

# Challenges of NATO aspiration: the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality

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## Abstract

The Russo-Georgia war in 2008 and the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 galvanized the countries, which are namely squeezed between NATO and Russia into considering their strategies again. The paper examines Russia's efforts to maintain its influence in its "near abroad" in the face of NATO's enlargement. It principally focuses on identifying the challenges particular countries face as obstacles to NATO accession. The arguments raised in the paper prove that, the primary reasons of Russia-Georgia War and Ukraine conflict are associated with these countries' NATO aspiration. An argument regarding the Alliance's reluctance to actively engage in partner nations is also presented.

The objective of the study is to consider the repercussions of NATO aspiration and introduce the real prospects of cooperation with NATO. The research methods primarily used in the book are comparative analysis and synthesis.

**Key words:** NATO, cooperation, challenge, rhetoric, prospect.

## Introduction

Having analyzed the thorny path of two post-soviet countries, Georgia and Ukraine to NATO, the dichotomy between the rhetoric by member states and the reality, which is mainly shaped by Russia, become more and more conspicuous. Russian pressure on these countries is tangible enough. In Georgia, Russian troops continue presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In Ukraine, Moscow's military, political, and economic policies perpetuate humanitarian suffering, and complicate Ukraine's domestic politics (Christopher S. Chivvis, 2016).

Most Western policymakers dismiss Russia's assertions that NATO's enlargement threatens it. While it is true that, nothing in NATO policy or strategy can reasonably be seen as a threat to Russia, this does not mean that NATO enlargement is not threatening Russia (Robert E. Hamilton, 2016).

Considering current state of affairs there is not even a faint hope for rapprochement between NATO and Russia. Thus, it seems that, the

stalemate between NATO and Kremlin will continue with no end in sight and the countries with close proximity to Russia will suffer the most while these two sides pass the buck to each other regarding different issues. Since conventional wars are less feasible especially between global powers and nuclear exchange is unthinkable, we may suppose that future adversaries will wage hybrid war against each other or instigate irregular or unconventional war in the third (mainly in fragile and failed) countries to sap each other's strength, where some states continue to strive for maximization of power at the cost of other states. Where are those third countries? Most probably in the "near abroad" of Russia, the places in close proximity with Iran. In the future, (does not matter foreseeable future or in the long run) the armed forces of these countries might be enmeshed in hybrid scenarios where the boundaries between war and peace appear strangely blurred. Covert operations combined with economic pressure, deliberate disinformation and propaganda,

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stirring up social tensions in target areas, finally overt use of professional soldiers without insignia and building up military forces close to borders will be the intrinsic elements of future confrontations and conflicts (Khayal Iskandarov, 2019). There are

enough “favorable” conditions for all these elements to be implemented in Russian so called “near abroad”. Moreover, NATO will not step in to handle the crisis, in case it occurs. That is the main challenge for NATO aspired nations.

## Results and discussion

### Russian tactics to suffocate NATO aspiration

In the “National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020” and the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, Russia declared “the right to apply military force when necessary” within the borders of regional states in order to ensure its own security. According to some experts, this is an indication that Russia remains the source of military-geostrategic threats to the post-soviet space. Moreover, according to the analysis of Russia’s military doctrines of 2010 and 2014, Moscow’s future strategy does not seem to have close cooperation with NATO. Thus, in the 2010 Doctrine of Doctrine, “globalizing NATO” is the number one external danger for Russia’s security. Unlike the 2010 document, in the doctrine of 2014 the cooperation with NATO has not been viewed as a factor of constituting a collective security, although the nature of the threats mentioned is the same. In this document NATO was simply referred to as “a potential partner for equal dialogue”. Although no specific country names are mentioned, the strategy of Russia’s traditional influence zone is the core of the military doctrine of 2014 (Khayal Iskandarov, 2019). Nowadays massive disinformation campaign, propaganda, subversion and psychological pressure are all in place in Russia’s so-called “near abroad” with a purpose to undermine NATO enlargement.

