



NATO'S EASTERN FLANK AND ITS FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

Judy Dempsey



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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: +1 202 483 7600
F: +1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

Carnegie Europe
Rue du Congres 15
1000 Brussels
Belgium

P: +32 2 735 56 50
F: +32 2 836 62 22
CarnegieEurope.eu

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About the Author

Judy Dempsey is a nonresident senior fellow at Carnegie Europe and editor in chief of the *Strategic Europe* blog. She is also the author of the book *The Merkel Phenomenon* (*Das Phänomen Merkel*, Körber-Stiftung, 2013).

She worked for the *International Herald Tribune* from 2004 to 2011 as its Germany and Eastern Europe correspondent and from 2011 to September 2013 as a columnist. Dempsey was the diplomatic correspondent for the *Financial Times* in Brussels from 2001 onward, covering NATO and European Union enlargement. Between 1990 and 2001, she served as Jerusalem bureau chief (1996–2001), Berlin correspondent (1992–1996), and Eastern Europe correspondent in London (1990–1992) for the *Financial Times*. During the 1980s, Dempsey reported on Central and Eastern Europe for the *Financial Times*, the *Irish Times*, and the *Economist*.

Dempsey graduated from Trinity College, Dublin, where she studied history and political science. She has contributed to several books on Eastern Europe, including *Developments in Central and East European Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan and Duke University Press, 2007).

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Summary

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its invasion of eastern Ukraine unified the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and prompted the allies to beef up defenses. But the process of strengthening the alliance's Eastern flank is far from over. To complete it, NATO needs to develop a comprehensive, long-term strategy toward Russia based on unity, deterrence, and resilience. That effort is long overdue.

Much Unfinished Business

- NATO countries are divided in their assessments of the Russia threat, principally whether Russia would invade any of the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—on the front line of the alliance's Eastern flank. NATO has opted for modest rotating deployments to this region, with questionable deterrence value.
- Southern member states believe that NATO is not doing enough to bolster their security in contrast to what it is doing in the East. This weakens the alliance's sense of solidarity and cohesion.
- NATO faces logistical challenges in moving troops, tanks, and equipment across Europe to the Eastern flank.
- The alliance has long recognized that it needs to be resilient at home to prevail in a conflict, but it has not applied that philosophy to cyber vulnerabilities. Whether it be transportation networks, energy grids, or hospitals, member states' infrastructure is vulnerable.
- NATO's relations with Russia are based on the twenty-year-old NATO-Russia Founding Act, which allows for some dialogue in the NATO-Russia Council. But the geostrategic environment has radically changed, making the Founding Act anachronistic. Germany in particular remains unwilling to review the act, and there is silence in the alliance about other options.
- The U.S. dedication to defending NATO's Eastern flank seems unequivocal, but some member states remain nervous about that commitment.

Recommendations for NATO

Agree to a Russia strategy. This includes having a frank and detailed discussion about long-term strategy, reconciling member states' different schools, and addressing the hybrid and cyber security threats.

Consider permanently basing troops in the Baltic states and Poland. The present arrangements are too easy to dismantle. NATO's Eastern flank members need permanent reassurance.

Establish a Military Schengen. Such an agreement would allow troops, aircraft, tanks, trains, and equipment to cross unhindered to the Eastern flank countries.

Revise the NATO-Russia Founding Act, or scrap it and present new options. It may be the only accord between the alliance and Moscow, but that shouldn't mean it must be retained. The Founding Act and the NATO-Russia Council have run their course.

NATO's Challenge

Three years after Russia's invasion of the Donbas region in Ukraine, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has greatly strengthened its position on its Eastern border. Most visibly, thousands of new (mostly Western) troops are posted on the border with Russia.

This is a success story in many ways. Few would have expected the German and Lithuanian views, for example, to ever align given their historical differences over Russia and the legacy of World War II. But such was the galvanizing effect of Moscow's aggression that the allies agreed in 2014 to double NATO's rapid reaction force, create an even faster Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, and increase defense budgets to 2 percent of GDP by 2024.¹ After a three-year absence, the United States has returned its battle tanks to the continent—and this time to Poland,² close to Russia, rather than to the safe confines of Germany.³

However, even allied officials admit that the task of deterring Moscow is a work in progress. And in some regards, all of the remaining steps will be more difficult than the ones before. Some are highly political. There are disagreements in NATO about permanently basing troops on its Eastern flank. At the moment, troops are rotated. NATO countries are still not united in their assessments of the nature of the Russia threat and indeed whether Russia would invade any of the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the frontline countries on the Eastern flank. NATO too has to agree about how far it can go in finding ways to deal with cyber and hybrid warfare that straddle military and civilian responsibilities.

