises to ensure that NATO forces are better prepared to operate in complex and dynamic environments.

ACT, as the strategic warfare development headquarters, also looks into the future. Studies focus on widely debated topics including, for example, the future operating environment and the future force structure. Other topics include the future of tanks and attack helicopters, small-drone warfare, vulnerabilities of fleets and ports to maritime drones, and the protection of critical infrastructures against long-range strikes.

NATO's commitment and ability to continuously develop and improve ensures the Alliance's enduring strength and cohesion. NATO is rapidly incorporating battlefield lessons into the transformation, adaptation, and preparation activities of the Alliance's forces. ACT is key to this process, ensuring lessons reach operational forces at the speed of relevance.

General Chris Badia is NATO's Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Transformation.

NATO EXERCISES: THE GUARANTEE OF ALLIANCE SECURITY AND TEST OF READINESS

By Uğur Tarçın

Since its establishment in 1949, NATO has been dedicated to securing lasting peace in Europe and across the transatlantic region, based on individual liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. As of 2024, NATO has expanded its membership to thirty-two countries, covering an area that represents 16.63 percent of the world's habitable land and 12.13 percent of the global population. To maintain this peace, NATO must ensure effective deterrence, enhance its capabilities, utilize resources efficiently, and remain a combat-ready force.

Achieving combat readiness is a comprehensive process that involves several key components:

1. **Training and education:** Regular drills and exercises, specialized training, and continuous education on the latest technology, tactics, and global security developments.

2. **Logistical preparation:** Efficient supply chain management, maintenance and upkeep of equipment, and rapid deployment capabilities.

3. **Technological readiness:** Modernization of equipment and robust cybersecurity measures to maintain operational integrity.

4. **Intelligence and surveillance:** Accurate and timely intelligence, supported by robust surveillance systems and networks.

5. **Strategic planning:** Effective scenario planning and flexible strategies.

6. **Physical and mental preparedness:** Ensuring physical conditioning and mental resilience.

7. **Interoperability and coordination:** Conducting joint operations and fostering allied cooperation.

8. **Leadership and command structure:** Maintaining strong leadership and a clear command structure.

In this article, I will strategically examine NATO exercises within the field of training and education.

While war games and military exercises simulate real scenarios, they differ in execution. Military exercises involve actual troops and equipment, focusing on replicating wartime decisions for training purposes. In contrast, war games use simulations with artificial players and models to explore potential decisions and outcomes.

Exercises serve various purposes, including testing tactics, demonstrating deterrence, and ensuring forces are prepared for combat. They also verify the readiness of units before deployment.

NATO held its first military exercise in 1951 to develop a unified military force under centralized command. Since then, NATO has conducted thousands of exercises across various domains, particularly during the Cold War. Notable exercises include the REFORGER (Return of Forces to Germany) series, which tested the rapid deployment of North American troops to Europe, with the last major exercise being REFORGER 88, involving 125,000 personnel.

NATO's rapid reaction forces have evolved since the creation of the Allied Command Europe Mobile Force (AMF) in 1960, which played a crucial role in deterrence and defense during the Cold War. Subsequently, NATO expanded its mission to include crisis response, reflecting the evolving security environment.

In 2002, the AMF was restructured into the NATO Response Force (NRF), which continues to be integral to NATO's strategy, ensuring readiness and adaptability through operational exercises.

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO significantly increased its collective defense exercises and further enhanced its defense plans.

Now, let us explore NATO and member exercises conducted in 2024 to gain some insights:

1. **Steadfast Defender 24:** NATO's largest military exercise held from January to May 2024, showcased the enduring unity between Europe and North America, reflecting the shared commitment to safeguarding over one billion people for the past seventy-five years. The exercise involved over 90,000 troops from all thirty-two NATO members and was conducted in two main phases: securing the Atlantic region and rapidly moving

troops across Europe, from the High North to Central and Eastern Europe. This exercise demonstrated NATO's ability to respond swiftly to emerging threats and highlighted the Alliance's readiness and collective defense capabilities.

2. **Coalition Warrior Interoperability Exercise (CWIX):** An annual NATO exercise celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2024, CWIX enhances the readiness and resilience of command-and-control capabilities and IT services. Hosted at NATO's Joint Force Training Centre in Poland, CWIX 2024 involved over 2,500 participants and tested more than 26,000 cases across 480 capabilities, from emerging technologies to proven tools. CWIX plays a crucial role in ensuring interoperability among NATO forces.

