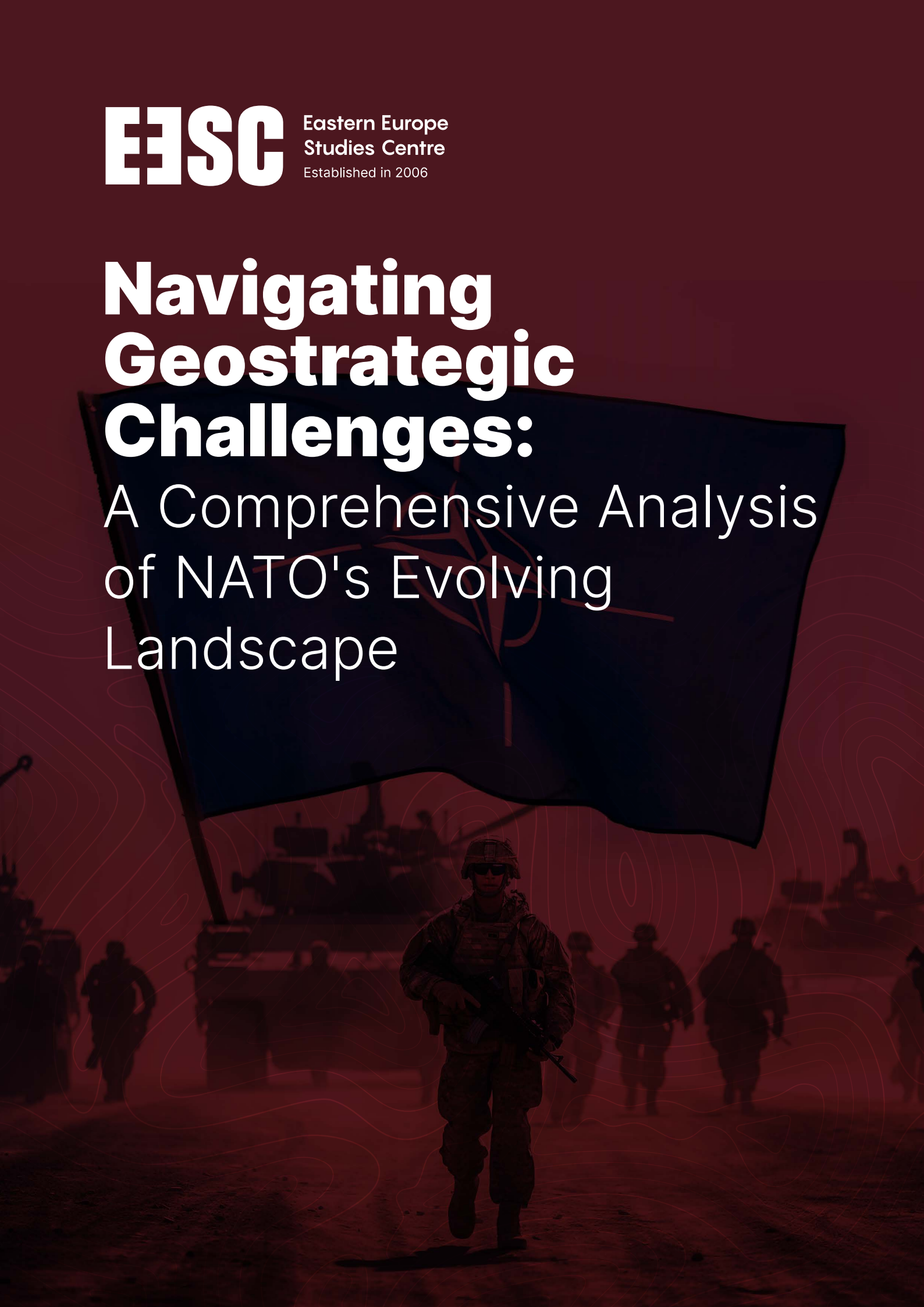




Eastern Europe  
Studies Centre  
Established in 2006

# Navigating Geostrategic Challenges:

A Comprehensive Analysis  
of NATO's Evolving  
Landscape



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# Energy security and critical infrastructure protection

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This article raises awareness for current and future strategic threats to the security of critical energy transport and energy infrastructure. At the moment, NATO's operational readiness centres around the 'single fuel policy', which is based on fossil kerosene. At the Madrid NATO summit in 2020, the Alliance announced its goal to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2050. The resulting transition to renewable energy will bring new challenges to the armed forces of the Alliance. The energy systems will become more diverse and complex and thus will create more vulnerabilities. All these changes require an increased focus on all aspects of energy security and the protection of critical energy infrastructure.

“Energy security in NATO and partner countries is a multinational effort mostly conducted by private and civil society organizations.”

## Vulnerabilities of the global energy system

Modern societies depend on huge amounts of energy. Since WWII, the global fossil energy consumption has risen sevenfold to 136 TWh (2021). Most energy is still provided as fossil-based oil and gas, while electricity from renewable sources contributes 8 TWh.<sup>1</sup> Within NATO countries, most energy-related infrastructure is owned and managed by public or private civil entities. Only minor components like the Central European Pipeline System are controlled by NATO armed forces.

Transporting and transforming fuels from the source to the customer is a multinational effort. Most NATO countries are not energy self-sufficient and are therefore vulnerable to changes in the political alliances of the producers. Processing plants are located in both producing and consuming countries, typically close to seaports. The Rotterdam harbour in the Netherlands, for instance, hosts five oil refineries covering large areas and therefore are easy and vulnerable targets for kinetic attacks (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Large oil refinery and storage facilities in the seaport of Rotterdam.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 2: Transport routes and bottlenecks for fossil oil shipping. The numbers indicate the estimated oil volumes in million barrels per day (1 million barrels equals 1,628 GWh<sup>5</sup>).**

Globally, 63% of crude oil (Figure 2)<sup>3</sup> and 10 % of natural gas<sup>4</sup> are transported by ship and therefore prone to obstructions at maritime bottlenecks. Recent examples are the six-day blockage of the Suez Canal in 2021 (with a daily throughput 4.5 million barrels of oil), piracy in the Strait of Malaga (15.2 million barrels per day) and military interventions in the Strait of Hormuz (17.0 million barrels per day). Such incidents threaten the global energy supply chain. In contrast, long-distance transport on land is usually performed via pipelines (Figure 4), and trains and trucks are used only for the 'last mile'. Recent cyber- and kinetic sabotages on refineries and pipelines demonstrated the vulnerability of these installations and logistic hubs.

Facing climatic changes, industrial societies are now making strong efforts to de-fossilize their energy supply by switching to electricity generated from renewable sources. Critical infrastructure for electricity production are power plants, transformer stations and electrical grids. Power plants using fossil fuel, nuclear, hydropower or geothermal sources are compact facilities. In contrast, solar- and wind parks (c.f. Figure 3, a solar power plant in Chile) as well as the power transmission grid cover large areas and are difficult to protect against kinetic attacks. This became evident during the Russo-Ukrainian war. Because electric power loss can cause a nuclear meltdown in nuclear plants, the International Atomic

“Technological progress in storing and using electricity for mobility of heavy systems is currently physically limited.”

Energy Agency is currently warning of this serious threat at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant on the Russo-Ukrainian frontline.

Transitions are generally difficult processes. Success, hiccups and failures are close together. Some of the main challenges to NATO are discussed next.



**Figure 3: Large photo-voltaic power plant in Chile.<sup>6</sup>**



## Strategic challenges related to NATO and its single fuel policy

For NATO members and partner countries, the current energy challenges are very complex and securing energy availability is essential. In current international efforts of a transition away from fossil to renewable energy production, industrial societies with limited fossil energy resources are facing a dilemma: they need to invest enormous financial resources for building a renewable energy supply chain based on carbon-neutral electric power production while at the same time competing on the global markets with societies which continue to use fossil fuels.

The technological progress in using electricity for aeroplanes, ships and heavy land-based systems like trucks and armoured systems is physically limited, and propulsion systems using liquid hydrocarbon-based fuels simply have superior performance. Consequently, the military and many civil transport systems will depend for the next decades on hydrocarbon-based liquid fuels. An environmentally sound 'way out' would be using renewable electric energy for the production of carbon-neutral synthetic fuel by combining carbon capture and hydrolysis. However, this is less energy-efficient and therefore expensive.<sup>7</sup> To keep up in combat effectiveness with potential adversaries who are using fossil fuels, NATO armed forces are forced to either continue using fossil fuels or acquire expensive synthetic fuels.