Then there are the logistical challenges facing the alliance. Moving troops, tanks, and equipment across Europe is not as easy as it was during the Cold War era. Then, NATO had a seamless geographic reach to the Eastern territory of the former West Germany. It could crisscross Western Europe's borders free of controls and bureaucratic obstacles. Those arrangements were discarded after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. Now NATO has to revive them. As if these challenges were not enough, alliance members have to find a way for the reinforcements on their Eastern flank to overcome Russia's air and missile forces.

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Though there are differing views among NATO members about how to beef up the Eastern flank, the political consensus—that the flank has to be defended—has held. But that political consensus could fray as the memory of Russia's war on Ukraine fades or indeed if Russia withdraws its support completely from Donbas, which at the moment is highly unlikely.

To finish the task along its Eastern flank, NATO needs to agree to a Russia strategy based on unity, deterrence, and resilience. That means figuring out how to maintain the consensus over Russia and dealing with the range of challenges presented by Russia on the Eastern flank.

Shaky Agreement on Bolstering Defenses

At NATO's 2014 Wales summit—the first after Russia's aggression—there was a consensus that the Eastern flank had to be defended. But the agreement on the extent of that defense was fragile. Member states could only approve a modest increase in presence in the East, in the shape of small forward-based planning teams. It took NATO allies time to implement those defensive measures because of the logistical, military, and political preparations required. They needed to get reacquainted with the idea of defending their own territory.

It took another two years and another summit—in Warsaw in 2016—to adopt new and more robust measures. There, NATO leaders agreed to establish an enhanced forward presence (EFP) in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. It was supposed to “unambiguously demonstrate, as part of our overall posture, allies' solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression,” according to the communiqué.⁴

In practice, the EFP consists of multinational forces, led by framework nations on a voluntary and sustainable basis. This overall strategy for the Eastern flank is centered on deterrence, defense, and a “meaningful dialogue and engagement with Russia.” The latter, the communiqué stated, “will not come at the expense of ensuring NATO's credible deterrence and defence.”

By the summer of 2017, NATO had a total of 4,530 troops on the border with Russia grouped under four battlegroups. They were led by Germany (operating in Lithuania), the United States (Poland), the United Kingdom (Estonia), and Canada (Latvia).⁵ None is based permanently in these countries. Instead, they are rotated. The details prescribed by the current EFP arrangements and an old agreement NATO made with Russia in 1997 when the geostrategic environment was far less hostile means that troops have to be constantly on the move. Because they cannot (yet) be based permanently in these countries, the costs of moving personnel and equipment back and forth are high. Such an approach is expensive, and it prevents an esprit de corps from developing. It slows down interoperability that ensures troops from different countries with very different weapons and training systems can work together.

There were mixed views in NATO about the agreed-upon level of deterrence, to say nothing of permanent deployment. One view regards the EFP as an essentially symbolic measure—too small to deter Russia, but at least the allies had put something in place to show their solidarity and commitment to their Eastern flank.⁶ Proponents of this view point out that Russian forces could reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga, the capitals of Estonia and Latvia respectively, in sixty hours.⁷ In that case, NATO would have to invoke its mutual defense clause, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, obliging it to militarily assist its allies who were under attack. That would mean going to war with Russia.⁸

The EFP's critics argue that instead, NATO should have adopted the so-called deterrence-by-denial approach. That would mean a serious upgrade of the EFP, involving seven brigades, three of them heavily armored, that would be supported by airpower and other defenses.

But that view misreads the purpose of the EFP, at least from the viewpoint of EFP supporters. NATO assumes—although that assumption is conditioned by the geographical location of the member state that might fear it will be attacked—that a deliberate, all-out Russian offensive is improbable. The EFP is designed for the more likely cases when a relatively smaller skirmish, possibly unintended, but also possibly provocative to test NATO's reaction, might threaten to spill into a larger war. NATO's forward presence is meant to discourage Russia from escalating in such cases, and to give Moscow reasons to seek a nonmilitary solution.