3. **EFES 2024:** The largest joint military exercise conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces, held from April 25 to May 31, 2024, took place in two phases: a computer-assisted command post phase in Istanbul and a live-fire phase in Izmir. With participation from forty-five nations and nearly 11,000 military personnel, EFES 2024 demonstrated significant international military collaboration and commitment. Participants included nine NATO members, sixteen NATO partners, fifteen African Union countries, two Latin American nations, one Middle Eastern nation, one other European nation, and one Asian nation, highlighting its importance in regional and global security.

4. **Baltic Operations 2024, Ramstein Legacy 24,** and other exercises also involved members and partners.

Based on the exercises, three separate reports, analyses, and the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war since 2022, we can conclude that although NATO has made substantial progress in areas such as defense spending, forward defense, high-readiness forces, command and control, and collective defense exercises, as well as integrating new members, the alliance is prepared for immediate combat but may not be fully equipped for a protracted war. Therefore, what are our short- and mid-term solutions to address the vulnerabilities?"

Drawing from my NATO and national experience, as well as academic research, I offer the following recommendations for improving exercises to strengthen deterrence:

- Address and overcome key lessons learned in meetings at all levels, from the chair of the NATO Military Committee (CMC), supreme allied commander Europe (SACEUR), and supreme allied commander transformation (SACT), down to component commanders, chiefs of staff, mentors, and directors of centers of excellence.

- Designate mentors/senior fellows with academic and combat experience to NATO institutions, such as the NATO Defense College and NATO School.

- Develop more effective leadership training at all levels to ensure quick and accurate decision-making.

- Enhance response plans for various conflict scenarios, including asymmetric and future challenges, to improve forces' readiness for unforeseen situations.

- Test physical and psychological training to ensure troops manage combat demands and stresses.

- Improve national resilience and interoperability across all domains through joint, allied, and live-fire exercises and operations.

- Ensure that the southern region also is included in exercises.

Lastly, to guarantee alliance security, we must prepare our troops without hesitation, with combat readiness listed as a top priority.

Uğur Tarçın is a retired Turkish Lieutenant General who formerly served as chief of Communication Electronics and Information Systems at the Turkish General Staff.

THE "OTHER" US ELECTION AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY

By Rich Outzen

*T*he US presidential campaign has been a source of high anxiety for Americans, most of whom (regardless of party) believed that a loss by their preferred candidate and victory by "the other" would bring calamity at home and abroad. Republicans assessed the Biden-Harris foreign policy record as one of weakness and failure, worrying that more conflict and chaos would follow a potential Harris victory. Democrats viewed Trump as unpredictable and impulsive on international affairs, and considered him a risk to the trust that underpins American alliances and partnerships abroad.

Mutual accusations are not unique to this election—in fact, clashing foreign policy visions and predictions of doom have been very much a staple of past US presidential elections. For NATO members, worries over Trump's second term should be tempered, though, by both comments of those close to Trump, who believe he seeks to strengthen rather than abandon the Atlantic Alliance, and the general pursuit during his first term of a pragmatic foreign policy. Though now a counterfactual thought exercise, European concerns over Harris's thin foreign policy record might have been balanced by her tendency to stick within the mainstream of Democratic Party thinking.

In other words, now that President Trump has secured a second term and a friendly House and Senate, European allies of the United States might do well to rein in their worst fears about what comes next. Despite the apocalyptic scenarios painted over the past year, Washington's policy shifts from 2025 onward may well remain within the norms of previous eras of turbulence and contention—which is to say, most of the past century. The United States will inaugurate a new president in January, and the new administration will face limits and structural checks that incline foreign policy toward the center. Congress will continue to play a major role in setting foreign policy directions and bounds—and a narrow majority in both the House and the Senate—will set the stage for bipartisan compromises on

national security and foreign policy.

Role of Congress

The US Constitution intentionally divided authority over foreign policy between the president and Congress. While Congress has been relatively less assertive in the post-Cold War period, it retains important checks on executive authority. These include budget and appropriations approval (what's called the power of the purse,) oversight powers, the ability to approve or curtail military operations, and to provide "advice and consent" for international agreements. The House of Representatives and the Senate share many of these responsibilities, but approving treaties, and perhaps most importantly in the early stages of an administration, confirming presidential nominees, is reserved for the Senate.

US presidential transitions have long operated on the principle that "personnel is policy," meaning that effecting change in foreign affairs, national security, domestic programs, or anything else depends upon getting the right people with the right skills into the right presidential appointments. The Senate is a key player in that process, as it can either expedite or slow confirmations as part of a policy bargaining process, and both Republicans and Democrats have played hardball with nominations in the past.

