

War without Borders: A Geopolitical Assessment of NATO

NATO on its 60th anniversary

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NATO's 60th anniversary is an event that has sparked a healthy dose of analytical thinking and debate concerning said organization's historical role as well as its current purposes in the early 21st century. Let us explore the geopolitical context in which NATO first came into existence so that later we examine the alliance's contemporary position in the world balance of power.

Even though NATO was founded in the late 40's, its theoretical background is substantially older. The mastermind who first coined the concept of 'NATO' was none other than British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder, the founding father of modern geopolitics. Writing in the early 20th century, Mackinder foresaw that the Heartland's (read Russia's) potential could be so overwhelming that only a combination of Western European and North American forces could successfully counter it. Mackinder is also credited with forecasting that America and Russia would be the most powerful States during the 20th century.

The main geopolitical consequence of World War Two was the emergence of two superpowers: The United States (the leading sea power) and the Soviet Union (the chief land power). During the war, American statesmen, guided by *Realpolitik*, wanted the Nazis and the Soviets to destroy each other so that neither could take over a considerable fraction of Eurasia's core territory. However, Moscow managed to repel and ultimately crush the invading Nazi hordes. In the process, the Soviet Union gained control of Eastern Europe and consolidated its dominion over much of the Heartland.

Once the war was over, Washington realized that Soviet power was not to be underestimated because the USSR had demonstrated a high degree of resilience. Therefore, the US concluded that the Soviet Union was the only power that retained an important capability to challenge US power. As a result, the Americans implemented a policy of containment, forged by a senior diplomat called George F. Kennan.

Kennan's suggestion was to establish a *cordon sanitaire* around the Soviet Union and its satellites so that Moscow's power couldn't reach deeper into Europe. US planning was also influenced by the ideas put forward by Dutch-American professor Nicholas Spykman. Spykman argued that even though the Heartland's (again read Russia's) power could be vast, it could be kept in check if the top sea powers (read Britain and America) were successful in controlling Eurasia's rimland, that is Western Europe, the Middle East and the Asiatic Monsoon.

Therefore, American officials were busy ensuring that the US could have a large number of

allies located in the Eurasian rimland in order to encircle the Soviet Union. Those allies were essential to Washington's strategy throughout the Cold War. In the Far East, there were Japan, South Korea and Thailand, among others. In the Middle East, there were Saudi Arabia, Iran (until the Shah was overthrown) and (later) Israel. In Europe there were (mainly) France, West Germany and Britain.

Washington sponsored the formation of military alliances meant to surround the Soviet Union's huge territory. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, the British-led Baghdad Pact and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization were thus created. The most solid of them was NATO because it encompassed much of Western Europe and it also courted Turkey, a centuries-long Russian adversary. Moreover, NATO's charter contained a clause of mutual defense, according to which an attack against any member would be regarded as an attack on all of them. In blunt terms, NATO was extremely important to American geostrategy in Europe because its purpose was to keep the "Americans in, the Russians out and the Germans down".

Shortly afterwards, the Soviet Union created an equivalent organization: the Warsaw Pact, which incorporated Soviet satellites from Eastern Europe. During the Cold War, the existence of both alliances and the possession of nuclear weapons by both Moscow and Washington kept military tensions in Europe, the very epicenter of the Cold War, frozen for decades. Both sides feared the consequences of a war in Europe and therefore the Cold War in that part of the world was fought through more subtle means like espionage, intelligence and counterintelligence operations. Nevertheless, that did not necessarily mean that the same logic applied to the rest of the world. Indeed, proxy wars were fought elsewhere, e.g. in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and even Latin America.

Decades later, circa the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union agreed to a German reunification. In exchange, the Kremlin was given the American promise that NATO would not expand further eastward. The collapse of the Eastern bloc, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the breakup of the Soviet Union itself led many analysts to claim that now that the USSR was gone NATO would cease to exist and that the Atlantic community would extend from Los Angeles to Vladivostok. Professor John Mearsheimer was a remarkable exception, he argued that the end of the Cold War would fuel an intense security competition in Europe.