The EFP discourages escalation by signaling that should the Russian side intrude, it would run into—and would have to run over—forces from most if not all allied countries. Such an encounter would make it very likely that NATO would respond immediately, and respond as a whole including—crucially—the nuclear powers, the United Kingdom and the United States, who lead two of the four battlegroups.⁹ Well-armed and strategically placed multinational troops send that kind of message, while their overall number—less than 5,000—is too low for any offensive operation. This is important for preventing Russian overreaction.

Given all the pros and cons about the EFP, the arrangements fall short of treating allies equally. A permanent presence would show Russia and NATO's Eastern neighbors that the alliance is serious about the defense and security of all its members.

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The Threat Perception Factor

Allies' fragile consensus on Russia stretches beyond the EFP. Member states do not see eye-to-eye on a number of issues. There remains a disagreement about Russia's intentions and its appetite for risk. Countries differ on how

much defense is enough, and whether too much may risk spooking Russia into aggression.

Some big member states, such as Germany, France, and Italy, are not convinced that Russia would attack Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania. They argue that NATO's Article 5 would discourage Moscow from ever doing so.

The United States, the United Kingdom, and the Central European states counter that defense guarantees without the necessary forces, plans, and presence deter no one. This group has succeeded in pushing through the upgrades in the defense of the Eastern flank. But Eastern flank countries see the need for additional measures, both in terms of military presence and in the cyber domain.

Germany, France, and other like-minded countries, however, won the argument that new troops should not be stationed on the Eastern flank permanently, and that forces there should be limited in size and capability. The idea behind the limit was to signal an opening to a potential better future relationship with Russia, and to allay Moscow's fears that NATO's

deployments might be offensive. Neither have happened. Russia does not trust NATO's intentions.

Germany in particular has wanted to stick to the original spirit of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. This political agreement says that NATO will carry out its collective defense and other missions "by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of

substantial combat forces" in former Warsaw Pact countries.¹⁰ In a nutshell, NATO was not to deploy troops on a permanent basis in those countries.

The act allows for some dialogue in the NATO-Russia Council, or NRC, which consists of all the alliance ambassadors and the Russian representative to NATO. But that dialogue has rarely made progress. NATO didn't trust Russia, so items on the agenda were superficial. And Russia believed the NRC was a mere talking shop, devoid of content. But since it was the only forum in NATO, both sides persisted with it until the Ukraine crisis. The NRC was suspended in early 2014 because of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its intervention in eastern Ukraine. It was revived in April 2016 and has met several times since but with very little to show.¹¹ Several NATO countries, notably Germany, want to retain the council anyway.

Others have argued that the provisions of the Founding Act—namely the one proscribing a permanent NATO military presence in the East—hobble the alliance. They also point to how the geostrategic conditions in which the Founding Act was signed have changed radically. The Founding Act, for example, obliges Russia to "exercise similar restraint in its conventional force deployments in Europe."

Yet it seems that no matter what defensive measures NATO takes on its Eastern flank, Russia reacts in its own way, launching persistent disinformation

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campaigns in which NATO is accused of undermining Russia's security and holding military exercises on the borders of the Eastern flank. Russia's persistent opposition to the EFP is aimed at sowing divisions in NATO between the member states, such as Germany, where some government officials have argued that the EFP is provocative and the frontline states that argue that Russia's reactions show why NATO should have permanent forces deployed in the East. For the latter, it's not only a question of unity and consensus in the alliance. It's about showing Russia that NATO is here to stay on the Eastern flank regardless of how the conflict in Ukraine is resolved or what happens in a Russia after Vladimir Putin.

At the same time, the provisions of the Founding Act were based on the "current and foreseeable security environment." The security environment has greatly changed since 1997. So maybe it is time for NATO to update the Founding Act to take account of the changing circumstances instead of believing it is still an appropriate instrument to deal with Russia. The status quo of 1997 has been eclipsed.

Southern Flank Versus Eastern Flank

Another area of disagreement pits those who prioritize the defense against Russia against those NATO countries that worry more about the threat of terrorism.