Slow-rolling nominees may again be a feature of the upcoming presidential transition. Yet the bigger picture of a closely divided Congress gives grounds for guarded optimism as to the overall foreign policy direction and priorities. Even in times of acrimonious division on domestic politics and partisan polarization, representatives and senators have worked across party lines more often than not on matters of national security and foreign policy. Sudden lurches in foreign policy, including a potential softening of commitment to NATO and European security, would run headlong into the prerogatives of Congress, especially the Senate, in the sensitive early stages of a new administration.

119th Congress

How will Congress look when it convenes on January 3, 2025? The recent election yielded a Senate flipped from Democrat to Republican control with a margin of 53-47, pending the final count in Pennsylvania. The House of Representatives appears headed for a closely balanced 2025 composition, with a slight Republican edge. While the Trump victory was fairly decisive in terms of electoral college and popular vote, on the legislative side will be two chambers with slim majorities, and consequently a higher need for compromise and bipartisanship on foreign policy issues. An early indicator will be Senate confirmation for Trump's cabinet nominees, some of whom are likely to have contentious hearings.

Committee leadership changes in each chamber, depending upon the majority party in that chamber. For the 118th Congress this has meant Democratic leadership of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) and Republican leadership of the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC). The SFRC serves as the primary counterweight to executive authority on foreign policy, balancing, reinforcing, or sometimes opposing the administration's approach. SFRC Chairman Ben Cardin will depart, as he retires. With the Republican majority, James Risch of Idaho will likely be the new chairman. Risch is known as an ardent supporter of NATO and a passionate advocate for strong Alliance relations. A current SFRC member, Marco Rubio, has been tapped as Trump's secretary of state nominee. Rubio has good working relations with Trump, but can be expected to put his own stamp on foreign policy. There also are two Republican senators who will remain on the SFRC, Todd Young and Rand Paul, who have major differences over policy or personality with Trump and can be expected to take a very critical look at any sharp turns in foreign policy or Alliance matters.

On the Democratic side of the aisle, Jeanne Shaheen will make history as the first female senator to serve as ranking member of the SFRC. A dedicated Atlanticist, she has a strong working relationship

with Risch and a similar strategic outlook. Other Democratic members of the SFRC likely to return have been sharply critical of Trump, including Tim Kaine (Virginia), Chris Van Hollen (Maryland), and Chris Murphy (Connecticut).

November till January

A flurry of activity is commencing as the incoming administration focuses on roles, policy priorities, personnel, and myriad administrative details. New members of the House of Representatives are attending New Member Orientation as the House organizes for the new term (all members of the House stand for election each two years). The Senate, which elects only one-third of its membership each two years, is taking up committee and leadership assignments during this period. In a sense, this gives the Senate and the SFRC a head start in organizing for the policy debates that will begin after the presidential inauguration of January 20.

Given the constitutional structures, political dynamics, and leading personalities in play this election cycle, US allies and partners have better grounds to expect continued US leadership—

and alliance commitment—than is commonly appreciated. Whether the United States will lead, and whether the winning candidate fulfills worst fears and expectations posited during the year-plus presidential campaign, may be the wrong question. The right question is how quickly the administration can get its team in place, and how quickly it can forge consensus with key congressional stakeholders on foreign policy. And while the answer remains to be seen, the prospects for a balanced/closely divided Congress with a number of experienced foreign policy hands augurs for an outcome that may exceed expectations.

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POLITICAL-MILITARY LESSONS FOR A NATO-RUSSIA CONFLICT

By Can Kasapoglu

In Putin's consideration, there is no Ukrainian nation in Europe. The Ukrainians and Russians are nothing but one people under neo-Muscovy, as are the unlucky Belarusians. Russian writings, notably, consider the war in Ukraine a quarrel between NATO—"the collective West" in their very own parlance, to be precise—and Russia. Ukraine, therefore, just happens to be the battlefield within this holy war of the Russian military renaissance. In essence, however, the Russian campaign is an overall effort to eradicate the Ukrainian identity. A detailed revisit of the Russian regime in occupied areas, as well as the case of abducted Ukrainian children, reveals a genocidal intention toward the Ukrainians as a people.

In reality, the geopolitical roots of the unfolding conflict in Ukraine hail from the Cold War showdown between Soviet expansionism into Europe and NATO efforts to defend the free world. The war, unchecked, will not likely end in Kyiv. The Kremlin's imperialist views apply to any former Eastern bloc nation with a historical background of being oppressed or colonized by the Russian military, be it in imperial times or the Soviet era. This article offers three chief lessons to prepare for and win a potential war between NATO and Russia.

1. The West cannot contain Russian aggression with mere diplomatic naiveté

Reciting simple and major facts offers a practical way to explain complex political-military agendas. Any scenario involving a Russia-NATO escalation demands such an approach to clear the dust that keeps the core problem area murky and hard to grasp.

