

## **Do NATO states continue to have enough willpower and strategies to help Ukraine to stop Russia and what are the prospects of Ukraine's NATO membership?**

by Volodymyr Tsybka

NATO's trajectory since its inception can be seen as a result of constant attempts to balance inner tensions with the changing demands of the security environment. The shape of this trajectory and the underlying pattern of organizational continuity and change look very different through different conceptual and ideological lenses (compare, for example, Anderson, 2023; Apps, 2024; Sayle, 2019), which prompts heated debates about the identity and mission of the Alliance. Russian aggression against Ukraine has reignited these debates, since NATO reached a point when it must align its identity with the new era of security challenges and work out strategies to address them (Moore and Coletta, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2018).

The task is hardly new – the global security landscape has never been static and the Alliance went through several identity crises during its history. Yet, the magnitude of the challenge seems unprecedented. The reemergence of the Russian threat goes along with the increasingly aggressive behavior of China, and the renewed global contest between democracies and autocracies finds the balance of power tilted away from the West (Sanger, 2024; Sciutto, 2024). The digital and interconnected world leaves open societies more vulnerable to numerous hybrid threats, potent enough to shatter their very foundations (Stengel, 2019). The West also gave its enemies a long head start, dismissing their aggressive stance as pursuing domestic goals or projecting “soft power” (Walker and Ludwig, 2017) and letting them build a vast network of influence across the globe (Applebaum, 2024). Excessive optimism, growing risk aversion and denial of history removed war from the societal frame of reference in the western world, which led to the inevitable decline in strategic thinking and left mainstream elites largely unequipped for the looming confrontation (Osinga, 2021).

Though the challenges are great, they are not insurmountable. Moreover, today it is hard to think of any other force but NATO that can turn the tide in democracy's favour. The Alliance provides a unique framework that allows members to effectively pool resources for collective defence. But it is even more uniquely positioned to provide vision and strategies that will guide democracies through the current round of confrontation with enemies. Called to serve the most fundamental human need, the need for security, the Alliance has never been allowed to experience institutional amnesia and has never been completely subjected to political whims and turned into a classical tool of state power (Rynning, 2024). Yet, it is the binding spirit of freedom that has always been the ultimate source of the Alliance's leadership potential. Captured in the words of Roman politician and philosopher Marcus Porcius Cato '*Animus in consulendo liber*' that became NATO's motto, this spirit was the foundation for the staying power of the Roman Empire and has been successfully carrying the Alliance for over 75 years, allowing it to reinvent, but never lose itself.

In the face of the renewed threat from Russia, Alliance tapped into the long institutional memory shaped by nuclear alerts of the Cold War and the dual-track policy of deterrence and détente (see NATO, 1967; Brands, 2023; Apps, 2024). This approach is strongly echoed in NATO's current strategies on Ukraine, and rightly so, in the situation when nuclear weapons are back on the radar and the title “Nuclear war: a scenario” is on the top of the lists of international bestsellers and most gifted books (Jacobsen, 2024).

Yet, in the current security milieu the risks presented by the unending low-intensity war in Europe involving a major nuclear power grow exponentially and require bolder, proactive strategies. And NATO *is* getting bolder – in actions and rhetoric, clearly identifying Russia (and China) as major long-term threats (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2024b), reversing the trend of declining defence budgets (NATO, 2014), enhancing deterrence and defence posture and increasing assistance to Ukraine (NATO, 2022; NATO, 2023; NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b).

Yet, its stance in the war in Ukraine is still too cautionary defensive, as evident in low-key response to criticism for provoking the conflict, endless attempts to avoid escalation, agreeing with a prospect of a long war and delaying Ukraine membership invite. On each of these issues the Alliance should go on the offensive. This reversal starts with acknowledging pitfalls and faulty premises of the above strategic choices and how to change.

### **Defensive denial of NATO's responsibility for the war**

The earliest warnings against NATO's eastward enlargement were famously sounded by George Keenan at the time of the formation of the Alliance and reiterated by him half a century later when the first wave of expansion took place (Friedman, 1998; Moore and Coletta, 2017). The criticism grew more intense after Russia's annexation of Crimea (e.g., Mearsheimer, 2018) and after the start of the full-scale war was voiced with new force (Anderson, 2023).

At times the arguments are advanced with academic rigour, yet in most cases they are politically motivated expressions of anti-Americanism or anti-liberalism, intended to put the Alliance on the defensive, make it lose resolve and seek compromise with Russia. Answering the critics, Alliance should not focus on removing itself from the picture, but emphasize the need for its active engagement and deal sharp blows to the image of Russia.