No one in NATO disputes that the alliance has to tackle both threats at the same time. But when it comes to allocating money and resources to operations or commands, the needs of the South and the East often compete. The United Kingdom and the United States see the threats coming from both the East and the South. The Southern countries—Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece—by virtue of their geographical location, would like the alliance to play a more active role in North Africa and the Middle East, where terrorism, migration, and instability make NATO's Southern flank vulnerable. They see these issues, not Russia or Ukraine, as the main threats facing them. Many of the Southern countries feel that NATO has already done all it needs to do to strengthen the defense of the Eastern flank, and it now needs to focus exclusively on the South. This is something from which NATO has shied away.

In this respect, the alliance is too divided over what role to play on its Southern flank. It is not only because of the different historical and political interests in the region among the big member states, such as Turkey, France, or Britain. NATO does not want to become bogged down in any conflict in the South. Even if the United States did call for a NATO military engagement in the region, it is highly unlikely that the allies would agree. They saw what happened with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the NATO military operation in Libya in 2011. Both caused major rifts in NATO.

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Yet instead of past experiences having the effect of provoking an open discussion about NATO's role in the region, particularly with regard to Iran, the allies have suppressed it. There is still an assumption in NATO that if the United States or another major alliance member were to put a sensitive issue such as Iran or North Korea on the agenda, it would automatically lead to a knee-jerk reaction—that NATO would be asked to prepare for some military role.

This reluctance to have an open political discussion applies to Russia as well. NATO is not devising any long-term strategy toward the country because of the different perceptions of Russia in the alliance.

Dealing With Russia

On the day-to-day level, NATO has four policies with regard to Russia.

The first is transparency about exercises; giving numbers, locations, participation. NATO has consistently explained to Russia what the enhanced force presence in particular entails.

The second one is maintaining some level of necessary communication with Moscow. NATO, for example, has repeatedly warned Russia about accidents when Russian fighter jets enter the Baltics' airspace. There have been several near misses, one including a civilian aircraft. Defense ministers and senior military officials from individual NATO countries also try to keep a weekly dialogue with their Russian counterparts.

The third is NATO's willingness to counter Russian propaganda in all its forms by spelling out the facts. NATO however still falls short in communicating its policies to a public beyond security, defense, and military wonks, even though doing so is necessary for explaining why NATO has to send troops to its Eastern flank. It's even more necessary to explain to a broader public how Russia's cyber attacks could disrupt member states' crucial infrastructure, such as energy grids and transportation networks. Even more important, NATO needs to explain to a wider public that Russia's aim is to break the transatlantic bonds between Europe and the United States and undermine Europe's democratic institutions by supporting populist, anti-European Union and anti-NATO movements.

The fourth policy is ensuring that the consensus in support of the EFP is maintained if not increased. There's no possibility that NATO would ever be able to match Russia's conventional forces that are based in the exclave of Kaliningrad, sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland, or that can be quickly deployed to NATO's borders. That is not NATO's intention on its Eastern flank. Its intention is to ram home the point to its more vulnerable members and to Russia that the EFP is about upholding Article 5. The EFP numbers are not huge. But the arrival of the American M1A2 Abrams tanks to Poland in January 2017 cannot be underestimated.¹² The United States is

now present in Central Europe. Russia has strengthened NATO's resolve. The deployment of American troops and tanks might be enough to convince temporarily those countries that wanted a permanent and larger presence to accept that the current arrangements might provide a sufficient deterrence.

The four policies are sensible and should stay. They show to the Eastern flank members that NATO is taking their security seriously. The question is, what are the right vehicles for executing them? More specifically, should the NATO-Russia Founding Act stay and if so, how it should be used?

Even though NATO has stuck to the letter of the Founding Act, Russia has claimed that the EFP is escalatory, that it violates the terms of the act, and that Russia will retaliate. No matter how much NATO stresses that its presence on its Eastern flank is for the defense of its own allies, Russia regards such measures as provocative, offensive, and threatening its own security. Russia responded by militarizing Kaliningrad.¹³ And its Zapad-17 exercises in Belarus in September 2017 were by sheer force of numbers designed to intimidate NATO's Eastern flank.¹⁴ These actions raise questions about Russia's intentions. For the Eastern flank countries, these efforts offer evidence that they need the EFP and its defensive posture.

But there is little doubt that these countries would much prefer bigger, if not permanent deployments in their countries. Such deployments would ensure a U.S./NATO presence even if a political solution were reached over eastern Ukraine. For these countries, Russia is their permanent threat.