The contemporary Russian Federation, ruled by the last generation of the Soviet intelligence elite, dubbed the siloviki, is a highly militarized and expansionist state. At present, Russian defense economics is on a pronounced war footing. The nation's defense spending as a portion of its gross domestic product exceeds 6 percent and remains sustainable. Production rates for principal warfighting

equipment, such as heavy armor and artillery ammunition, dwarf those of many NATO member states. Moreover, in each conscription round, which occurs twice a year, Moscow drafts massive manpower into its military ranks, outnumbering most standing NATO armed forces.

The ruling elite has reclaimed their traditional grip on power following the Second Russo-Chechen War in the late 1990s, which massacred thousands of Chechens to keep the Russian foothold in the Caucasus following the Soviet collapse. Since then, the Kremlin invaded Georgia and Ukraine and used its military capabilities overseas to keep the Baathist dictatorship of Syria in power. The Syrian campaign unfolded against the backdrop of Bashar al-Assad's war crimes and involved systematic use of chemical warfare in combat operations.

On the heels of the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has fielded a robust tactical nuclear deterrent in Europe. The Belarusian Iskander missile-system crews have been trained for nuclear delivery. With Russian help, Minsk has refurbished the Su-25 attack aircraft and Su-24 frontline bombers in the Belarusian Air Force's arsenal for nuclear certifications. Moreover, Belarus has been hosting Russian MiG-31K interceptor aircraft, certified to carry nuclear-capable Kinzhal hypersonic missiles, which could pound Ukrainian civilians. Overall, Russia has turned Belarus into a garrison satellite state at NATO's east.

President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, a career KGB officer himself, publicly depicted the collapse of the Soviet empire as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century." During the late Cold War years, Putin was a liaison to the notorious East German secret police, the Stasi, which strongly shaped his worldview. Given that, diplomatic outreach is of minimal use in reasoning with Moscow. The seventy-one-year-old former spy does not accept sovereign nations in the former Soviet space.

The Obama administration's failed "reset" of relations with Russia, which came after the invasion of Georgia in 2008, speaks volumes. Five years after receiving a reset button as a symbolic diplomatic move, Russia invaded Crimea and illegally annexed Crimea. Less than fifteen years after the reset, Russian tanks rolled in and troops committed atrocities in Bucha and Irpin. Had it not been for the Ukrainian resistance at the Hostomel Airport at the overture of the war, as well as President Volodymyr Zelensky's famous "I need ammunition, not a ride" rhetoric shunning evacuation plans, this paper would have probably discussed Putin's Ukraine. Thanks to the Ukrainian defensive grit that bought time for the Western military assistance to arrive while Kyiv stabilized the front, "Ukraine Rus" has never materialized. Nonetheless, a stumbled invasion has not altered the geopolitical calculus ruling Russia. The threat has never been that imminent since the fiercest days of the Cold War.

2. Avoiding a catastrophe: Recapturing the Baltic states is a nonstarter

If the war plagued Europe, the most critical question would boil down to where the belligerents would fight. If the tiny Baltic states were to be invaded by Russia, even as briefly as for a few weeks, they

might be wiped off the face of the Earth. NATO cannot afford to pursue a military policy centered on recapturing territory following a Russian coup de main in allied territory. NATO needs to cement forward defense that aims to repel, not expel, Russian military presence.

Occupied Ukraine showcased that even a brief exposure to Russian invasion leads to mass ethnic cleansing. The massacres in Bucha and Irpin took place within the first two months of the 2022 campaign. Worse, the case of abducted Ukrainian children still haunts the Ukrainian civilian population. A typical Russian combat operation ends up with population centers decimated into rubble due to heavy missile and drone salvos.

In a Baltic scenario, a NATO counteroffensive effort to liberate Baltic territory would prove more demanding compared to defensive combat operations to deny a potential Russian incursion. This is why the NATO Force Model, planned to take thirty to 180 days to mobilize a 500,000-strong warfighting deterrent in Europe, could not save the day for Baltic members.

Moreover, NATO's strategic command structure cannot today effectively verify the combat readiness of the allied militaries to levy a 500,000-strong war machine within 180 days from the start of hostilities. Most allied nations' standing armed forces lack the combat readiness and warfighting experience that would be so valuable in an Article V showdown. Finally, the ability of NATO's existing operational-level command structure to run large-scale combat operations, especially in the changing context, is highly debatable.

3. NATO would not face a stand-alone Russia but an authoritarian axis

The most important geopolitical lesson from the Russo-Ukrainian War is the visible rise of a hostile axis. In the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Kremlin has help. The Islamic Republic of Iran, China under communist party rule, and North Korea ruled by the iron-fist of Kim Jong Un generously provided the Kremlin with military aid.