In the wake of the war in Ukraine, Russia has underscored its clear opposition to post-soviet countries’ pursuit of integration with Western institutions, including NATO. Russia’s military intervention in Georgia in August 2008 was largely motivated by Georgia’s aspirations to join NATO (Khayal Iskandarov, 2019). According to Robert E. Hamilton, admitting Georgia to NATO will not remarkably change the military balance between NATO and Russia. However, Georgia’s accession to

NATO would complicate Russian efforts to support its ally – Armenia. He claims that, politically Moscow portrays the West as trying to destabilize Russia through “color revolutions” and “Maidans”; economically it alleges that, the West is trying to keep Russia dependent (Robert E. Hamilton, 2016).

Moscow claims that, the eastward expansion of NATO into the Baltics and to include Georgia as a member state is a method of containing a resurgent Russia. However, the former soviet republics of Ukraine, the Baltics and Georgia maintain that, Russia represents a threat to their sovereignty, as seen by the Russian support of unrecognized Republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. A hostile rivalry between the Russian-backed Armenia and Azerbaijan, which is reliant upon NATO member Turkey, intensifies the polarization of the region (Paul Antonopoulos, 2017). According to Richard Weitz, hybrid tactics are most effective when the target state has no capacity to resist. Conversely, countries that do not have these vulnerabilities face little threat from Russian adventurism. The most prevalent indicators or “signposts” that an entity is vulnerable to Russian hybrid actions include political and social turmoil, large Russian investments in its key capabilities, and weak security structures (Richard Weitz, 2019).

Russia used hybrid tactics to annex Crimea, provoke and support a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine. Some observers in the West concluded from the Crimea operation that with the “hybrid warfare” approach used there, Russia had found a “new art of war” that made up for shortcomings in its conventional capabilities and if repeated, could pose a considerable threat not only to its “near abroad”, but also to some other states in the West. The image of a resurgent Russia emerged (Guillaume Lasconjarias, Jeffrey Larsen,

2015). It would be prudent for NATO to assume that Moscow might apply elsewhere the “hybrid warfare” tactics it demonstrated in Ukraine. NATO faces a Russian security challenge that it hoped ended with the demise of the Cold War. However, in the case of Georgia, Sergei Markedonov claims that, having asserted its military and political dominance in the two former autonomous regions of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Russia is not, however, attempting to expand its sphere of influence into “core Georgia”. Likewise, the United States and its allies are not trying to shift the balance in their own favor, despite continuing to emphasize their adherence to the principle of restoring Georgia’s violated territorial integrity (Sergei Markedonov, 2017).

Sergey Sukhankin claims that, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the subsequent outbreak of hostilities in south-eastern Ukraine were ensued with a dramatic transformation of Russia’s posture from cautious optimism to barely concealed gloating (Sergey Sukhankin, 2019). An authoritative Russian information outlet quoted a NATO communiqué that drew on “continued support of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity” and “condemnation of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and Kremlin-backed separatist forces”. The Russian tabloid then posed a rhetorical question: “so what?” Russian propaganda construes the Ukraine crisis as “Russia’s success in hindering NATO’s eastward advance”, which has “decreased the prospect of European war in the medium term” (Sergey Sukhankin, 2019).

With the benefit of the hindsight, we can say that Putin’s third term began with a clear juxtaposition of Russia vs. the West as a conflict driven by different values systems. Two decades after signing on to the vision of Europe whole, free, and at peace with itself and its neighbors, Russia finally abandoned it. This break also manifested itself in Russian foreign policy, particularly in relations with the former soviet states. Building on earlier Russian pronouncements about a sphere of influence and interests, and the danger posed by the West’s geopolitical expansion, Putin elevated Eurasian integration, the gathering of the former soviet states around Russia to the top of his foreign policy

agenda for his third term (Eugene Rumer, 2013). In his address on March 18, 2014, in which President Putin justified the annexation of Crimea, he underlined the humiliation Russia had suffered due to a series of hostile actions and “broken promises” by the West, including the eastward expansion of NATO (Anna Roininen,) 2017.