By then, NATO members included Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Britain, the United States, Greece, Turkey, Germany and Spain. Nowadays, almost twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union and far from having been dissolved, NATO has expanded and now incorporates other Eastern European states (including most former Warsaw Pact members): Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Albania and Croatia. Moreover, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all of them former Soviet Republics, have been also accepted as full members.

During the 90's Russia was plunged into complete chaos. Its economy and finance were in ruins, there was political uncertainty, the war in Chechnya was a destabilizing factor and the country's national leadership was far from competent in foreign policy matters. As a consequence of those circumstances, a great deal of Russian geopolitical power had vanished. In 1999 NATO even conducted an air campaign against Serbia, one of Russia's staunchest allies. Back then, both the Americans and the Europeans could afford to ignore

Russian objections because the Eurasian power was weakened. It must not be forgotten that, since 2001, Afghanistan is occupied by NATO forces.

The ultimate goal of post-Cold War NATO expansion was/is to complete a military encirclement of Russia so that it remains isolated and surrounded until it ceases to be a functional nation state. The reason for this is that, in spite of its deep crisis, Russia is the only country whose strategic arsenal is military capable of destroying the US. Furthermore, the Russian Federation has the largest territorial extension, possesses huge deposits of key natural resources (like oil, gas, coal, uranium, fresh water, iron, aluminum, gold, timber and so on). The aforementioned means that Moscow can certainly challenge Western interests so, according to American geostrategists, that is why Russia must be dismembered in order to prevent it from ever recovering its status as a formidable contender.

Professor Kenneth Waltz adds that there are economic interests involved as well. He notes that some American top weapons manufacturers were interested in NATO expansion because that would represent great business opportunities. Take the case of Bruce Jackson, one of the most ardent supporters of the Atlantic alliance's enlargement. For several years, Mr. Jackson held a senior position in Lockheed Martin, one the most prominent companies of the US military complex. Not surprisingly, he advocates a confrontational approach toward Russia as well.

After the Georgian Rose Revolution and the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, both former Soviet Republics declared that NATO membership would be one of their new pro-Western governments' top priorities. George Kennan, the architect of containment policy himself, warned that a deep intrusion into the traditional Russian sphere of influence was reckless because it could trigger a harsh backlash from Moscow.

Nonetheless, NATO has to deal with important complications, namely:

- NATO has overstretched. From a strategic perspective, the territory of some NATO members simply cannot be militarily defended in case of war. The US still does not possess meaningful military facilities in Eastern Europe comparable to the ones it operates in the territory of earlier members; think of Ramstein, Aviano or Incirlik. The Atlantic alliance's unrestricted extension is clearly reflected in the fact NATO member States Romania and Bulgaria do not even have contact with the Atlantic Ocean. Others like Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary are not even contiguous to any Ocean at all since they are landlocked. Halford Mackinder explained that Eastern Europe is strategically important because its lack of significant natural barriers can allow Westerners to launch an invasion of the heartland. However, the reverse is equally true since the heartland will not encounter geographic obstacles if it attempts to attack Eastern Europe. Additionally, US forces are still distracted in Iraq and Afghanistan.

- There are several political discrepancies among NATO members, particularly between the Anglo-American axis and the Franco-German entente. Neither Paris nor Berlin backed or participated with Washington's 2003 invasion of Iraq. Both President Nicolas Sarkozy and Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel were considered to be more pro-American than their respective predecessors. Indeed, they may have been but they cannot ultimately escape their countries' geopolitical realities. France and Germany just cannot afford to antagonize an increasingly assertive and reemerging Russia. Germany depends on Russia for energy supplies and, perhaps more importantly, Berlin does not want to be caught right in the middle of a new Cold War between Russia and America. Washington, London and

Warsaw have sponsored Georgian and Ukrainian bids to join NATO. However, there are serious disagreements because neither the French nor the Germans are willing to unnecessarily escalate tensions with Moscow. In fact, there have been rumors in strategic circles about ongoing secret negotiations between Germans and Russians concerning an eventual security understanding between them. Moreover, the Europeans are still unwilling to send more troops to Afghanistan. An important political byproduct of NATO enlargement has been a closer cooperation between China and Russia.