NATO armed forces are adhering to NATO's single fuel policy, which aims to use one globally available primary fuel type. Currently, this is kerosene jet fuel, the mainstay of civil air transport. Efforts are underway to replace it by sustainable air fuels, which are blends of kerosene with up to 50% bio-, or synthetic fuels. The geo-strategic challenges for securing fossil energy supply are well known. The build-up of additional renewable energy and electricity-based production facilities and infrastructure needed for large quantities of synthetic hydrocarbon-based fuels pose challenges of almost epic proportions. Not only does this require huge investments, the total amount of electricity needed from renewable sources can realistically not be produced within most NATO countries. This will create new global markets for renewable energy production and shift the focus towards countries within the global solar belt. Consequently, NATO countries will have to exchange

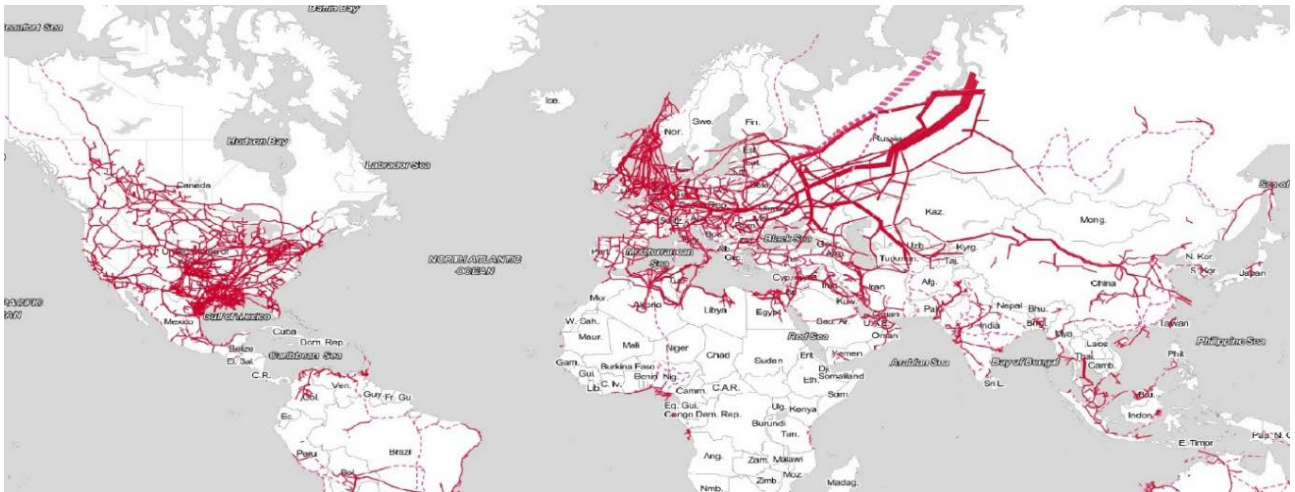
“NATO armed forces are adhering to the NATO single fuel policy, which is currently fossil kerosene but will be supplemented in the future by biogenic and carbon-neutral synthetic fuels.”

some strategic dependencies from fossil fuel producers with dependencies from global renewable energy providers. This also means that such new energy and transport infrastructures have to be protected to ensure energy security.

New supply chains must be built up while the old ones are still operational. The increased complexity requires agile management and vigilance to establish resilient structures and protocols since their effectiveness can only be evaluated in hindsight after disruptive events. NATO armed forces depend primarily on civil society energy supply chains. Therefore, protective measures for energy installations and systems must include private, national and military infrastructure protection and security protocols.

## Protecting energy systems

Energy systems are very complex and may fail in unpredictable ways. The complexity and sheer size of the global oil and natural gas shipping ways and pipelines (c.f. Figure 2 and Figure 4) is a challenge in itself. Operating it requires a multitude of technologies and procedures with thousands of humans, physical and virtual interfaces that are very difficult to protect from hostile forces, even in times of peace. Any concerted kinetic or cyber-attack within an economic zone or synchronized electric power grid has the potential to knock out civil and military activities. The establishment of additional infrastructure as 'shock absorber' on all levels of operations and supply chains is essential to augment energy security. These measures will increase costs and can only be enforced within a state or supranational structure.



**Figure 4: Map of the extensive global natural gas pipeline network.<sup>8</sup>**

An increasingly electrified world will add new challenges to the protection of the energy supply. Electricity must be produced instantly and in exactly the required amounts. Therefore, any incapacitated electrical infrastructure, until the last demand point, must be repaired before electric energy can be provided again. This poses serious risks, as large-scale electricity storage technology is not yet available. The bifurcation in the energy mix by having fossil and alternative fuels during the next decades will add even more diverse and additional infrastructures and increase the number of potential targets.

All challenges discussed must be addressed in the next decades, because the change to a de-fossilized energy future will be a long process. Additionally, agile risk management must anticipate any blind spots as hostile forces will certainly do so.

## Conclusions

Failing to ensure a secure environment for a stable and reliable supply of energy to citizens, industry and defence forces, means failing as a state. For NATO nations and partners, this has to be avoided by any means. This statement remains valid for civil governments and for military commanders, and for individual nations and for the Alliance as a whole. What matters most is the security and stability of the complex energy environment, starting from energy production and conversion all the way to distribution and consumption by civil society and the armed forces. In this context, the choice of energy sources – renewable or not – is of secondary nature. The

“Agile risk management must identify any blind spots in the critical energy protection system.”

demands of today's civil society and armed forces for ensuring energy security is more than understandable, given the current global conflicts and the technological transition to a non-fossil and zero-carbon energy world. NATO must convey and shape the message that energy is no longer an easily obtainable commodity for our nations and that armed forces will not be able to exclude themselves from this vision. Since energy security is essential, the mission of critical energy infrastructure protection cannot be ignored or outsourced in the future. While currently most NATO armed forces are not directly assigned to critical energy infrastructure protection on their own soil, it is now time to rise to the challenge and rapidly adapt to the mission, because military and national security depends on these assets. Energy security is a global challenge that can only be managed through a collective and comprehensive conceptual framework of efforts and mitigations. Realistic resilience concepts must start by realizing how vulnerable we are, followed by a comprehensive risk assessment. Only those overarching efforts will lead NATO successfully through the energy transition and ensure the security of the Alliance.

# Europe's Contribution to NATO's New Defence

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Henrik Larsen

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The policy debate about NATO's burden sharing tends to focus on European members' reluctance or failure to meet the two-percent-of-GDP minimum defence spending target. Redressing the transatlantic budgetary imbalance is indeed warranted because of the possibility of a re-election of Donald Trump or a like-minded Republican candidate next year, who would use Europe's under-spending as an argument for reducing or withdrawing U.S. support for NATO and Ukraine.

However, equal attention should be devoted to European allies' material contribution to NATO and whether that would allow them to assume the lion's share of its conventional defence and deterrence. The issue is not only about the alliance's internal cohesion but also about its objective ability to repel Russian aggression (while retaining its crisis-management readiness), as the United States – no matter who occupies the White House – is bound to balance China in the Indo-Pacific and Iran in the Middle East. The 2017 and 2022 U.S. defence doctrines state the preparedness to fight (and win) only one war against a great power war while only deterring another at any given time. Europe needs to fill the gap.

“The issue is not only about the alliance's internal cohesion but also about its objective ability to repel Russian aggression...”

The NATO Force Model adopted last year prescribes roughly 300,000 troops for high-readiness deployment within one month, and an additional 500,000 for deployment within six months. NATO further decided that forces 'up to brigade-size' could be placed on the border with Russia. This is a serious preparation for the eventuality of war with Russia. However, the Vilnius Summit did not specify the implementation of these goals other than putting in place new regional defence plans, investing in advanced and interoperable capabilities, and creating a so-called Allied Reaction Force. The policy discussion needs to focus on the European contribution, specifically (i) defence investment and (ii) defence planning.



“... the European allies should invest their defence budgets in building military ‘muscle’, i.e. conventional fighting power, rather than ‘nervous system’...”