Moreover, the annexation of Crimea and the current conflictive situation in Ukraine have both brought the Western countries to come together for the first time without “ifs and buts” and put the USA, NATO and the EU in a position to impose sanctions on Russia. For instance, during NATO Summit in Wales on September 4, 2014, NATO declared that Russian attitude against Ukraine was disturbing and they would impose sanctions on Russia as NATO would act together to protect the independence and the recognized borders of Ukraine. However, it should be made clear that Ukraine’s accession to NATO does not seem to be easy for several reasons. Firstly, NATO has almost no capability to defend Ukraine as Russia has 270,000 troops and 700 jet fighters positioned on Ukraine. In other words, Russia can quickly mobilize its military assets in the meantime NATO makes decision. Secondly, after the annexation, Crimea has been fortified with 25,000 Russian troops, many ships, subs and 5,400 missiles, which have the ability to knock down NATO jets up to 400 km away. Finally, Russia can claim the right to deploy nuclear weapons to Crimea to warn NATO and Ukraine about probable Ukraine membership into NATO (Uğur Özgöker, Serdar Yılmaz, October 2016).

Russia “sphere of influence” is not limited to post-soviet space. Moscow endeavors to strike the balance in Nordic region, Eastern Europe, even in Central Europe and Balkans.

In 2016, the Kremlin led media attacks against the government in Finland with an aim to “make citizens suspicious about the European Union, and to warn Finland over not joining NATO”, according to Markku Mantila, who was then director of communications for the government (Alexander Roberds, 2018). The former Finnish Ambassador to Moscow for four years – including during the Crimean crisis Hannu Himanen is increasingly concerned about Finland’s security. “I would not call the current situation threatening, but we are

in a phase when Russia has become a significantly greater security threat that we have to take seriously”, he says. Even though Himanen is one of the masterminds behind an initiative that advocates Finnish membership in NATO, he is pretty much aware of the repercussions. “Advocating for a NATO membership would be a political suicide”, – Himanen justifies his concerns (Julian Heissler, 2018). “Keeping Finland out of NATO is Russia’s primary political objective in the region. Our worst foreign policy mistake since the end of World War II was not to join NATO while the window of opportunity was open”, says expert Alpo Rusi. Rusi agrees with Himanen that a major military conflict between Russia and the West is unlikely. However, he is convinced that the hybrid threat to his country is rising. “This has happened in our history time and again”, he says. In 1939, prior to the Winter War against the Soviet Union, fake news emanating from Nazi Germany forced the foreign minister to resign (Julian Heissler, 2018). Similarly, in neighboring Sweden, the Russian government directed efforts to manipulate public opinion with a flood of disinformation during a time of heated national discussion over Sweden’s potential NATO membership in 2016.

The Balkans are also important for Russia–NATO relations. The people in this region are culturally close and politically sympathetic to Russia. Consequently, this is where Russia's stance can find the greatest understanding and support (Russia in the Balkan). In 2016, the ruling Russian party “United Russia” signed a cooperation declaration with the representatives of parties from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, Macedonia and Bulgaria with the purpose of creating “militarily neutral territory in the Balkans”. The signatories pointed out that, as part of a “reduction of international tensions”, it was especially significant for Southeastern Europe to develop the initiative of a number of Balkan politicians “to form a territory of neutral sovereign states, with an intention to include Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina” (Putin’s party “secures” Balkans, 2016).

In the lead-up to Montenegro’s accession to NATO, the Kremlin-linked Internet Research Agency, which was indicted for interfering in the

2016 U.S. presidential election, used social media to target U.S. citizens with disinformation intended to discourage U.S. support for the move (Alexander Roberds, September 21, 2018). Apart from this, during the 2016 October election night in Montenegro, Russian citizens together with individuals from Serbia and Montenegro, planned to kill former Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic and overthrow his pro-Western government. Russian nationalists, members of the Russia’s military intelligence service GRU, were involved in the planned action with the goal of stopping Montenegrin accession to NATO. Officially, Moscow denied its involvement in both cases (Ivana Gardasevic, 2018). The displays of anger and the offensive statements about Montenegrin ambition to become a member of the Alliance (for instance, the Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergei Lavrov: “Montenegro “betrayed Russia”, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Dmitry Rogozin: “Montenegro will regret its decision to join NATO”, the Russian ambassador to Serbia Alexandar Chepurin: “The Montenegrin choice will have an appropriate place in the common history of the two countries”, The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “The official policy of Podgorica is “hostile” and that Russia will take “reciprocal measures” because of Montenegrin accession to NATO”) were a sign that Moscow was not planning to give up so easily in their efforts to influence Montenegro. These and other statements from such a significant world player towards a small Balkan country created a kind of political hysteria which was yet another example of how Russia conducts its high-pressure international relations. The numerous Russian attempts to interfere in Montenegrin internal affairs are examples of Russian hybrid warfare techniques in the 21st century (Ivana Gardasevic, 2018).