Pyongyang recently sent thousands of combat troops to augment Russian manpower. Moreover, North Korea is the prime artillery ammunition supplier of Russia, overtaking the entire Western artillery transfers to Ukraine.

The Islamic Republic is the chief source of low-cost kamikaze drones employed by the Russian military. The Revolutionary Guards have established a drone warfare plant in Alabuga, Tatarstan. Open-source intelligence suggests very high production rates for its joint arms production with Russia. Ukraine witnessed a growing number of Shahed loitering munitions each month. Worse, the Shahed baseline is getting more capable with different variants entering into play, ranging from thermobaric warhead configurations to stealthy coatings.

Last but not least, China is a critical enabler of the Russian war effort. With sanctions getting tougher, China looms large as it provides machine tools, ball bearings, and semiconductors—crucial inputs for Russia's war effort. According to the United Nations COMTRADE database, Beijing's exports to Russia was around US$110.94 billion in 2023. Open-source intelligence data showcases the exponential growth of China's average monthly export to Russia of high-priority dual-use items, which can be used in various weapons manufacturing processes. In 2023 alone, Beijing exported some 90 percent of the Russian imports of goods falling under the Group of Seven's high-priority export control list for the Russian Federation. For decades, Russia's defense technological and industrial base, like the rest of the country's industries, has been dependent on foreign supplies to operate machine tools. Since the invasion, machine tools alone accounted for almost 40 percent of the annual rise in Chinese dual-use exports—if not more.

Chinese nitrocellulose exports to Russia remain another very critical issue to monitor. Since Putin's Ukraine campaign, China's nitrocellulose transfers to Russia have drastically grown. While Beijing exported slightly more than 700 tons of nitrocellulose to Russia in 2023, the amount nearly doubled to more than 1,300 tons in 2024.

Conclusion: Skip the *si vis pacem* part—
NATO needs to foster *para bellum*

Political-military trends suggest that the probability of war between NATO and Russia now towers over the prospects of peace in the coming years. In particular, should the Russian war machine succeed in Ukraine via its ongoing war of attrition, the Kremlin's anticipated next step would be tearing and wearing the Article V guarantees of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, which form the casus foederis backbone of NATO.

Without a counterbalancing military alliance in Europe, one that is thoroughly backed by the United States, there is almost nothing standing between Putin's Russia and Europe.

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HOW PREPARED IS NATO?

By Richard D. Hooker, Jr.

How is NATO currently postured to deter and defend against the threat of Russian aggression on NATO territory? In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Alliance has taken steps to strengthen deterrence and defence along its eastern flank, including the deployment of enhanced forward presence (EFP) battalion battlegroups to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, in addition to those already present in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. At the Madrid summit in March 2022, heads of state and government also expressed an intention to increase these formations to brigade size "when and where required." In addition to the brigade combat team posted in Poland on a rotational basis, the United States deployed a second, along with a divisional headquarters and support troops, in Central and Eastern Europe for a total increase of some 20,000 troops. Allies have also continued to increase defense spending, with European members and Canada achieving an overall spend rate of 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) for the first time in 2024. Those states most threatened, including Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, and the Nordic nations, are well above 2 percent, while the accession of Finland and Sweden significantly enhance NATO's defence posture in the east and north. Finally, allies agreed in Madrid to a new NATO Force Model designed to achieve higher readiness levels, while at the Vilnius Summit in 2023 approval was granted to prepare regional defense plans to further enhance Alliance security.

At the present time, Russian ground and air forces are fully committed in Ukraine and aggression against NATO member states appears unlikely. Accordingly, the measures cited above seem adequate. However, should Ukraine subside into yet another frozen conflict (as in Georgia and Moldova), the Russian military will rearm and reequip its formations. Putin has on many occasions made clear his intentions to recover territories formerly belonging to the Russian empire:

> The concept of the "Russian World" allows Putin to regard any territories that were once ruled by or claimed to be ruled by a Russian regime as Russia's "historical territories," which include Poland and the Baltic states. Putin may elect to "protect" people the Kremlin describes as Russian "compatriots" in these claimed "historic territories" at the time of his choosing by replicating similar narratives he used to invade Ukraine.

Given repeated Russian aggression in Europe, and the reality of the largest conflict since 1945 right on NATO's doorstep, the Alliance must take the Russian threat seriously. In the most likely case, a Russian invasion of the Baltic states in the next three to five years, how well is NATO positioned to respond?