First, the European allies should invest their defence budgets in building military ‘muscle’, i.e. conventional fighting power, rather than ‘nervous system’, i.e. the capability to trace the enemy’s positions and capabilities. Discussions about European defence and space collaboration (Permanent Structured Cooperation, European Defence Fund) tend to obscure the fact that Europe is unlikely to replace the U.S. strategic enablers and situational awareness capabilities (C4ISR) in the foreseeable future.<sup>9</sup> It is hard to imagine any European capital, even Paris, in favour of a transfer to a European nervous system because they will see it as an abandonment of U.S. leadership in NATO, especially as far as the integrated command at strategic level (SACEUR) is concerned. From both a military and political perspective, therefore, the Europeans should focus on building NATO’s muscle to defend against Russia.

NATO’s new deterrent requires more robust and less mobile brigades and divisions whose capabilities interoperate across all domains (sea, land, air, cyber, and space). This is a clear change from the lightly armed infantry forces that NATO relied on for its preexisting ‘tripwire’ presence on the eastern border or its crisis-management operations such as Afghanistan. The degradation of Russian land power in Ukraine gives the Europeans breathing space to expand their military capability and adapt their industries to the attritional warfare that plays out in Ukraine.

The Europeans should divert their budgets to the build-up of combat-ready ground troops, armour, artillery, and combat aircraft, where they can relatively easily expand their existing capabilities. They should give priority to acute gaps in air and missile defence, drones, long-range fires, strategic airlift, and ammunition production<sup>10</sup>, also with a view to future donations to Ukraine. The EU has proven a viable forum through which the European allies can finance the increase in their ammunitions production and their donations to Ukraine.

Second, the European allies should explore enhanced defence planning without traditional overreliance on the United States. European allies generally support the NATO Force Model, but many face significant challenges in integrating their national policy and capability development into NATO’s three new regional defence plans.<sup>11</sup> NATO will require its allies to build up stockpiles and equipment, and to plan for European troop formations for territorial denial. This is crucial for the preservation of allied unity during a security crisis, as opposed to having to take a political decision to liberate seized territory against a nuclear-armed opponent. Reinforcements from Western Europe would have to travel more than 1,000 kilometres to reach wartime positions, which means that delay comes at the risk of loss of territory.<sup>12</sup>

“...the European allies should explore enhanced defence planning without traditional overreliance on the United States...”

The regional defence plan for Central Europe, which includes the Baltic States, seems to be the most salient to counter Russian ambitions to restore parts of its Tsarist territory. The new in-place forces in the Baltic States with a British-led battalion in Estonia, a Canadian-led brigade in Latvia, and a German combat brigade in Lithuania narrow the deterrence gap but do not completely close it.<sup>13</sup> NATO should, therefore, leverage the growing German and Polish force projection capability. Germany aims to increase its active armed forces to 200,000 and to contribute 30,000, or ten percent, to the high-readiness NATO Force Model. Poland aims to increase its armed forces to 300,000 and is much further ahead in procuring new battle tanks, artillery, combat aeroplanes, and air defence systems that are necessary for the land warfare conducted in Ukraine.

The regional defence plan for Northern Europe, which stretches from the Arctic to the Gulf of Finland, would logically revolve around the United Kingdom, which will retain a limited presence also in Estonia. The regional defence plan for Southern Europe, which stretches from the Black Sea to the

“The new in-place forces in the Baltic States with a British-led battalion in Estonia, a Canadian-led brigade in Latvia, and a German combat brigade in Lithuania narrow the deterrence gap but do not completely close it”

Mediterranean, would centre on France and perhaps Italy. Only the bigger European countries can provide combat-ready brigades and command-and-control and logistical enablers, but the smaller countries can complement them with mechanized or artillery units, or with host facilities for those that share a border or sea with Russia.<sup>14</sup> Finally, it falls to the EU to increase funds for military mobility throughout Europe – essentially to improve infrastructure for moving heavy weapons and large amounts of troops eastward.

The United States will continue to play an indispensable role as NATO's military nervous system and obviously for its nuclear deterrence. Given the demographic, economic and technological superiority, it is embarrassing for the European countries if spending (at least) two percent of their GDPs does not result in the capability to fight Russia. The policy debate about burden sharing after the Vilnius Summit should now come full circle, whereby Europe aims to assume the lion's share of NATO's conventional deterrence.

# Technological change in the war in Ukraine — what lessons for NATO allies?

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**Ulrike Franke**

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## Intro

For Ukraine's deputy prime minister, Mykhailo Fedorov, the equation for Ukraine's victory is clear: "The courage of Ukrainians + technology = the key to Ukraine's future victory", he noted in April 2023. For him, the war between Russia, which invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and Ukraine, which has been defending its people and territory since then, is a "technology war".

Of course, the war is not all about technological change. Some of the most urgent demands – and most heated debates with supporters – have been about the delivery of tanks, artillery ammunition, and aerial defence systems. Among the most useful aerial defence systems have been the German anti-aircraft gun tank *Gepard*, which the Bundeswehr had phased out in 2010. 'Dragon's teeth' anti-tank obstacles – something most Europeans associate with the second world war – are making a reappearance.

But technologies which NATO calls emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) – artificial intelligence, space-based capabilities, but also cyber and drones which are a bit more established – are playing an important role in the war in Ukraine, and specifically in Ukraine's defence against the Russian military. Ukrainian civilians inform their armed forces of Russian advances by logging sightings of military vehicles in apps. Drones are in the sky 24 hours a day, streaming back images of troop movements and attacks. According to Fedorov, cloud services "basically helped Ukraine survive as a state".

NATO allies need to pay close attention to and learn from the war if they are serious about building up their own EDT capabilities. Specifically, NATO allies should draw three distinct lessons from the war so far. These are not about specific weapon systems, such as which drone has been the most promising, or how to integrate autonomy in the fighting process. Rather, they are more fundamental lessons and changes that the increasing use of new technologies have caused or enabled.



## Lesson 1) Private companies are providing decisive capabilities — and in some areas are the only ones able to do so

Private, mostly civilian, technology companies have provided crucial systems and services to Ukrainians and their armed forces throughout the war. The most visible roles for these companies have been in the field of internet connectivity (Starlink/SpaceX), and in cloud computing and cyber (Amazon, Microsoft, Google). Other companies have provided hardware such as drones (DJI), or software to improve legacy systems.

“Starlink is indeed the blood of our entire communication infrastructure now”, Fedorov said in an interview. Thousands of terminals that link to satellites of the US company SpaceX are in use in Ukraine, providing secure communications to the military as well as to the government and the public. Amazon helped Ukraine move data to the cloud in the first days of the war. This included the provision of ‘snowball’ devices – suitcase-sized computer storage units – to help store data, as well as room in the cloud. By December 2022, Amazon had helped move some 10 petabytes of data – equivalent to at least twice the contents of the US Library of Congress. This included crucial information such as the country’s land registries. Google has helped place Ukrainian websites under a ‘cyber umbrella’, protecting them from denial-of-service attacks. But not only the big US technology firms have been playing a role. Of the tens of thousands of drones that populate the sky over Ukraine, a high number are initially civilian systems, produced by the Chinese drone maker DJI. DJI suspended operations in both Russia and Ukraine early into the war – but has been unable to control the use of its drones.

NATO countries have to take note of the change in the balance of power between the private sector and the state. Private companies are providing services that are crucial to the war effort, and for many of these services it can be questioned whether states would be able to provide them in their stead. While working with commercial providers can sometimes be a good way to get products and services quickly and more cheaply than the public sector may be

able to guarantee, relying on the private sector can also create vulnerabilities. Earlier this year, SpaceX reported that it had taken measures to limit Ukrainian military use of Starlink, arguing that the intention had never been for the service to be used for offensive military purposes. The New York Times revealed in July that, at times, the Ukrainian armed forces changed their operations because of Musk’s decisions on when and where internet connectivity via Starlink was available.

NATO members should therefore clearly define which capabilities they are comfortable buying from private firms, and in which areas they should be developing their own capabilities. Also, to guarantee smooth cooperation with the private sector, NATO members should regularly include commercial systems, equipment, and even actors in their military exercises. They need to learn from Ukraine how new, off-the-shelf systems can be integrated into the military with minimal bureaucracy and immediate impact. The Ukrainian government appears to have been particularly successful in dealing with private companies, creating relationships that they have been able to rely on during the war effort. NATO can learn from these experiences.