Broader Russian efforts across the Western Balkans were documented in a 2017 report from the OCCRP, which exposed Russian disinformation campaigns supporting Moscow’s policy goals in Macedonia dating back to 2008. The report also documented more general anti-NATO efforts in the region, such as Moscow’s goal of creating “a strip of militarily neutral countries,” to include Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina,

Macedonia, and Serbia. These actions reflect consistent efforts by Moscow to impede NATO enlargement, violate the sovereignty of European states, and interfere in democratic processes across the continent (Alexander Roberds, September 21, 2018).

In July 2018, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) revealed that Ivan Savvidi, a Russian oligarch with close ties to the Kremlin, was actively funding politicians and protestors in Macedonia to spark unrest over the country's September 30 referendum to change its name to "North Macedonia". The referendum could settle a decades-long dispute with Greece over the country's name, removing the primary obstacle to Macedonia's membership in NATO and an impediment to its European Union accession. Complementing efforts by Russian diplomats to agitate against the deal in Greece, Savvidi passed at least €300,000 to groups in Macedonia to incite violence and stir chaos surrounding the referendum. Russian efforts to undermine the Macedonian referendum, and, correspondingly, the country's accession to NATO follow a well-worn playbook (Alexander Roberds, September 21, 2018). Nevertheless, NATO leaders agreed to invite Macedonia to begin accession talks to join the Western alliance, extending its reach in the Balkans in defiance of Russia and following a landmark accord with Greece over the ex-Yugoslav Republic's name (NATO formally invites, Jul 12, 2018). The Kremlin has used asymmetric tools like disinformation, covert support for extremist political groups and organizations sympathetic to Russian policies, and cyber-attacks throughout the Western Balkans and across Europe in attempts to keep countries out of Euro-Atlantic institutions (Alexander Roberds, September 21, 2018).

However, Russia does not have as much influence in the Balkans as the Western media has. Montenegro's accession to NATO in 2017 and the expansion of the Alliance's military infrastructure and logistics into Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina reflect the problems and drawbacks in Russia's foreign policy. If in the 2000s, Russia's task was to "stop NATO's expansion", then the country risks failing in this task now. The inclusion of Serbia – Russia's strategic partner – in these

processes additionally complicates the picture and makes Russia an "obstacle" from the point of view of Euro-Atlantic integration (Russia in the Balkan).

There is another point that should be taken into account, that When George W. Bush was a president of the US, he was adamantly pushing for NATO enlargement, especially towards Georgia and Ukraine. Barack Obama proved to be reluctant to continue his predecessor's policy regarding enlargement. Nevertheless, today's leadership is even averse to the process. As former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer wrote: "Until the simmering conflict in the Donbas and frozen conflict in Crimea are resolved, Ukraine has little prospect of membership. Bringing Ukraine in with the ongoing disputes would mean that NATO would face an Article 5 contingency against Russia on day one of Kyiv's membership." Moreover, Henry Kissinger himself has urged that Ukraine ought to be considered a bridge between West and East rather than another potential NATO ally. Washington needs to realize that NATO's expansion is not always in America's interests and that in this case the cost would be far too high. The United States should focus on holding NATO's interest-based red lines while also recognizing Russia's interests. Otherwise, the alternative would be the Second Cold War to drag on longer than is necessary to the risk of all (John Dale Grover, 2018).

The general theme that emerges is that the West working to expand its reach to the East and Russia perceiving this as a growing strategic threat to the homeland. Nevertheless, the Western failure to anticipate this perceived threat to Russia has now forced NATO to defend its eastern border by increasing its troop presence in the Baltic countries (Uğur Özgöker, Serdar Yılmaz, October 2016).