Russian forces likely to participate in this scenario are a reconstituted 1st Guards Tank Army, stationed in western Russia with three heavy divisions and two independent heavy brigades, supported by strong artillery, air defense, electronic warfare, and aviation contingents plus a Russian airborne division based in Pskov—just across the Estonian border. Unlike most NATO militaries, these formations possess significant combat experience. Their close proximity to the Baltic region, and the presence of a strong (and nuclear-armed) Kaliningrad garrison well in the rear of defending forces, provide strong advantages.

Here the current and projected level of readiness across NATO must give pause. So far, increased defense spending has not translated into marked increases in readiness. The Baltic states themselves field small militaries with no tanks or combat aircraft. Weak in air defense and artillery, they depend on rapid reinforcement from allies. Here, readiness and capability gaps limit the ability of NATO to respond. So far, NATO forces in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have not been increased to brigade strength. The NATO battlegroups posted in the three Baltic states, while important indicators of

Alliance resolve, are trip-wire forces with limited combat power. To some extent, NATO airpower will be limited by the formidable air-defense bastions located in Kaliningrad and Saint Petersburg, while Russian anti-ship missiles based ashore in Kaliningrad and afloat with the Baltic Fleet will constrain NATO naval operations in the Baltic Sea.

While the United States might manage to deploy perhaps a single division to Estonia in thirty days, major powers like the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy cannot move ready forces in divisional strength there in less than sixty to ninety days—far too slow to affect the outcome. Close neighbors Poland, Sweden, and Finland possess competent militaries but lack power-projection capabilities and will be concerned to defend their own territory. (It is some 1,000 kilometers from Warsaw to Narva, Estonia.) Shortfalls in military mobility, theater air and missile defense, long-range fires, electronic warfare, and stocks of fuel, precision-guided munitions, and artillery ammunition are cause for concern. Given the high casualties seen in Ukraine, the lack of reserves across the Alliance are another serious vulnerability.

These disabilities are well known to both Russian and NATO planners. What can NATO do in the near term to address them?

The first step must be to upgrade NATO forces in vulnerable areas from battalion to brigade strength, with appropriate enablers. Next, NATO should assist threatened states in upgrading their military forces, both in size and capability, to include tanks, artillery and air defense. Theater air and ballistic missile defense must assume high priority, as Russia will certainly attempt to interdict the arrival of NATO reinforcements. Across the Alliance, member states must strive to improve readiness to meet the demanding timelines called for in the New Force Model—up to 100,000 troops "ready to move" in ten days. Military mobility has been flagged as a major concern for years; it must be tackled with urgency to remove bureaucratic obstacles and upgrade transportation infrastructure. "Below the line" capabilities such as ammunition, spare parts, fuel, and combat replacements require serious attention.

All of these will require sustained support in capitals from parliamentarians and heads of state and government. The economic and military capacity is there, along with strong political communities and institutions, and decades of collective cooperation in pursuit of shared interests and values. To knit these all together will require political will. If that can be found, a strong and safe Europe is assured.

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PACING SCENARIOS

By Rich Outzen

Si vis pacem para bellum

*T*he military adage that avoiding war requires preparing for it is as true today as it was for previous generations. For NATO, in the shadow of the ongoing war in Ukraine, this means considering scenarios of Russian aggression that may seem remote at the moment, but become more plausible over time. Given that Putin's Russia has made clear a desire to reassert control over former territories and committed significant blood and treasure to the dream, the Alliance must take Putin at his word, and prepare for multiple scenarios in a generational conflict.

The conflict is ongoing in the cyber and propaganda domains, and in hybrid warfare in Syria, Africa, and elsewhere. The war in Ukraine demonstrates, however, that major conventional war remains in the Russian strategic tool kit, and Putin likely thinks it's worked so far. Absent a strategic defeat and the advent of a more pacifist government in Moscow, the prospects for future revanchist campaigns against NATO member states are not zero.

Is NATO prepared to fight, and therefore to deter, defensive wars against Russian aggression? While some fear that the war in Ukraine could escalate into a broader NATO-Russia war, both sides seem intent on avoiding that eventuality for now. Yet if the war settles into a protracted stalemate or, worse, ends on terms that reward Russian aggression, the prospects for other revanchist conflicts will grow over time. Western military planners must understand and measure their readiness against them.

This issue of the Defense Journal aims to provide a rough assessment of NATO's readiness through the mental exercise of imagining three conflict scenarios that could embroil the Alliance in a direct combat against Russia in the coming two decades. The scenarios vary by scope and intensity, as well as location. Each presents a challenge to existing NATO readiness, and can therefore provide a useful parameter for debates on future resourcing, organizing, and exercising for the Alliance.