Given the limited returns on NATO's investment into the Founding Act, it would seem logical to abandon it, perhaps along with the NATO-Russia Council. That would require consensus in the alliance. Germany and other countries with a historically softer approach to Russia need, if only for domestic political purposes, to demonstrate that the alliance continues to try to engage Moscow constructively. If the NRC were scrapped, their support for further—possibly even existing—defensive measures in the East would ebb. The alliance has to choose: soldier on with an increasingly anachronistic agreement in the hope that one day, NATO and Russia can find a constructive way to reengage; go back to the drawing board to devise a strategy for Russia; or work on an ad hoc basis with Russia without any formal forum or structure. One thing is certain. Neither the NRC nor the Founding Act can continue as if nothing has changed since the late 1990s.

Since there is no discussion about the future of the NRC because no member state is willing to put it on the agenda and for now no member state has an alternative, then the council should be used in a more coherent way to explain the defensive nature of NATO's measures. Even if Moscow will always choose to portray NATO's actions as unwarranted and destabilizing, the serious military thinkers in Russia should be given some insight into what NATO's Eastern presence is meant to do and how. This is because any military force

is potentially both offensive and defensive. Russia, understandably, wants to know just how much risk any new weapons and personnel near its borders pose to its security. If Moscow misreads the composition and purpose of enhanced NATO presence, it is more likely to overreact.

The discussions about the size and shape of Eastern defenses are far from over, and NATO's new Russia posture remains incomplete in other ways as well. Most importantly, troops deployed in the East need faster access to reinforcements and the alliance as a whole needs to beef up its cyber defenses. This is far easier said than done.

The Agility Factor

Multilateral institutions are not known for their nimbleness. NATO follows that rule—except when it functioned during the Cold War. At that time, NATO had a highly sophisticated and seamless infrastructure for moving troops, tanks, and heavy equipment across Western Europe. Bridges were kept in good repair. The railways played a major role in moving NATO and U.S. troops back and forth, as did airlines and the facilities at airports. The motorways and country roads were well maintained. Today, in some parts of (western) Germany, you can still see the speed limit signs for tanks. Those measures assured that in times of crises, fresh troops could be brought to the front lines reasonably quickly.

But much of that preparedness eroded rapidly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The European Union's Schengen system, whereby people and goods can cross borders without checks and controls, does not apply to military equipment. Often physical impediments intrude. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg described the obstacles in NATO's way: "It was a lot of red tape, a lot of bureaucracy which we had to overcome to be able to move forces quickly across Europe," he said. "What remains to be done, which is the next step, is to address actually whether we have all the infrastructure in place. Because one thing is to have as I say the legal right to move tanks or heavy equipment on the plane but the other issue is whether that plane can land on a specific airfield and whether there are roads or railways connected to that airfield which makes it possible to then move that tank further."¹⁵

Neither NATO's rapid reaction force nor its Very High Readiness Joint Task Force considered these major deficiencies. The EFP brought those deficiencies into stark relief. It is about moving sizeable numbers of troops and equipment across Europe, and quickly. And in the case of a conflict, speed, communications, and logistics will become imperative. NATO needs its own Military Schengen.

During the Cold War, NATO also had a dedicated command—the Atlantic command—whose main task was to plan, exercise, and if necessary execute, on

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short notice, the mass movement of reinforcements from the United States and Canada to Europe. However, the Atlantic command was abolished in 2003, and NATO has not exercised a naval operation of this sort in decades. What this means is that there is a major gap in NATO's Eastern flank that leaves it unable to withstand intimidation or any attack from Russia.

Even if forces were moved across the Atlantic and from Western Europe to the East, they would face one more challenge—that of overcoming Russia's forward defenses. That's basically a network of missile sites, fighter aircraft bases, and naval ports that allow Moscow to engage NATO reinforcements before they reach the forward-deployed units. Overcoming the defenses is within NATO's means. But doing so would require skills that have not been exercised en masse in a long time and dedicated weapons that may not be available in sufficient quantities.