#### **Future prospects: NATO's rhetoric and Russian reality**

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has disrupted nearly a generation of relative peace and stability between Moscow and its Western neighbors and raised concerns about its larger intentions (David Shlapak, Michael Johnson, 2016). Western democracies have entered a period of volatility and Russia is no longer playing by the rules of the game that applied even during

the darkest days of the Cold War (Elman Nasirov, Khayal Iskandarov, 2017). Russia has proven successful in its abilities to destabilize neighboring countries through threatening postures and “hybrid warfare”. Russia is using economic, diplomatic, ideological measures for destabilizing countries in the so-called “near abroad”. Moscow exploits existing societal divisions using its “hybrid warfare” strategy. From the perspective of NATO, the post-soviet republics that border Russia are more vulnerable than any other country, where local militaries are weak relative to Russia’s. In fact, Russia continues to regard post-soviet space as a region of special interest. Moscow sees closer ties between post-soviet states and NATO as a threat to its authority in the region and views this process as a provocation. The solution to maintaining or tightening control in post-soviet space while avoiding open confrontation with NATO was found in the implementation of the “hybrid warfare” a kind of warfare that encompasses a number of complex actions aimed at exerting influence on an independent country in order to achieve specific political goals. Russia’s “hybrid warfare” has allowed it to effectively distance itself from conflicts it initiated and to justify its actions whenever necessary (Elman Nasirov, Khayal Iskandarov, 2017). In this case, the Alliance is mainly preoccupied with European countries (both members and non-members). The threat of Russian aggression against these countries is already widely recognized as a real possibility. Russia has a remarkable track record of invading countries to prevent them from joining NATO. Considering Russia’s current ambitions in Georgia and Ukraine, we may surmise that these countries may come under considerable pressure at any one time, does not matter how well guarded its borders with Russia are. According to Shalva Natelashvili, the founder and chairman of the Georgian Labour Party, Georgia should develop as an independent state refraining from membership in any military block or it will become a battleground for big powers, which could jeopardize its sovereignty (Zdeněk Kříž, Zinaida Shevchuk, 2009). Russian military presence along these borders is apparently increased. And of course it has a negative impact on further security developments in Baltic States, Ukraine (Crimea

and Eastern Ukraine), Moldova (Transnistria), Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh with its military presence in Armenia). Even Belarus, which is politically aligned with Russia, is exposed to hybrid threats according to Arseni Sivitski, a reserve officer in the Belarusian military and the director of the Minsk-based Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies. He believes that, a Russian invasion of Belarus modeled on Eastern Ukraine is plausible, although the likelihood of such an event is impossible to predict. He drew that conclusion from the political situation and the Belarusian army’s own preparations, including exercises in 2016 and a change in military doctrine to prepare for a “Donbass-like hybrid scenario” (Robert Beckhusen, 2017). Parenthetically, the different outcomes in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, the first being a swift success, while the second turned into a long and costly conventional war may indicate that an established Russian military presence in the target region constitutes an absolute precondition for a successful hybrid attack (András Rácz, 2015). At this juncture, we have to mention that after the 2008 Bucharest summit, the Russian leadership recognized the “so called” Abkhazia and South Ossetia “republics” as independent states, took over the commitment to politically and militarily support them. At the same time, Russia owns a military base in Armenia, the country that has occupied 20% Azerbaijani lands in late 90s. Russia has installed military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with approximately 4,000 troops in each region, along with S-300 missile system units that limit NATO’s operational capabilities in the Black Sea (Jakub Benedyczak, 2018). Apart from these, with 20% of Georgia occupied and Russian provocations continuing, the risk that hostilities will resume is high. Russian analyst Pavel Felgenhauer argues that, another Russian–Georgian war is inevitable, not only to finish the business of 2008, but because Moscow has a strategic need to create a land bridge to its forces in Armenia (Kornely Kakachia, Levan Kakhishvili, Salome Minesashvili, 2015).