## Lesson 2) Technology has enabled and motivated individuals to take part in the war effort

Among the most striking aspects of the war in Ukraine related to new technologies is how they have enabled and motivated the involvement of individuals. Inside Ukraine, civil society and individuals have been highly involved in the war – and their involvement is often directly linked to new technologies. Already before the 2022 invasion, the hobbyist drone unit *Aerorozvidka* was founded – a group of individuals interested in drones who, by now, have built their own drones and are working with the Ukrainian military. Ukrainians send tips to the military regarding advances of Russian forces and incoming Russian missiles through apps or Telegram chatbots. The Ukrainian government has created a website and app where people can testify on Russian war crimes.

It is not only civilians in Ukraine – who have little choice as to their involvement in the war – who have been involved in the war efforts. New technologies have also made it possible for individuals abroad to play an active role. Ukraine’s resistance has attracted thousands of foreign fighters from around the world. Independently of their location, people were able to appreciate the situation in Ukraine – also thanks to myriad drone videos and satellite imagery posted on social media. Technology has allowed those who cannot or will not go to Ukraine to nevertheless support the war effort from afar. A multitude of international crowdfunding efforts support Ukraine’s troops. They are organized via social networks, allowing money to be sent via platforms such as PayPal, and have primarily collected funds to buy new tech equipment such as drones and Starlink terminals.

This development is extremely relevant for NATO countries, which are democracies with a free and open internet, where public opinion matters. An engaged citizenry is an overall positive development, but it can add to polarization, be instrumentalized by opponents, or lead to pressures that could hamper international diplomacy. NATO members should be proactive and establish mechanisms to coordinate and make use of civilian volunteers who can boost capacities. One promising example is to cultivate individuals’ involvement in cyber defence, in order to engage individuals who might otherwise conduct cyber vigilantism with little positive impact on military strategic goals. The idea of using civilians as an intelligence resource might also be an option. Here, again, NATO can learn from Ukraine which has been exceptionally good at positively directing individuals’ engagement. The Ukrainian leadership has been impressive in adopting the light, sarcastic tone of the internet in its own communications on social media platforms, all the while never losing sight of the severity and tragedy of the situation.

## Lesson 3)

### Quality and quantity matter

The western approach to military technology has for years been ‘quality over quantity’. To counter the numerical advantage of its opponents – most importantly, historically, the Soviet Union – NATO put its

efforts on developing better and more sophisticated weapons. While this logic still holds to some extent – think of the debate around Western tanks and aircraft which have shown their superiority to Russian systems – the war in Ukraine has been a reminder that quantity can have a quality of its own. Or, as former Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid succinctly put it: “there is no point in having one fancy weapon if the enemy has 10,000 non-fancy ones.”

The war has called into question Western military-industrial capacities, with Ukraine at times using more artillery rounds in a month than all European manufacturers can produce in an entire year. And even new technologies have appeared en masse: Russia has used hundreds of kamikaze drones to saturate and overwhelm Ukrainian air defences. One recent study estimated that Ukraine loses up to 10,000 drones per month – most of them non-hardened civilian systems. With Ukraine planning to manufacture 200,000 drones over the next year, and Russia aiming to build 6,000, it appears that even ‘fancy’ weapons now need to be procured in high numbers.

Europeans would be well advised to consider the acquisition of higher numbers of more expendable systems. Here, working with the private sector could be beneficial. Governments should devise plans to ramp up production, possibly relying on commercial abilities. The ease of replacing systems or parts needs to become a higher priority.

## Conclusion

Hopefully, technology combined with the courage of Ukrainians is indeed the key to Ukraine’s victory, as Mykhailo Fedorov states. For NATO, Ukraine’s use of new technologies, as well as the way the government works with the private sector and utilizes civilians’ competences, is something to learn from. At the same time, NATO members need to rethink their relationships with the private sector – strengthen it where needed, and invest in alternative solutions where deemed necessary. Finally, the Western strategy of counting on technological superiority over adversaries with numerical advantages may have to be reconsidered. Less shallow arsenals and higher procurement numbers will be needed in the future.

# Moving NATO's military power centre towards Central and Northern Europe. Poland's political and military goals

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been a defining moment for European security. It has been an attempt to introduce a new paradigm in European security with brutal military force in line with Moscow's interests. Russia, together with China, aims to undermine the European and international order that was created and led by the US after the end of the Cold World War. Russian goals were presented in form of two draft treaties that included three major demands in December 2021. The first demand was about putting the post-Soviet space de facto under Russian control, with the priority of controlling Ukraine. The second demand was aimed at creating a buffer zone in Central and Northern Europe,

“Russia, together with China, aims to undermine the European and international order that was created and led by the US after the end of the Cold World War.”



“The outcome of the Russian invasion of Ukraine will, from Poland’s perspective, determine whether Russia will further pursue or bury its neo-imperial ambitions.”

making the countries in the region prone to Russian pressure. The third demand was to push the United States out of Europe by withdrawing US nuclear weapons from European military bases. All this would mean a shift to a great power concert on the continent, limiting the sovereignty of small and medium states in Central and Northern Europe and giving Russia a veto power in European foreign and security affairs. The outcome of the Russian invasion of Ukraine will, from Poland’s perspective, determine whether Russia will further pursue or bury its neo-imperial ambitions.

## NATO’s adaptation

The Russian aggression against Ukraine shifted the focus of the Alliance to its northeastern flank and made NATO strengthen its collective defence posture. In the new Strategic Concept from 2022, the allies defined Russia as the most significant direct threat to their security. Deterrence and defence were made a priority. NATO obliged itself to develop forces, capabilities, plans, and infrastructure, including for high-intensity warfare against peer-competitors. The allies also put a greater emphasis on the role of nuclear deterrence due to Russian aggressive nuclear rhetoric.

The most important change to NATO’s posture is a partial return to the defence planning processes and structures implemented during the Cold War. At the summit in Vilnius, the allies agreed upon three regional defence plans: the north (covering the European Arctic and North Atlantic), the centre (covering the Baltic Sea region and Central Europe) and the south one (covering the Mediterranean and Black Sea region). These plans will form the basis for the development of allied military forces, capabilities, and exercises.

However, no change to the concept of stationing NATO forces on the eastern flank was decided. Permanent rotational presence of battalion-sized battlegroups on the eastern flank was maintained, with allies exercising their ability to quickly expand them to brigade-sized forces. At the same time, two of these battlegroups – in Lithuania and in Latvia – should increase to a brigade in a few years, due to the bilateral arrangements of the two countries with Germany and Canada.

Beyond the plans to strengthen military posture in Central and Northern Europe, the accession of Finland, and hopefully soon Sweden, to NATO changed the strategic landscape in Central and Northern Europe. The membership of both countries sets clear boundaries between NATO and Russia, and prevents Moscow from taking advantage of their non-alignment (e.g. by occupying parts of their territories like Gotland or the Åland Islands) to conduct possible military operations in the wider region.

## Poland’s political and military interests in the Alliance

From Poland’s perspective, in order to achieve sustainable peace in Europe, Russia needs to be defeated, Ukraine has to become part of Euro-Atlantic structures, NATO must live up to its defence plans, and the allies need to invest in the implementation of these plans.

“From Poland’s perspective, in order to achieve sustainable peace in Europe, Russia needs to be defeated, Ukraine has to become part of Euro-Atlantic structures, NATO must live up to its defence plans, and the allies need to invest in the implementation of these plans.”

“The best way to curtail Russian ambitions in Eastern, Central and Northern Europe would be to integrate Ukraine in both the EU and NATO.”

First, the Kremlin's strategic defeat in Ukraine includes not only a military failure. The best way to curtail Russian ambitions in Eastern, Central and Northern Europe would be to integrate Ukraine in both the EU and NATO. Ukraine being left outside the Western structures in the in-between zone would only mean protracted crisis and conflict in Eastern Europe. Russia would repeatedly attempt to subdue the country, and might be willing to strike against NATO countries in the future if they see a window of opportunity. If there is no consensus for Ukraine's membership now, the goal should be to bring the country politically and militarily closer to the Alliance step by step.

At the same time, NATO needs to further strengthen deterrence and defence vis-à-vis Moscow. In the conventional domain, after agreeing to the strategic shift in collective defence posture, the allies need to work on swift implementation of the regional plans and on structural changes to the Command and Force Structures by investing in the agreed military capabilities, by providing high-readiness forces to fill in NATO defence planning, and by staging large-scale exercises to be able to execute the plans if needed. The allies should also finally denounce the NATO-Russia Founding Act, a document that prescribes limitations on allied military presence in Central Europe. There should be no temptation to come back to NATO's cooperative stance towards Russia without a deep political change in the country – i.e. without hopes of finding an arrangement on future European security with Moscow.