Assumptions

A thought exercise measuring capabilities against plausible threats inevitably entails assumptions about change over time. The following ones inform possible conflict scenarios with Russia, assuming that:
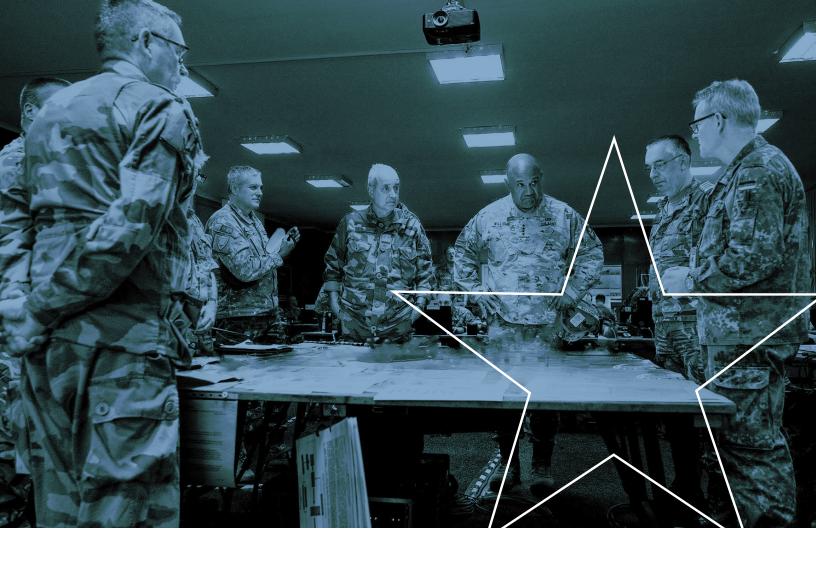
1. Russia does not suffer strategic defeat or failure in the near to medium term in Ukraine, and recovers its massive losses in equipment through new mobilization and spending;

2. military coordination and cooperation among China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran continues to deepen in the coming years;

3. Western risk aversion regarding escalatory or retaliatory steps against Russia continue; and

4. Russia and other anti-Western powers privilege conflict, mobilization, and resistance spending whereas Western powers struggle to maintain the goal of 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) for defense spending, and the United States faces growing budgetary pressure due to debt obligations.

These assumptions frame potential conventional conflicts between Russia as less unequal than a direct Russia versus NATO aggregate comparison of economic, demographic, and industrial potential. It thus avoids a temptation to wish away the threat by assuming Russia sees the asymmetry and would not tempt fate. Yet Russia does not stand alone in its drive to undermine Western power, and may see itself as more agile, subtle, ruthless, and politically unified than its targets—and better prepared for a long war.

For ease of analysis, Defense Journal excludes scenarios that would require significant geopolitical or internal political shifts to appear plausible. These would include a direct Russian attack on larger NATO member states in the north (Poland, Finland, Norway), the central area (Romania, Hungary, Slovakia), or the south (Turkey).

Pacing scenario 1: Baltic war

A group of retired senior military officers earlier this year laid out how a Russian attack through the strip of land between Poland and Lithuania could launch an effort to detach the Baltic states from their NATO allies to the west. The rationale for the attack would be to fulfill Vladimir Putin's ambition to regain control of former Soviet territories for an expanded Russian Federation. In the experts' view, rising defense budgets and force expansion underway in Russia comport more with a Baltic reconquista than with the scope of the current war in Ukraine.

Such a war would likely begin with massive cyber and missile attacks against key headquarters, logistics nodes, and communication assets of NATO military forces. A key point of the assault would be for Russia to seize the Suwalki gap, connecting its Kaliningrad exclave with proxy Belarus. Naval combat, perhaps including seizure of Baltic islands Bornholm and Gotland (in Denmark and Sweden, respectively) would provide distractions to NATO forces and impede reinforcement to the targets of the ground invasion.

Within a few years, this scenario could include waves of unmanned tank and armored vehicle attacks on land, and naval drones on sea coordinated via artificial intelligence programs, similar to the unmanned aerial vehicle attacks already on display in Ukraine. It could also include seizing key terrain in the Arctic to impede NATO logistical and commercial traffic along the northern seas. The ultimate goal would not be conquering larger NATO members' territory outright, but raising the costs for them to oppose reassertion of Russian control over newer members, over which Moscow nurtures irredentist aims.

There are some scenario-specific assumptions involved here. The first would be that Russia achieves a draw or stalemate in Ukraine, so that it considers its gamble has paid off. The second is that dissent in the United States and Europe over defense obligations to the Baltic states rises to a level that encourages the Russians to accept the risk of a major gambit.