The situation has been exacerbated by the growing appreciation that Russia has engaged in “hybrid warfare” against Ukraine and that such tactics could also be used against even NATO

countries (Edgar Buckley, Ioan Pascu, 2015). It should be kept in mind that ethnic situation in Estonia and Latvia with about 25%-strong Russian minority (“Russian compatriots”) is more complicated than it was in Ukraine before the war. Ethnic Russians, who constitute 17% of Ukraine’s population, are strongly integrated into society and have no reason to feel discriminated (Edgar Buckley, Ioan Pascu, 2015) (Robert Beckhusen, 2017). Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has increased mistrust and the perception of unpredictability. In response to Russian aggression, NATO launched the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) at the 2014 Wales Summit. Though this plan was a step in the right direction, it simply bolsters NATO’s conventional capabilities and is not optimized for the types of hybrid threats Russia is presenting. It does not necessarily mean that Russia can launch a full-scale attack and send its troops to these countries. Russia is acutely aware of the repercussions of this step. The risk and costs of a conventional incursion does not fit into the Kremlin’s grand strategy. Russia does not need to invade to achieve its strategic objectives. As Russian President Vladimir Putin said: “I think that only an insane person and only in a dream can imagine that Russia would suddenly attack NATO” (András Rácz, 2015). Russia has another means of influence – unconventional approaches. It could play national minority card, fulfill its pledge to separatist regions, patronize its satellite states, covertly support non-state actors, run cyber-attacks, as well as sway some politicians and officials. NATO leaders cite Russia’s disruption of Estonia’s communications in a dispute in 2007 as an example of its willingness to use “hybrid warfare” in the Baltic rather than conventional military force to get its way. What Moscow actually did then was to “disrupt lives for several days or a week or so” and ran the risk of retaliation for little gain, a situation it would face in the future (John Grady, 2016). An increasingly unpredictable Russia is engaging in a “hybrid war” with Europe, seeking to destabilize states from within and is more dangerous now than during the days of the USSR, NATO’s former Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen warned. According to Rasmussen, the USSR was more predictable than the current leadership (Damien Sharkov, 2015).

According to Giorgi Tskhadaia, as Russia drifts away from Europe, in the future it will be more and more aggressive towards dissenting moves from its neighbors (Giorgi Tskhadaia, 2016). Therefore, it is understandable that, today, many allies remain ambivalent about future enlargement. The current aspirants face serious challenges. Nevertheless, most policymakers within the Alliance accept the inevitability of states of the Western Balkans joining the Alliance. However, despite the commitment at the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit that, Georgia and Ukraine will become a member, many allied capitals harbor deep suspicions about whether this statement is credible (Malina Kaszuba, 2018).

As presently postured, NATO seems uncomfortable creating a serious pre-emptive strategy against Russia’s violation of international norms and cannot successfully defend the territory of even its most exposed members. If a handful of Russian compatriots in any Baltic state emboldened by Moscow rebel against the legal authority, it is not a case to invoke Article 5, but enough to create a panic and chaos for an indefinite period, which may translate into irregular warfare. The top brass in NATO countries also takes stock of Russian goings-on. General Adrian Bradshaw said that, Putin could use “hybrid warfare to seize Baltic States” (Marie Gibrat, 2015). UK Defense Secretary Michael Fallon announced: “The Russian aggression poses as great threat to Europe as the Islamic State”. At the same time, the Defense Secretary warned of the threat to Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia posed by Russia (Marie Gibrat, 2015). Therefore, the Baltic States should not deceive themselves about their security just because of their NATO membership. These states might find themselves in a situation where they await troops and military back-up that may never come. Russia in fact considers the loss of Baltic States a “historic accident”. This vision eventually leads to the conclusion that the return of the Baltics from Western influence to the influence of Kremlin is a priority in Russian grand strategy, even it is unlikely to take place anytime soon. Then the vulnerable non-members’ expectation of NATO’s support to thwart this threat becomes a pipe dream. Crimea was a clear sign for the West that in a hybrid war restricting