“At the same time, NATO needs to further strengthen deterrence and defence vis-à-vis Moscow.”

“From Warsaw's perspective, it is equally important to strengthen NATO's nuclear deterrence.”

From Warsaw's perspective, it is equally important to strengthen NATO's nuclear deterrence. The allies agreed at the summit in Vilnius to update the nuclear planning and to modernize nuclear capabilities. From Poland's perspective, this should open the way to certifying Polish F-35 jets as dual-capable aircraft for nuclear sharing arrangements. This would be the way out of the controversial debate about the basing of US tactical nukes in Poland, while at the same time allowing the allies from the eastern flank to actively join the nuclear sharing programme.

All this means that the European allies need to invest heavily in the reform and modernization of their armed forces. With Russia attempting to challenge the European security order, there can be no comeback to past policies of prioritizing economic growth and social cohesion over security. 2% of GDP should be the bottom line if NATO is to quickly react to contingencies in Central and Northern Europe.

## Investments in Poland's national defence

Strengthening deterrence and defence within NATO and implementing the central regional defence plan forms the basic layer of enhancing Poland's security. Beyond that, Poland has decided on substantial investments in their own military capabilities. Poland's military expenditure from budgetary and extrabudgetary funds reached 3.9% of GDP in 2023. It will remain high in the years to come as 3% of GDP for defence was enshrined in the Homeland Defence Act adopted by the Sejm in 2022. More than a half of the \$30 billion spent on defence in 2023 was invested in arms and military equipment. The current plans for the modernization of the Polish Armed Forces until 2035 will cost \$133 billion. Even if there is a correction in both military procurement plans and expenditure, Warsaw will still spend big on defence.

The goal is to prepare the Polish Armed Forces for a more difficult security environment in the future, with an unknown degree of US military presence in Europe. The speedy implementation of the procurement programmes reflects a conviction that there might be a need for an enhanced regional military posture as soon as 2026/2027, in order to deter and defend against a resurgent Russia. The lack of understanding of the changes in the security environment on part of the Western European allies and the slow investments in their armed forces is an additional factor. Moreover, there is the need to quickly replenish the military equipment that was delivered to Ukraine from operational units of the Polish Armed Forces.

Poland therefore primarily invests in land forces capabilities like the heavy armoured vehicles (a.o. US and South Korean tanks), long-range artillery and air defence systems, as well as in the Air Force with the purchase of new fighter jets (F-35 multirole combat aircraft and FA-50 light combat jets), airborne early-warning planes (Saab 340), among others. The Navy, the Territorial Defence Forces and the Cyber-space Defence Forces will also get a share of the modernization budget. The procurement process will be accompanied by an increase in military strength. Expanding their current size of ca. 160,000 up to 300,000 soldiers will probably be not possible, but there will be an effort to cross the 200,000-threshold through combining different forms of military service.

The strengthening of national capabilities has been accompanied by continuous efforts to keep and increase the US military presence in Poland in terms of troops (currently up to 10,000 soldiers) and command structures (V Corps Headquarters-Forward). Furthermore, there is a conviction that regional cooperation and coordination need to be enhanced. In 2023, this was demonstrated by the synchronization of the year's biggest military exercises in the Baltic Sea region – the Polish Anakonda with the Swedish Aurora and the US Defender 23. As the northeastern flank allies will be the first responders to a crisis or conflict situation, there is a need for more information exchange, coordination, and cooperation across the Baltic Sea region on top of what NATO has been doing so far and will be implementing in the future.



# From Ukraine to North Africa: how are the threats to NATO's eastern and southern flank similar and different?

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Threats to the southern flank do not represent such a direct, military, and imminent threat to NATO as Russia does on the Eastern flank, but they do endanger the security of NATO member states and regional partners as recognized in NATO's Strategic Concept adopted in Madrid in 2022. Despite that recognition and the Alliance's desire to pay equal attention to every threat in its 360° strategy, the eastern flank deserves much more attention in NATO's planning than the southern flank.

The 2014 NATO Summit of Wales acknowledged the existence of risks and threats coming from both the eastern and southern neighbourhoods. A decade after, during the 2023 Summit in Vilnius, NATO put in place a new generation of regional defence plans for the High North-Atlantic, Baltics-Central Europe and Mediterranean-Black Sea while only tasking the North Atlantic Council to launch a comprehensive and deep reflection on existing and emerging threats and partnership opportunities in the south, to be presented by the next 2024 Summit in Washington D.C. While NATO has adopted concrete measures and action plans to cope with the eastern risk and threats in the last years, the southern flank is still waiting for diagnosis and remedies.

Of course, both threats are different in nature and danger. The eastern threat, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, impacts the core task of collective defence. Hence, NATO has updated its military planning for high-intensity and multi-domain scenarios and adjusted its structure and force posture, among many other deterrence and defence measures adopted accordingly.

On the contrary, the southern destabilization stems from the proliferation of jihadist groups taking advantage of weak local governments and the global geopolitical competition in which powers such as Russia and China seek to reduce the Western influence in the region. As NATO's Strategic Concept of 2022 acknowledged, the regional insecurity is aggravated by the impact of climate change, fragile institutions, health emergencies and food insecurity that provide fertile ground for the proliferation of non-state armed groups, including terrorist organizations. It also enables strategic competitors such as the Russian Federation to "destabilize countries to our East and South".

As a result, the southern flank, and particularly the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel region, faces an accumulation of intermittent conflicts, humanitarian crises, jihadi insecurity, arms races, migration crises, and hybrid tactics, among others. Afghani-

stan, Burkina Faso, Somalia, Mali, and Syria lead the ranking of countries with the highest incidence of terrorism in the world and the Sahel region is the epicentre of global terrorism and jihadist insurgency.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the conflicts in the Western Sahara, Libya, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia, and Sudan, there is an ongoing arms race between Morocco and Algeria and a spiral of terrorist attacks from the Gulf of Guinea to the Sahel.

In addition, Russia's hybrid tactics and the presence of private mercenaries in the region have undermined local confidence in the effectiveness of international crisis management operations, and authoritarian governments in the region denounce the colonialist vocation of Western countries.<sup>16</sup> These could be the main similarities between NATO's eastern and southern flanks as part of the new types of conflict in the 'grey' zone made of information operations and disinformation to undermine local support for NATO's and allies' activities in the area.

With the security situation being so challenging, it is easy to see why NATO has not yet designed a proper regional plan for the south. On the one hand, the threats and challenges are multifaceted and most of them are not of a military nature. This explains the difficulty for NATO to provide a comprehensive answer to them, as the failure of the military intervention in Libya revealed. On the other hand, and despite NATO's attempt to project stability in the neighbourhood<sup>17</sup>, including the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, NATO finds difficulties in engaging local partners because regional and sub-regional powers and organizations lack the proper capabilities to diminish regional insecurity, and because of initiatives of extra-regional actors such as Russia, China, and Iran to dilute Western influence.

What the east and south flanks have in common is the hostile behaviour of Russia. Russia continues to be the main supplier of major arms to Africa, and overtook China as the largest sub-Saharan provider in 2022.<sup>18</sup> However, arms exports are not so influential as the military assistance or the deployment of private mercenaries in support of regional authoritarian regimes<sup>19</sup> and lately the delivery of free grain.<sup>20</sup> Another potential similarity is the Russian attempt to portray NATO as an expansive organization that intervenes in foreign territory (Ukraine, Libya) to defend the particular interests of allies without regard for its impact on local populations or respect for regional security organizations. The Western influence in the region is diminishing, which became ev-

ident during the United Nations voting round about the condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in March 2022, when a significant number of African countries refused to condemn Russia.