A NATO general, who spoke on condition of anonymity in late 2016, pulled no punches when he described the challenge before the alliance: "What we have lost is institutional memory," he explained. "Now look where we are."¹⁶

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The Cyber/Deterrence Factor

In addition to rediscovering some of its old skills, the alliance faces the challenge of adapting to new threats. Foremost among them: Russia's information warfare—a strategy that current President Vladimir Putin announced after becoming prime minister in 1999. Then, Putin drew up a national security policy in which information warfare was a major plank. It was first tested in Estonia in 2007, when Russia attacked the country's vital computer networks. Since then, Estonia has been at the forefront in trying to link conventional defense with cyber and hybrid warfare in NATO.

And because Russia had tried to influence the outcome of the Dutch, the U.S., and the French elections, governments and independent civil society organizations are motivated to counter the barrage of fake news and propaganda spread by Russia. "Actually, there's a solid consensus among NATO countries about the insidiousness and danger of Russia's disinformation campaigns and its cyber attacks," a NATO official said. "But it's not just up to NATO to work against this. The nations must stand up for their values and defend themselves against fake news and all the ramifications of these Russia attacks," the official added.¹⁷ As other NATO officials argued, the alliance has neither the means nor the mandate to counter fake news. What it can do is refute, which it does, the fake stories that it knows are sent by Russian bots and that directly target NATO. For example, emails were sent to the Lithuanian government and media outlets falsely accusing German soldiers based in Lithuania of rape.¹⁸

In addition to measures targeting public opinion, NATO faces increasingly more effective cyber attacks on military and civilian infrastructure. It has addressed the first challenge reasonably well by beefing up protection of its own networks. This step mirrors measures taken by individual allies. The German defense ministry, for example, created in April 2017 a new Cyber and Information Space Command that will eventually be staffed by 13,500 soldiers and civilians.¹⁹

More remains to be done. Individual member states' efforts are improving. But there is little coordination among them. Also, NATO is still grappling with the issue of whether cyber security is a civilian responsibility or a military one. Furthermore, allies have yet to agree on whether to entrust NATO with offensive cyber operations in order to dissuade adversaries from attacking NATO headquarters and member states.

The alliance has long recognized that it needs to be resilient on the home front if it is to prevail in a conflict, but it has yet to apply that philosophy to cyber vulnerabilities.

And NATO has yet to seriously wrestle with the question of threats to critical civilian infrastructure. This is about putting in place resilience measures, something NATO did well during the Cold War. Now, the vulnerability of power grids, transportation links, or banks could be used against the allies in case of conflict with Russia—

or any sophisticated cyber war opponent. The risk is that the adversary may seek to dissuade NATO countries from coming to the defense of an ally by threatening devastating strikes on civilian infrastructure. The capitals could be in effect forced to choose between upholding alliance obligations or risking financial chaos or worse at home.

The alliance has long recognized that it needs to be resilient on the home front if it is to prevail in a conflict, but it has yet to apply that philosophy to cyber vulnerabilities, for instance by drafting strict standards of cyber protection for banks. The latter is a good example of the arguments taking place inside NATO about its role in protecting civilian assets and indeed about whether the alliance is up to a task that is becoming ever more complex.

Inside NATO: Germany

Many good minds at NATO and in allied capitals are devising ways to finish the work of bolstering the Eastern flank. Their main challenge, in many senses, will be to find support among all twenty-nine countries for whatever solutions they propose.

Similar such divisions in the past were usually overcome when the major allies worked out a plan among themselves. This is proving tricky, not least because of Germany's domestic landscape.

Under Chancellor Angela Merkel, Berlin has been immensely important for keeping the European Union together when it comes to renewing sanctions on Russia every six months. And Germany's role in NATO and its role in the EFP

cannot be underestimated. Since the end of the Cold War, Germany has pushed NATO to develop formal cooperation with Russia. When Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined the alliance in 1999, Berlin wanted to reassure Moscow that NATO enlargement was not about undermining Russia's security or posing as any kind of threat. Russia accepted that view, although with serious reservations. When NATO expanded further in 2004 following the entry of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia, tensions between NATO and Russia increased. It was not just because of NATO's expansion to Russia's borders. The United States under former president George W. Bush considered deploying the ballistic missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic to protect its allies against any threat from Iran. Russia argued that shield was directed against Russia. Germany vehemently opposed the deployment of components of the missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic because it claimed it was a provocative move against Russia. This opposition in NATO confirmed Germany's ambivalence on issues related to Moscow. It did not want to antagonize Russia.