oneself to a reactive role and “playing a Russian game” without innovation and initiative will lead to defeat (Elman Nasirov, Khayal Iskandarov). NATO should not merely focus on spending 2% of GDP on defense, but be more specific about the capabilities required to achieve the compulsory level of deterrence. Being increasingly aware of such a threat, political authorities in Baltic countries with growing resoluteness and persistence require strengthening the NATO presence in their territories (Elman Nasirov, Khayal Iskandarov). However, does NATO have a determination to prevent another former soviet state, from falling victim to Russian incursion? Does it have an effective and a credible tool in non-member states to avert the hybrid threats emanating from Russia, or it will sidestep them minding its own business? According to Russia, the Alliance is currently playing a negative role in the world and interferes with the internal affairs of the CIS countries on issues that are not relevant. Therefore, all steps taken by NATO in Russia’s “near abroad” are considered by Moscow against its interests. Any agreements between the CIS countries and NATO are carefully monitored by Russia. Of course, NATO does not owe non-members any obligation to step in if any crisis occurs. Nevertheless, there are important issues at stake for the Alliance and it should have a pre-emptive strategy, because any turmoil in these countries may compromise NATO’s interests on the whole. How this strategy should evolve then. As the first practical step in this direction, one could consider the establishment of regional military cooperation like NORDEFCO (Nordic Defense Cooperation) between Ukraine-Moldova-Poland-Baltic states and Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan whose further development has clear benefits for all these countries. The stated reason for this cooperation is to deter any aggression before the situation spirals in aforementioned regions. As we mentioned a full-scale Russian invasion of any NATO country is not realistic. Major war is not a part of Russian plans, they simply want to create the impression that it might be. Such Russian aggression has two goals (Rod Thornton, 2016):

1) to make Russia look more powerful;

2) to create divisions in opponents in order to weaken them.

Baltic and GUAM countries are on the front-line of this policy. For several years now, they have been the target of a substantial Russian (violent and non-violent) “hybrid warfare” campaign. The overall aim is to raise tensions and to thereby create the divisions that destabilize these countries. Thus, Russia can leverage events in these states to its own advantage. Indeed, the ultimate goal of Russian “hybrid warfare” is undoubtedly to make these countries reluctant to foster close relations with NATO and the West. Moscow moreover has another and more convenient way of increasing the level of tension in these countries: namely through the use of Russian minorities (“compatriots”) (Rod Thornton, 2016). These minorities are part of the “hybrid warfare” campaign, does not matter how content they are with their life. Moscow would probably like nothing more than to see these ethnic Russians protesting on the streets and then being subject to clampdown by local security forces. This is how Russian troops enter these countries not in an outright invasion, but rather in a “humanitarian” operation to “protect” fellow Russians. There is not any country in these regions that can cope with hybrid war single-handedly. Therefore, NATO should continue to bolster its unconventional capabilities to maintain security and stability throughout Europe including non-member states. Russia is using guerrilla and asymmetric methods to probe NATO’s weaknesses in the East. One of Russian strategic goals of the Georgian war was to prevent Georgia from ever becoming a NATO member (Stephen Dayspring, 2015). Then again, Putin’s strategic goal before the annexation of Crimea was to prevent a unified Ukraine from joining the EU and NATO and challenge the spread of western neo-liberalism into Russia (Stephen Dayspring, 2015). Russia somehow fared well and dragged these countries into protracted conflicts with no end in sight. As Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian Prime minister recently mentioned: “NATO’s plan to ultimately offer membership to the former soviet republic is a threat to peace. There is an unresolved territorial conflict and would they bring such a country into the military alliance. Do

they understand the possible implications? It could provoke a horrible conflict. Any attempt to change the status quo could lead to “extremely grave consequences”. I hope that NATO’s leadership will be smart enough not to take any steps in that direction” (Tom Embury-Dennis, 2018). Some worry that “Russia may run multiple Ukraine-sized operations in Europe. In rethinking the character of contemporary war, Moscow has arguably moved beyond its adaptation of the US concept of network-centric war, which drove previous defense reforms starting in 2008”. By 2025, it is believed that Russia’s forces “would have parity with the US and NATO in conventional and nuclear dimensions of high-tech warfare, and therefore the capability to deter and intimidate NATO”. This seems dubious. Even though Russia is and will keep building up its military forces, so will Poland, the Baltic states, and most significantly, the United States, NATO’s leading country. Article 5 means Russia would probably not attack a member of the organization, regardless of its improved capabilities (Noëlie Frix, 2016). While troops permanently based in Eastern Europe serve as a deterrent against conventional warfare, they will not stop cyber-attacks, propaganda campaigns, the funding of subversive groups and similar non-conventional means of waging war, which are the most prevalent methods in this case (Noëlie Frix, 2016). Thus, the Alliance should not wait until this turmoil spills over into member states. Prevention represents the best possible means of countering “hybrid warfare” since irregular threats are far more difficult to manage once they run rife. According to Janusz Bugajski, Putin views the very existence of NATO as a threat to the Kremlin’s ambitions because its mission is to protect the independence of states that Russia seeks to suborn (Janusz Bugajski, 2019). However, such cataclysmic scenario is inevitable if it goes unchecked and Russia’s hybrid meddling is not met with a firm response from NATO.