A combination of meagre results in the political, economic and military fields of Western assistance, together with local claims against the interference in internal politics, have been the ideal breeding ground for Russian campaigns of mistrust and disinformation to flourish.<sup>21</sup> This environment of hostility puts at risk the presence of Western troops in the region and the continuity of European Union missions, leaving a vacuum in which Wagner's private mercenaries act with impunity.<sup>22</sup> France's exit from the Sahel is a case study of the declining presence and influence of Western powers in regional affairs. The displacement of Western forces in the area could be even more acute after the military takeover of Niger in July 2023, the more recent one after the takeovers of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad since 2020.<sup>23</sup> Regional armed forces, especially those of regional powers such as Algeria or Morocco, could compensate the departure of Western forces and strengthen regional counter-terrorism capabilities, but instead they are engaged in competing for regional supremacy.<sup>24</sup>

Whatever could be the outcome of NATO's study to be delivered on the 75th Anniversary Summit, the role of NATO in the south looks much more restricted than in the east. With no (Russian) military

aggression in sight, without the emergency of a Caliphate-type insurgency, and under the current atmosphere of distrust and hostility, the opportunities of NATO to provide stability in these regions are quite limited. Nevertheless, NATO must frame a set of measures to make clear to its members and regional actors that it has a spectrum of measures at its disposal to intervene in different scenarios: from the more positive ones of cooperation with local actors in capacity-building and reform of their armed and security forces, to maritime security controls, the extraction of nationals or allied troops in situations of risk, or – in the more extreme case – fighting global terrorism as in the cases of Syria and Iraq, but on African territory.

Unlike on the eastern flank, NATO is not a strategic actor in the south. It can contribute to regional stability by coordinating the actions of the Mediterranean allies, strengthening strategic partnerships with regional organizations, or improving the division of labour with the European Union<sup>25</sup>, but always in a supporting role. NATO's engagement with the African Union or Mauritania is more than limited, many countries distrust NATO as a security provider, and it lacks the proper situational awareness. Nevertheless, NATO must overcome such obstacles to avoid a breach in its 360° strategy and to ensure its preparedness for worst case scenarios in the south. Without adopting strategies and measures, NATO will not be a relevant strategic player in the south, neither for the regional countries nor for the southern allies.

# The Unchanging Core: Russian Military Culture Examined through the Ukrainian War

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*“The measure of a state  
is how it treats its soldiers.”*

## Introduction

Approximately 35 years ago, Soviet society entered a period of *glasnost*, characterized by a newfound openness that allowed for public debate and criticism of pressing social issues. It was during this era that a network of women activists, collectively known as the ‘Soldiers’ Mothers Organization’, emerged as a powerful voice in society. Their mis-

sion was to passionately advocate for the well-being of their sons, the Russian soldiers serving within the confines of the Soviet armed forces.

Persistent issues, including the troubling ‘*dedovshchina*’ (a form of hazing), tragic peacetime fatalities, widespread alcohol abuse, excessive violence, corruption, and other harmful behaviours within the military, continued to afflict the Russian armed forces. These challenges were not mere abstractions; they were vividly exemplified by countless harrowing soldier stories. These narratives served as stark reminders of the enduring and deeply ingrained nature of the Russian soldiers’ predicament.

Imitating the enduring trends observed in Western armed forces, marked by the processes of civilianization, modernization, and professionalization culminating in the formation of what is commonly referred to as the 'all-volunteer force', a similar remedy was sought to address the intricate challenges faced by Russian soldiers within the ranks of the Russian armed forces.

The chosen path to address these issues revolved around the concept of professionalization, a paradigm shift that had been under consideration since the 1990s. This transition involved the replacement of the conscription system with volunteer soldiers and the transformation of a massive army into a relatively compact, yet highly technologically advanced and mobile force. It wasn't until after 2008 – notably following the harrowing experiences of both Chechen wars, marked by excessive brutality, extensive devastation, and a heavy human toll endured by all parties involved, as well as the invasion of Georgia – that substantial reform and modernization of the Russian armed forces gained significant momentum.

Under the leadership of Defence Minister Shoigu, who assumed his role in 2012, the professionalization of the armed forces emerged as a focal point of his widely publicized reform agenda. Even Western observers, captivated by Russia's remarkable modernization and reform efforts, were left in awe of the transformation of Russia's military capabilities, often calling it 'Russia's military phoenix', symbolizing not only rebirth and renewal but also the emergence of a new and potent strategic challenge.

As we mark 600 days in the midst of conflict and closely examine the behaviour of Russian soldiers in Ukraine, a critical juncture is upon us. The time has arrived to delve into the depths of Russia's reform and modernization endeavours. In this unfolding narrative, we aim to unveil the essence of 'Ivan's War' on Ukrainian soil. This inquiry poses compelling questions: can we truly decipher the unique contours of their military culture and, consequently, discern a distinct Russian way of war?

## Ivan's War in Ukraine: Mobiks, Volunteers, and Convicts

It is widely acknowledged that Russia is grappling with a structural manpower issue. This situation reveals that Russia's military involvement in Ukraine is more a product of hubris and miscalculation than rational decision-making. Russia's military ambitions often appear to outpace the number of personnel available for deployment, requiring the Kremlin to delicately balance its operational necessities with public approval of its actions in Ukraine.

As a result, a perpetual improvisation process unfolds to ensure an adequate presence on the frontline. This improvisation includes tacit mobilization, intensified recruitment efforts to attract new volunteers, and even the recruitment of convicts from Russian prisons.

In practice, the Russian frontline is manned by a diverse combination of '*mobiks*' (mobilized soldiers), '*kontraktniki*' (professional soldiers), and convicts. This amalgamation is less conducive to orchestrating complex, combined operations, and it doesn't align with the vision of Russia's 'New Look' military. The implications of this composition become evident in the way Russian military operations are conducted in Ukraine, often reminiscent of practices from the 1990s and early 2000s.

This situation is reflected in sporadic yet systematic witness reports, as revealed by intercepted telephone communications and social media posts. Russian soldiers and their families often voice complaints about the circumstances under which they serve. Soldiers state that, immediately after reporting for duty, they are sent to the battle zone without much preparation or training. Arriving at the frontline, they have no clue about small group tactics, let alone the mission they are supposed to accomplish.

In some cases, Russian tactics appear to rely on what may be called "meat grinder tactics", involving the sending of soldiers wave after wave in counter-offensives or leaving them on their own in defensive positions without adequate support. Unit rotation or relief from battle duty also seems to be problematic, resulting in battle fatigue, refusal to follow orders, and even instances of local mutiny. The response of officers to these challenges tends to be predictable: silence, denial, insults, threats, or even execution.



Adding to this already challenging situation, soldiers sometimes seem to lack basic necessities such as clothing, food, water, or shelter, which can lead to outbursts of anger, with some soldiers asking, “Are we just cannon fodder?”

This composition, marked by low morale and weak leadership, not only results in a high acceptance of manpower losses but also has repercussions beyond the battlefield. The brutal and violent behaviour exhibited by Russian soldiers towards the local population in Ukraine is often exacerbated by high alcohol consumption. This behaviour has been observed in locations such as Bucha and elsewhere, with reports of theft, torture, rape, and murder occurring without repercussions or sanctions. This may not be surprising, given the situation, which in Russia is often qualified as ‘*bespredel*’ (‘lawlessness’ or ‘arbitrariness’).

Furthermore, as soldiers return home after their frontline service in Ukraine, reports emerge of acts of violence and murder committed by convicts who have earned their freedom in return for their frontline service. Additionally, incidents of soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have been documented. As the Kremlin’s decision to invade Ukraine appears to backfire, a looming ‘Afghanistan syndrome’ reminiscent of earlier times in Russia becomes increasingly apparent.

## The Russian Paradox

The Russian military culture, characterized by a high tolerance for suffering and violence, proves to be an enduring and persistent trait of the Russian military organization. Indeed, the problems reported and studied in the 1990s and early 2000s are nearly identical to those observed in Ukraine today. In this sense, it should not surprise us. However, the issue is that we – both the expert community and laypeople – often find ourselves surprised. It seems we’ve been drawn in by Russia’s modernization and reform debate, its prowess displayed in numerous large-scale exercises and military interventions in Ukraine (2014), Syria (2015), Kazakhstan (2021), as well as the Kremlin’s increasingly confident strategic communication and sophisticated misinformation campaigns. Therefore, it is crucial to reflect on our research and understand what we’ve missed since 2008.

It is of paramount importance to take note of this specific military culture. Horrifying and revolting as it may be, it is crucial to familiarize oneself with it in a dispassionate, almost stoic way, as it is of utmost importance to comprehend our self-declared opponent. More importantly, however, we should refrain from drawing the wrong conclusions from this depiction. Firstly, we must understand that most of the traits of Russian military culture and the behaviour of Russian soldiers in the combat zone and beyond are the result of Russia’s structural problems. Indeed, structural problems often underlie cultural ones. As such, Russian military culture can be approached as a mirror of Russian society and as the result of the Kremlin’s policies over the last three decades. In this sense, it is quite telling that the soldiers’ mothers’ organizations, as described in the introduction as agents of change during the *glasnost* period in the Soviet Union, no longer exist in the form in which they emerged in the late 1980s and mid-2000s. Currently, they are coopted or merely disqualified as foreign agents.