During her third term as chancellor that began in 2013, Merkel changed Germany's position in NATO. She took a strong line against Moscow. She agreed that Germany would (eventually) contribute 2 percent of its GDP to defense spending, the agreed target for NATO states. And she supported Germany contributing to the EFP. This cannot be underestimated. To have German troops based in Lithuania amounted to a huge political and emotional leap by Berlin, and also Vilnius, given the Nazi atrocities there during World War II.

As for what the alliance means for Germany, NATO is its security guarantor. Russia's consistent goal has been to split the alliance, often by tapping into Germany's post-World War II pacifist culture and pro-Russian elements in the left-wing parties. Despite that, Germany's commitment to NATO remains part of its defense, security, and political outlook.

Even so, Germany's role in the EFP surprised some of its critics. They thought Germany would block NATO deployments to the Eastern flank.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition of conservatives and Social Democrats had qualms about deploying troops along Russia's borders. The older generation of Social Democrats in particular clung to its decades-old policy of Ostpolitik in which Berlin would do everything possible to reach out to Russia in the belief that it would bring it closer to the West and enhance the security of Europe. The Social Democrats were also still wedded to the idea of Cold War détente even though Russia had torn up the rule book that was based on the inviolability of borders.

Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea in 2014 followed by its subsequent invasion of parts of eastern Ukraine put paid to that strategy of Ostpolitik, at least for Merkel. And Germany's defense minister, Ursula von der Leyen, who belongs to the governing Christian Democratic

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Union party, repeatedly spoke out against Russian aggression and how it had undermined Europe's security architecture.

But differences have never been far from the surface. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a Social Democrat who was foreign minister from 2013 to early 2017 (and who is now president), said NATO's policies and exercises were saber rattling. His successor as foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel, has also opposed Germany spending 2 percent of its GDP on defense. In addition, Gabriel criticized Merkel and the CDU for submitting to the U.S. president, Donald Trump. "To double the German military budget after the Bundestag election is nothing but a sign to Trump that they will give in to their pressure," Gabriel said in an interview with Germany's Redaktionsnetzwerk newspapers. "For me, this is a submission to the U.S. president, as I would not have thought possible until recently."²⁰

Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea in 2014 followed by its subsequent invasion of parts of eastern Ukraine put paid to that strategy of Ostpolitik.

Gabriel made these comments during the German election campaign. There is little doubt that he was knocking on an open door. The Trump administration is highly unpopular in Germany. Furthermore, pacifism combined with an anti-Americanism particularly among the left wing has been easy to tap into. According to a poll the Pew Research Center published in June 2017, the most negative views of the United States among European countries are found in Germany (62 percent unfavorable).²¹

For now, von der Leyen has successfully lobbied for and defended the government's decision to lead the battle group in Lithuania, where Germany has over 450 soldiers. Merkel, who has been chancellor since 2005 and was reelected for a fourth term on September 24, has effectively changed Germany's decades-long policy of rapprochement with Russia by consistently defending the right of Ukraine, as well as other NATO countries located between Russia and the European Union, to choose its own alliances and direction.

Yet for all that, Germany is unwilling to review the NATO-Russia Founding Act. No other options have so far been put on the table despite the fact that the geostrategic environment in which the Founding Act was agreed upon has fundamentally changed. Thus, the Founding Act limits what NATO can do on its Eastern flank.

Trump, Putin, and the Transatlantic Relationship

It was the former U.S. president, Barack Obama, who pushed hard for a more robust NATO presence in Eastern Europe. He went much further than his predecessor George W. Bush, who often saw Russia as a threat to the security of these countries. He had no reservations about NATO's role and America's commitment to its European allies. Donald Trump sees things differently. On

defense and security issues, there are troubling divisions in the Trump administration that make NATO's European and Canadian allies nervous.

During the U.S. presidential campaign, Donald Trump said NATO was obsolete and that it was time the European allies paid their dues for America's security guarantee. Trump's opinion about NATO rattled the Europeans as did his uncritical view of Putin, not to mention the Kremlin's role in the U.S. presidential campaign in which it allegedly hacked into the Democratic National Committee's computers, among other efforts.²² For some Europeans, Trump was doing Putin a big favor by denigrating NATO.