The absence of diplomatic relations between Russia and the West and the ongoing standoff

## Conclusions

After myriad of pledges by the Alliance leaders, both individually and through the Alliance, NATO’s door still remains open. Of course a decision to

mean that a new crisis is not ruled out. Most probably this crisis will not be in Russia or in the member states of Western organizations (i.e. EU and NATO). The analysis of the events taken place in Russia’s “near-abroad” since the end of the Cold War show that Russia shapes strategies for the countries, which are not in NATO. Since the membership of Georgia and Ukraine in NATO is a chimera at list for the time being or for the foreseeable future, the countries squeezed between the West and Russia (particularly post-soviet countries) have only two choices: to enter CSTO, which does not have stringent requirements like NATO or to adopt a strategy of non-alignment.

Since NATO is regarded as the linchpin of the US’ global strategy and Russia is the pioneer of another rival organization CSTO, mainly Washington and Moscow are behind the disagreements between these two blocs. Taking this factor into account even most of NATO countries advocate for neutrality. According to Ted Galen Carpenter, a shift in European public opinion toward neutrality is sounding the real death knell (Ted Galen Carpenter, 2019). For instance, in France, 63 percent opt for neutrality; in Italy, it is 65 percent, and in Germany 70 percent. The results are similar even in NATO’s East European members, despite their greater exposure to Russian pressure and potential aggression. The support for neutrality accounts for 71 percent among Hungarian respondents and 65 percent among Romanians. Even in Poland, a country whose history with Moscow during both the Czarist and Soviet periods was especially frosty, neutralist sentiment accounts for 45 percent (Ted Galen Carpenter, 2019).

However, it should be taken into account that Russia’s strategic, economic and ideological capacities to influence the security in the post-Soviet countries are immensely stronger than Sweden, Finland, Balkan, even Central and Eastern European countries (before their accession to NATO).

stop enlargement process would definitely detract from NATO’s worldwide reputation and credibility. Nevertheless, NATO’s continuous

political rhetoric of “keeping its door open” to aspired countries is much weaker than the reality of the Russian impediment on the way to that “open door”. Because, beyond rhetoric and limited sanctions, the West will not risk further escalation of relations with Russia over non-member states, like Georgia and Ukraine.

The door to NATO is open, however, the roads are closed at least for the countries in the post-Soviet space. Russia’s strategy of preventing the aspired countries in its “near abroad” from the NATO-membership subconsciously chime with NATO’s requirements for new members. The Alliance is reluctant to accept new members with territorial disputes and Russia is either directly or indirectly involved in all territorial disputes in its neighbourhood. Now Russia is more comfortable with its foreign policy strategy and believes that its permanent intervention in its “near abroad” would prevent other countries from NATO

membership. Subsequently, in Moscow’s perception, NATO will have to shut the door, if no one is able to enter.

However, it should be noted that, during the debates on NATO enlargement in the 1990s, policymakers in allied capitals, including Washington, scoffed at the idea of the Baltic States joining the Alliance, arguing that such a step was too provocative and destabilizing. They were wrong. The security, stability, and predictability of embedding the Baltic States within NATO are what have allowed for the normalization in relations between these former Soviet republics and Russia. At that time, each of these nations also had Russian troops stationed on their territory. Thus, after North Macedonia is admitted to NATO, the allies will probably take stock of other countries for membership. Nevertheless, the number of these countries is limited in light of Russian overall strategy.

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