Scenario 2: Moldova and onward

Given the lack of a direct land border at present between the Russian Federation and the eastern bank of Moldova (occupied Transnistria), this scenario likely qualifies as a sequel to Russian victory in the current war in Ukraine. Unlike the first scenario, this would proceed from successful assertion of substantial, or total, Russian control along the northern coast of the Black Sea. In that event, the 1,500 or so Russian soldiers in Transnistria would no longer be isolated from supporting forces to the east. Were Ukraine to be beaten into a bad peace—potentially even losing the port of Odessa—possibilities open up in Moldova.
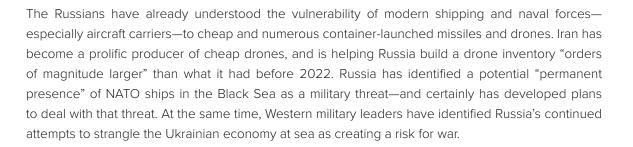
The Russians are already conducting political warfare against Moldova. Moscow's intelligence service, the FSB, has drawn up a ten-year plan to destabilize the country and reorient it away from the West. Part of that plan involves framing Moldovan independence as irredentist Romanian intrigue against the people of Moldova, who by the FSB script gravitate more naturally to the Russian cultural sphere. An attack on Moldova could begin with a coup attempt from pro-Russia elements infiltrated into the national capital, Chişinău, or an appeal for protection from pro-Russian separatists in the Transnistrian regional capital, Tiraspol.

Moldova is not a NATO member, but it has a close partnership with the Alliance (and seeks to join the European Union). If conditions in Ukraine allowed a Russian reinforcement to Transnistria and intervention in Moldova proper, the Alliance could be faced with a replay of the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine: sabotage, undeclared Russian forces operating in the guise of local volunteers, and forcible seizure of facilities and territory. There would be significant potential for spillover into NATO territory (Romania), and an unpalatable choice between tolerating a Russian fait accompli or intervening directly at the risk of escalation into a major NATO-Russia war in which Moscow portrays the West as the aggressor.

This scenario depends in large measure on significant deterioration of Ukraine's military position, potentially including new territorial losses from 2025 onward. This could lead to Kyiv ceding ground—and strategic decoupling from the West—to salvage formal independence. Were the Russians to extend control across southern Ukraine and into Moldova while the West dithered, increased Russian hybrid war in the western Balkans would be a possible further consequence.

Scenario 3: Black Sea drone swarms

One surprising development during the current Ukraine war has been Kyiv's ability, despite the lack of conventional naval vessels, to use sea drones, missiles, and small boats to deny much of the Black Sea to Russian ships and destroy a third of Russia's Black Sea fleet. In a third scenario for war between NATO and Russia, Moscow might seek to turn the tables in the coming years by expanding its own inventory of asymmetric naval weapons and turning them against Western commercial and naval shipping.

The Russians have already understood the vulnerability of modern shipping and naval forces—especially aircraft carriers—to cheap and numerous container-launched missiles and drones. Iran has become a prolific producer of cheap drones, and is helping Russia build a drone inventory "orders of magnitude larger" than what it had before 2022. Russia has identified a potential "permanent presence" of NATO ships in the Black Sea as a military threat—and certainly has developed plans to deal with that threat. At the same time, Western military leaders have identified Russia's continued attempts to strangle the Ukrainian economy at sea as creating a risk for war.

In a sense we have seen the creation of overlapping anti-access and area denial (A2AD) zones in the Black Sea region, one enforced by the West and Ukraine against Russia, the other by Russia against Ukraine—and in future perhaps against the West. In the coming years, Russian and Iranian advantages in the production of cheap and numerous systems could create a temptation for Moscow to direct a massive attack against ships and coastal facilities of NATO countries that would mitigate, or negate, the Alliance's clear advantage on the Black, Baltic, or Mediterranean seas. 2024 has seen Houthi forces in Yemen significantly decrease shipping through the Red Sea and even fire missiles at Israel, and it doesn't take too great a creative leap to multiply that in scope and ambition on more northerly seas. In a war pitting an adversary equipped with cheap and plentiful systems against one with few and sophisticated systems, the West is not currently well-positioned to win.

Upshot

Each of these planning scenarios suffers missing links in the causal chains or incentive structures required for probability, but the same might be said of arguments in 2021 that Putin intended to launch a massive new invasion of Ukraine. Intent and capability to carry out threats change over time, but the initial step for security experts is to think through possible scenarios, not assume them away, and to inform prudent steps to prepare for a range of threats. As NATO has relearned, based on Ukraine's experience, the goal of the Alliance must be to repel not expel threats—and these scenarios provide a measure of how ready it is to do so.

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