In addition, Trump's protectionist trade policies and his criticism of Germany's big trade surplus rattled Germany. Chancellor Angela Merkel, who rarely criticizes leaders in public, suggested Europe should go its own way. Whether for electoral reasons or not, Merkel spoke her mind in a beer tent in Munich in late May 2017 after a G7 summit during which she had had several discussions with Trump. "The era in which we could fully rely on others is over to some extent. That's what I experienced over the past several days," she said. "We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands."²³

Still, it is clear that the majority of European Union states are not prepared to pool their sovereignty when it comes to defense matters. Defense is still the remit of the member states. In addition, the majority of member states are more committed to soft power, not hard power. This could change in the coming years. In a major speech in Paris on September 26, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed that the European Union establish an intervention force by 2020 without going into detail except to say that Europe also needed its own common defense budget, a joint civil protection force, and a joint doctrine for action.²⁴

His speech reflected an emerging consensus that the Europeans need to have a serious defense and security policy of their own. It may not be in competition with NATO, or mean that NATO will become redundant. The declared need simply reflects changing perceptions of the transatlantic relationship.

In the meantime, Trump has left his mark on the European Union's Eastern and Central European members, who put their trust and faith in NATO. Many there were taken aback by Trump's comments about the alliance. They were even more worried when initially he didn't openly endorse Article 5 or even mention it during the NATO summit in Brussels in May 2017,²⁵ though he did so on a subsequent visit to Poland ahead of the July G20 summit in Hamburg.²⁶

Despite this bluster, America's commitment to defending NATO's Eastern flank seems unequivocal. In the absence of clear presidential guidance, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis has been at the forefront in reassuring the Europeans.²⁷ Mattis's visit to Ukraine in August 2017, in which he said the United States remains firmly committed to the goal of restoring Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, also reassured NATO's Eastern flank.²⁸

Some nervousness remains, though. Many Central Europeans point out that at times of crises, the president—not the secretary of defense—will have the last word on whether to send U.S. troops to fight in Europe. So far, the United States is committed to Europe and Article 5. But the idea that American troops would have to fight in Europe is at present unfathomable. Such fighting would assume that Russia had attacked a member of the Eastern flank.

It's All About Russia

In practice, dealing with the Eastern flank is about NATO realizing that Russia's attitude toward the alliance is not going to soften; that Russia will continue to use cyber and hybrid warfare to intimidate the countries of Central Europe in a bid to weaken the resolve of NATO; and that Russia, at least in the foreseeable future, will not withdraw its military and political support for eastern Ukraine. These are the parameters in which NATO has to operate in its relations with Russia under President Vladimir Putin.²⁹ And since these are the parameters, the need for NATO to maintain unity and increase its deterrence on the Eastern flank are imperatives.

If NATO is to complete the task of bolstering the Eastern flank, more progress needs to be made in reconciling the different schools of thought among the member states—most importantly Germany and the United States.

The concerns of the Southern allies will need to be addressed as well, though there are a few good solutions there. Most capitals concerned prefer that national or European Union action tackle the threat of terrorism and the

Geography and history dictate that different countries view Moscow differently.

uncontrolled flow of migrants and asylum seekers. They are understandably uneasy about NATO devoting most of its resources to a threat in the East that their populations consider secondary, but are simultaneously unwilling to allow NATO a bigger role in the South. That leaves NATO with few good opportunities to demonstrate that

it takes their threats seriously. The best the alliance can do is remain ready for a more substantive engagement, and make demonstrable plans for it, in case the opposition to NATO playing any significant role in the South goes away.

Then there are those disagreements that revolve around the question of how much threat Russia poses. Geography and history dictate that different countries view Moscow differently. However, a better political framework for Russia, one that reassures all in NATO that the alliance has done its utmost to reduce tensions, would help solidify the consensus around further defensive measures on the Eastern flank. That discussion can only take place when NATO is united, when its deterrence measures on its Eastern flank are credible—if not permanent at some stage—and when NATO increases its resilience. In short, these measures are about NATO committing itself to the long term on its Eastern flank and recognizing that a cooperative relationship with Russia is not on the horizon.

Corrections: A clarifying sentence has been added to summarize NATO's relationship to former Warsaw Pact countries from the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. The NATO-Russia Council was revived in April 2016, not July 2017. And Italy has been struck as an example of resisting the enhanced forward presence as a provocation.

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