Secondly, it’s crucial not to underestimate the Russian military based on this depicted culture, especially in the current stage of attrition warfare. In this test of will and endurance, of manpower and steel, it is often the party that disposes of the largest resources, the most audacity, and the (brutal) will to sacrifice and suffer that may prevail in this competition. Therefore, we may scorn Russian military culture and Russia’s way of warfare, yet we have to deal with it. The fundamental question remains: are we up to the task? This necessitates self-reflection and hard work.

## Coda

Russian military culture is a culture of pain and suffering, a glorification of an ideal that has only existed in propaganda and revised history books, and one that can only be maintained by the harsh and arbitrary hand of the state. It is morally dreadful, intellectually absurd, and tragically flawed. Unfortunately, it is resilient and effective to the point where we resist it with all our might.

# Ukraine's NATO Membership Quest: a closing window of opportunity?

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## Margarita Šešelgytė

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The NATO summit undeniably constituted the focal point of Lithuania's political agenda in 2023. It can be argued that a large part of the nation became actively engaged in fervent deliberations, which revolved around inquiries into the Alliance's role within the framework of regional security, strategies for fortifying NATO's eastern flank, and above all, the prospect of extending to Ukraine a promise of NATO membership in Vilnius. Arguably, the question of Ukrainian membership in NATO revived not-so-distant memories of Lithuania's own successful accession to the transatlantic community, and how the country had managed to use a narrow window of opportunity when Russia was at its weakest and the US was at its strongest in the nineties.

Prior to the summit, expectations for Ukraine were heightened by a seemingly increasing line of supporters of Ukrainian membership on the international stage. A vigorous debate ensued about delineating a clear membership perspective for Ukraine. An increasing cohort of influential policymakers, including Ian Brzezinski, Alexander Vershbow, and Anders Fogh Rasmussen, passionately advocated Ukraine's

accession to the Alliance. Ian Brzezinski and Alexander Vershbow asserted that the Vilnius summit should "begin the process of completing a Europe whole and free where Ukraine has to be fully integrated within the transatlantic community, including as a member of NATO", and for this to happen, it is essential to "move beyond the ambiguous formula regarding Ukraine's NATO membership enunciated at the 2008 Bucharest summit".<sup>26</sup> Even France, which for a long time, including during the Bucharest summit, was sceptical regarding Ukraine's prospects in NATO, changed its position and seemingly endorsed the membership perspective. During his meeting with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg at the Elysée Palace in Paris, Emmanuel Macron announced: "We will have to define a path to give shape to Ukraine's prospect to join NATO, which we opened up in 2008 in Bucharest."<sup>27</sup>

Along with the narratives supporting Ukraine's NATO perspective, some perspectives exhibited a degree of reservation and caution. Justin Logan and Joshua Shiffrin, in their Foreign Affairs article "Don't let Ukraine join NATO", argued the contrary. According

to them, a potential Ukrainian membership contradicted US interests, as it might have created high escalation risks in a tense international environment. They argued that “the US should accept that it is high time to close NATO’s door to Ukraine”.<sup>28</sup> Similar reservations were trending in Berlin. In his meeting with Romanian Prime Minister Ion-Marcel Ciolacu just before the summit, German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz was quite explicit: “Nobody can become a member of a defensive alliance (NATO) during a war”.<sup>29</sup> Apprehensions associated with the potential for escalation have exerted significant influence on the decision-making process within both the United States and Germany, and were the main reason that in a communiqué of 31 member states, wording on the Ukrainian membership perspective was somewhat lukewarm: “We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree, and conditions are met.”<sup>30</sup> In essence, the wording did not differ much from the lines of the Bucharest communiqué: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO”<sup>31</sup>, which has failed to provide a concrete membership perspective. The only substantial difference from Bucharest was removing the MAP requirement, instead offering to review the “progress on interoperability” through the Annual National Programme. Moreover, the NATO Ukrainian Council to involve Ukraine in direct coordination with NATO was established. Seemingly, the main message from Vilnius for Ukraine was that military aid is essential and membership could wait with the war still going on.

In his concluding press conference following the summit, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg affirmed: “We have just conducted a historic NATO Summit.”<sup>32</sup> But was this summit a historic one? John Deni, for instance, argued that “not every NATO summit can be a historic landmark”, and the Vilnius summit could not even remotely compare to previous milestone gatherings such as London in 1990, Madrid in 1997, or Wales in 2014. Although it had considerable potential, it has managed to mostly kick “the can down the road”.<sup>33</sup> Arguably, the absence of a clear membership perspective in Vilnius deprived this summit of the opportunity to achieve this status. Furthermore, it appears that the prospects of Ukraine joining NATO are diminishing in general.

As the second year of the war in Ukraine is coming to an end, the fatigue starts hitting. The Financial Times argues that in the US, “sufficient pre-approved

funds remain to sustain Kyiv for about five more months”.<sup>34</sup> The US is in the midst of an electoral battle, and the question of aid for Ukraine has already become the dividing line between the two potential candidates. The increasing debt and declining public support for Ukraine will likely affect future debates. In a recent CNN poll, 55% of Americans said that the US Congress should not authorize additional funds to support Ukraine, and only 48% said that the US should do more to support Ukraine (it was 62% in the summer of 2022).<sup>35</sup> If the US starts to linger, Europeans will need more funds. Europe has unequivocally surpassed the United States in pledged assistance to Ukraine, as the total commitments from Europeans are now twice as big.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it remains to be observed what will be provided and when, and how persistent the political determination to support Ukraine will be. A substantial reduction of financial and military aid will have a decisive effect on Ukraine’s ability to continue fighting.

The question is, what will happen next? Will there be negotiations and peace agreements? Although Ukraine and its supporters are dismissing any negotiations for the moment, all wars end in negotiations and peace agreements at some point. A dwindling military support may signal that the options for moving forward on the battlefield have run out. If peace is achieved, NATO membership will inevitably return to the agenda. What are the options to ensure Ukraine’s security? Since the beginning of the war, various alternatives have been discussed, ranging from the Israeli case, a porcupine strategy, and bilateral or multilateral security guarantees. One of the options presented by Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Andrii Yermak in “The Kyiv Security Compact” argues for a combination of several strategies.<sup>37</sup> However, all of them have one drawback: they are expensive. NATO membership is relatively the cheapest alternative, and historical examples demonstrate that it best deters Vladimir Putin. Anders Fogh Rasmussen has recently proposed that Ukraine might join NATO but be stripped of the territories occupied by Russia.<sup>38</sup> This discussion might be renewed in the forthcoming Washington NATO summit. However, it is still unclear whether this proposal will be acceptable for Ukraine and NATO members. The perspective of EU membership is being discussed increasingly prominently as a possible alternative to NATO. This is undeniably important, as EU membership eventually opens the door to necessary reforms, the rule of law and economic well-being. Only a prosperous and well-governed Ukraine could become resilient

against potential future interferences of autocratic regimes such as Russia's. Still, the EU does not provide hard security guarantees, which are also necessary for well-being, reforms, and boosts to investment in Ukraine. The relatively recent experience of the Baltic States illustrates that the most effective transformation of countries occurs when EU membership is accompanied by NATO security assurances. Therefore, even though there is no clear

path toward membership defined in the Washington summit, Ukraine has to continue pursuing its quest for NATO membership. And it must do so while Russia remains comparatively weakened, and Western unity and resolve are strong. With the commencement of the new political season in the US and Europe, coupled with a progressively worsening global security situation, this window of opportunity may be closing soon.

# Assessing the Vilnius Summit's Decisions: An American Perspective

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This summer's Vilnius Summit took place during an interesting time for NATO as an organization and for the transatlantic community writ large. ***The Summit was full of anticipation, hope, concern, and determination in the months and weeks leading up to its commencing.*** In the lead-up to the Summit, leaders, experts, media, and parliamentarians were debating whether NATO itself as an organization should do more for Ukraine, whether the transatlantic leaders should commit individually to better arm the Ukrainian armed forces, whether Russian President Putin would create a distraction that would cast an even bigger shadow over the event, whether Turkish President Erdoğan would finally agree to allow Sweden its place in the Alliance's ranks, and whether Ukrainian President Zelensky would find a compelling enough reason for him to attend the Summit in person.