The world financial crisis is taking its toll on European economies, specially in Southern and Eastern Europe. If their precarious situation deteriorates even further a deployment of NATO troops on one or more of its members' soil in order to counter a wave of protests or even civil unrest is not unthinkable. Such scenario could absorb NATO power projection capabilities and demand a great deal of resources because the alliance would have to focus on one or more of these operation theaters.

Besides, Russia is once again consolidating itself as a great power. This implies that if NATO decides to remain confrontational *vis-à-vis* Russia, then the Alliance will have to deal with a mighty and formidable adversary. Russian current national leadership is assertive enough to pursue the country's national interests. One must always bear in mind that the Kremlin demonstrated its power by defending South Ossetia from a Georgian offensive in a campaign that lasted five days. Washington and London went ballistic over this but Moscow proved that even though Tbilisi wants to join NATO, both the British and the Americans did not provide military protection for their Caucasian ally. Russia sent a clear message that reverberated heavily across the Former Soviet Union and in Western capitals as well: From now on any attack on Moscow's interests will not go unpunished. Just in case someone was not paying enough attention, President Dmitriy Medveded stated that "Russia can impose sanctions as well."

There have been interesting events lately. In order to diversify supply routes for NATO troops garrisoned in Afghanistan, the Alliance has resorted to Moscow and Russia, as a result, now allows the flow of supply convoys to go through its territory. The Kremlin has made it clear that if the Americans wish to strengthen this cooperation by involving post Soviet Central Asian States, a Russian blessing will be necessary.

Furthermore, Moscow has developed close ties with regimes the Americans regard as hostile. The Russian initiative to increase links with countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, Iran or Syria is motivated by the Kremlin's desire to accumulate as many bargaining chips as possible for any eventual negotiations with NATO. Thus, in exchange for meaningful geopolitical concessions from the West, the Russian Federation could abandon those States and withdraw any support it provides to them.

Nevertheless, if some prominent NATO members (read the UK and the US) still disregard Russian interests by insisting on NATO expansion or by establishing missile defense complexes in Eastern, moves which could easily engender a high degree of geopolitical and military tension, perhaps even a new Cold War with Russia.

Nonetheless, the Kremlin has managed to restore Russia's health and it has several tools at its disposal should the need arise. First of all, Moscow could (again) take advantage of its condition as an energy supplier to European countries. Russia can exploit this leverage to do some arm-twisting and forcibly compel a lot of European consumers of Russian gas to

comply with the Kremlin's demands or face energy starvation otherwise. Also, Moscow could target strategic facilities located in Central and Eastern Europe by stationing missiles in the enclave of Kaliningrad or in Russian-friendly Belarus. Additionally, the Kremlin plans to revitalize its own defense pact CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) through the creation of a common rapid-reaction force in order to maintain Russia's military supremacy in its near abroad. It also has to be taken into account that one can be certain that the Kremlin will resort to its vast intelligence apparatus in order to make sure Russian interests prevail. Last but not least, Moscow has been working on the modernization of its military hardware, both conventional (e.g. its stealth aircraft project) and non conventional (e.g. upgrading of Russian ICBMs).

During the Cold War, Moscow took for granted that American security guarantees to its NATO allies was indeed serious. That is not entirely clear today, i.e. it is unknown at this point if Washington is politically willing or technically capable of protecting newer NATO members from Eastern Europe. The area NATO now covers is larger and so are the challenges, obstacles and internal disagreements it has to deal with because such organization has overextended, which has been detrimental to its functioning. The Atlantic alliance's combined military might is remarkable, that is undeniable, but a realistic closer scrutiny reveals that its strategic, geographic, political, and economic limitations have to be acknowledged as well. In short, NATO power certainly cannot be dismissed but it should not be overrated either.

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