In reflecting on the Summit's outcomes from an American perspective, it is perhaps most useful to review what happened across five critical areas of importance for U.S. leaders: Russia, China, Ukraine, defence spending, and partners.

With regard to **Russia**, Heads of State and Government reaffirmed Russia as a threat, building on the summit hosted in Madrid nearly a year earlier. As stated in the NATO Summit Communiqué<sup>39</sup>, "Russia is the most significant and direct threat to allied security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area." ***Clearly, the Alliance leadership wanted to send a strong signal to President Putin as well as the Russian people that there is no doubt as to who is responsible for the war in Ukraine.*** Moreover, the Alliance emphasized the need for NATO to remain agile in both its posture and its responses to Russian provocations and attempts at destabilizing actions.<sup>40</sup>



With these statements, as well as those declaring that members will continue to reinforce NATO's Eastern Flank<sup>41</sup>, the Alliance demonstrated clear resolve, solidarity, and determination in remaining prepared for anything Putin may try against NATO and its partners.

**China**, too, was put on notice. As stated in the Communiqué<sup>42</sup>, "The People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values." NATO leaders outlined areas where Chinese actions were undermining global standards for human rights and rule of law, but remained open to a "constructive engagement"<sup>43</sup> with the PRC. However, the Alliance left no room for doubt when it called on Beijing to act responsibly and refrain from providing any lethal aid to Russia.<sup>44</sup> Such words matter to U.S. audiences. On the one hand, there is a growing belief amongst some in the U.S. that Europe will not be able to measurably contribute to any defence of Taiwan if Beijing were to attempt to forcibly try and retake the island. On the other hand, however, **statements that put China on notice about supporting Russian efforts in Ukraine show the degree of alignment between the U.S. and Europe on what it expects from Chinese leaders.**

For American political leaders, military brass, and, to a great degree, the American public, **getting commitments from Europe's leaders to spend annually no less than two percent of their GDP on defence was both welcome and long overdue.** For decades, the U.S. and some European leaders have banged the drum on the need for Europe to invest, build, and spend more on necessary military capabilities. The Communiqué clearly stated that the Alliance will spend more on defence, will spend at least 20 percent of their two-percent annual budget on major investments which can include research and development, and will need to have a robust defence industrial base.<sup>45</sup> In 2014, when NATO leaders met in Wales, they committed to achieving two percent of defence spending by 2024. From an American perspective, the fault with the Vilnius language is that it does not specifically recommit the Allies to their two-percent pledge by 2024. For some members, the war in Ukraine has expedited their plans to reach two percent or more; for others, the stated goal is still years away.

**The failure to achieve agreement regarding Sweden's NATO membership in the months leading up to the Summit was disheartening.** At the Summit itself, Turkish President Erdoğan did agree to remove his country's block on Swedish membership, but both the Turkish and Hungarian parliaments still

“As we have seen in the weeks and months following the Summit, the ability of some allies (including the Americans and the Brits) to both criticize Zelensky at the Summit and fail to show positive, bold leadership in driving toward a more declarative position on Ukraine's future membership in the Alliance has led to a weakening of support in Washington and other allied capitals for the continued material support to Ukraine in its fight against Russia.”

need to formally approve Stockholm's candidacy. It was great, however, that Finland could be represented as the Alliance's 31st member in Vilnius. NATO's 'open door' policy was once again validated with Finland's accession.

So what about **Ukraine**? This was arguably the most high-profile issue on the Alliance's agenda and one that had multiple aspects for NATO's leaders to consider. On the positive side, President Zelensky did attend the event. He met with Alliance leaders and addressed the Lithuanian public. He attended the inaugural NATO-Ukraine Council<sup>46</sup>, which replaced the NATO-Ukraine Commission set up following the 2008 Bucharest Summit. The decision to upgrade NATO's formal engagement from a Commission to a Council meant Ukraine was now considered a co-equal with NATO members in certain forums and for various other activities.

NATO also agreed to make its Madrid Summit commitment of creating a Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine a multi-year, more integrated initiative.<sup>47</sup> This is important because it demonstrates a long-term post-war commitment toward Ukraine to help build out much-needed areas of institutional and capability building for its armed forces.

**However, NATO bungled the language with regard to its future commitment to Ukraine.** Similar to the days leading up to the 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO leaders could not come to an agreement on what the appropriate language should be to offer Kyiv the possibility of a near-term NATO membership. Given that the country was at war with Russia, allies struggled to find binding language regarding promises of NATO membership. Ultimately, Alliance leaders reaffirmed the 2008 Bucharest Summit language that Ukraine will one day become a member of the Alliance, but qualified the wording in Vilnius by saying, “We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met.”<sup>48</sup> This understandably resulted in a lot of disappointment with Ukrainian leaders as well as its citizens. The reaction in Washington amongst many in the pro-Ukrainian camp was that the Alliance leaders fumbled in terms of making a post-war membership commitment to Ukraine more clear. As we have seen in the weeks and months following the Summit, the ability of some allies (including the Americans and the Brits) to both criticize Zelensky at the Summit and fail to show positive, bold leadership in driving toward a more declarative position on Ukraine’s future membership in the Alliance has led to a weakening of support in Washington and other allied capitals for the continued material support to Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

But despite some obstacles, all should not be considered lost. The 75th anniversary summit in Washington, held in July 2024, gives Alliance leaders the chance to not only demonstrate progress on the Wales, Madrid, and Vilnius commitments regarding defence spending, but also to take some historic steps that reflect on NATO’s ongoing and future

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need for peace and stability in Europe and beyond.

First, NATO leaders should continue to hold Russia accountable for the war in Ukraine and should resolve any fissures or splits amongst themselves in terms of supporting the military efforts and political leadership in Kyiv. This must be manifested in terms of modifying the Vilnius language to reflect immediate consideration of Ukraine’s membership following cessation of the war. If this cannot be achieved, either for political reasons amongst the allies or out of fear that Moscow will just keep a hot war going indefinitely, NATO leaders need to make it clear that Ukraine’s future is in NATO. Washington cannot be ambiguous or ambivalent on this. The world needs American leadership on this issue. This involves not just the White House but also Congress. Weakening Russia, seeing Ukraine prevail, and preventing future ‘Ukraines’ is in America’s security interest.

Second, all efforts should be made to ensure that Sweden is welcomed into NATO no later than the Summit’s opening events. The country deserves a seat at the Alliance table. Hungary and Turkey are democratic members of the Alliance and, therefore, NATO members need to respect their respective processes. However, Sweden brings vital capabilities to the Alliance that are needed now and will be needed even more in the future. NATO is a military alliance that requires strong militaries that are willing to support one another. Sweden will be a great ally, and they should be brought into NATO as soon as possible.

Third, it is important that NATO reports how many member states have reached the two-percent defence spending threshold. When the Washington Summit takes place in July 2024, Americans will have just spent five months voting in their state primaries for who could be the next U.S. president. Europe will be on the minds of many Americans, either because of the status of the Ukraine war or because some politicians may try to state on the campaign trail that Europe is not doing enough for its own defence. One of the best ways to defang these arguments is to have the majority of NATO member states achieve the two-percent spending target. Allies need to hold each other accountable and honour the agreed Wales Summit deadline of reaching said spending goals by 2024. A stronger, increasingly capable Europe is in America’s interest.

As noted above, the Vilnius Summit both achieved historic deliverables but also missed the mark on a few key items. Most Americans do not pay attention to Summits and the ‘deliverables’ that emerge from them. Rather, American media and politicians tend

to focus more on what failed to happen at Summits and magnify these points as demonstrating that America's partners are freeloading off American largesse. This is often factually wrong and even dangerous, as it corrupts the public's thinking and perspective. Americans want to know that their country has partners and that they are not the only ones obliged to defend freedom and provide security. They want to know that their partners will fight with and for them. They want to know that America's friends share in what they believe in. This includes ensuring Ukraine wins, encouraging our allies to spend more, and growing the number of European and Indo-Pacific partners, which is the best antidote for reducing the toxicity that is poisoning American political and public attitudes toward Europe and democracy promotion.

The Summit's legacy can be solidified depending on how Alliance leaders advance the Vilnius outcomes at the 75th anniversary summit in Washington. NATO needs to remain functional and unified. It needs to be inspiring as well. Figuring out the right decision pathway for Ukraine to join NATO is one of the most important decisions that can be taken in 2024 and could be the enduring legacy of the Vilnius Summit.

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