Proponents of the thesis that the war in Ukraine is the major failure of NATO's policy toward Russia often appeal to realpolitik arguments and advocate neutral status of Ukraine as a necessary buffer between NATO and Russia. Yet, the logic of political realism, especially its more offensive version (Mearsheimer, 2001), can easily lead to a very different interpretation of the situation: NATO's strategic failure was not allowing Russia to collapse towards disintegration, not keeping soviet nuclear arsenal fragmented, not establishing effective control over most of the former soviet zone of influence, and not stalling the rise of Russia that inevitably led to the clash between the two powers. The war started not because Ukraine wanted to join NATO, but because it had *not* become a NATO member. The fact that Russia seems totally unconcerned by Sweden and Finland joining the Alliance shatters the foundational premise of the critical argument – that Russia naturally perceives NATO as a major threat to its national security. This reaction should be offered as a strong support of the dovish view of NATO (and democracy in general) as a guarantor of peace and stability.

Criticism of NATO's policy toward Russia gets more forceful following Innenpolitik approach of interpreting foreign policy as determined by country's domestic pressures (as opposed to Außenpolitik view of relations among states as resulting from pressures of international system) (Anderson, 2023, pp. 31–57). From this perspective, NATO's enlargement is explained as American democratic messianism, promotion of economic interests, and tightening control over the European continent. The war in Ukraine is seen as a clash between two imperial projects with Russia merely reacting to the American economic and political encroachment on its historical sphere of influence. While this interpretation grossly oversimplifies the dynamics of relations in the US-Europe-NATO

triangle, and while the Innenpolitik approach can produce far more convincing arguments that Russian internal dynamics that led to the conflict had little to do with the US (McFaul *et al.*, 2014), the response should focus on morally inadmissible attempt to equate Russian and Western expansionist projects.

NATO criticism grows most emotional and least sophisticated when Russia is cast as a victim of Western hybris that broke promise not to expand Alliance beyond the unified Germany and pushed Russia away every time it expressed desire to join the organization (Anderson, 2022). Again, these arguments can be easily turned against Russia, who cheated on the West receiving economic help for empty promises to democratize, and whose long history of abuse pushed neighbours to seek security guarantees of NATO, leaving Russia no chance of getting veto power in the organization.

In every case NATO's reply to such criticism should be rhetorically forceful, unafraid to expose its roots and provoke moral outrage. Reaffirming democratic values in the face of mounting threats – and broad appeal – of authoritarianism was part of NATO's original mission on the war-torn European continent (Rynning, 2024). The ongoing debate on the causes of the Ukrainian conflict should be a reminder of the long-term urgency of this task.

### **Avoidance of confrontation and escalation with Russia**

Paragraph 18 of the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration reads very much like a leitmotiv of NATO's Cold War strategy: *"NATO does not seek confrontation, and poses no threat to Russia. We remain willing to maintain channels of communication with Moscow to mitigate risk and prevent escalation"* (NATO, 2024b). Today, as well as back then, this stance may not only help reduce fear and risk of nuclear war, but also allow the West to focus on raising the economic price tag of Russia's aggressive behaviour. Yet, with the war raging right at the door of NATO, the downsides of this strategy become more pronounced.

The Alliance avoids action that can strongly tilt the balance of war in Ukraine's favour: it does not help close the sky over Ukraine, help it dominate in the air or allow strikes on Russia with Western weapons. Air dominance has long been viewed as critical for military success across all domains, and setting limits on the use of conventional weapons in conflict of this scale may have no historical precedent (Petraeus and Roberts, 2023). In the latter case an apt analogy from the world of sport is a match where one team is discouraged from crossing a half-way line – with no time limit set for the game and the rival having a longer bench and unlimited choice of tactics.

NATO's vision of the end of the war which "Ukraine should not lose and Russia should not win" makes western political elites look inherently weak and lacking initiative. This emboldens Russia, demoralizes Ukraine, plays in the hands of Western critics who say that the talk about democratic values is cheap, and boosts popularity of illiberal politicians who slam governments for the lack of clear victory plans and lure publics with dangerously simple solutions. The vision of the prospects of the war between a smaller state and a nuclear power readily transforms into "Ukraine cannot win and Russian cannot lose," which makes any quick peace deal, however humiliating to Ukraine, seem a welcome coup de grâce.

Will this stance help NATO avoid Russia's retaliation? Throughout the conflict, Alliance members have been stepping up all forms of help to Ukraine – and nothing happened. Will Russia respond in case its territory is badly hit with Western weapons? Not necessarily: after the annexation of

Ukrainian territories, from the perspective of Russian constitutional law, strikes on Rostov or St. Petersburg are no different from strikes on Donetsk or Sevastopol. The truth is, Russia does not need any additional reason to escalate – it already considers itself in war with NATO. And it is imperative that the West fully grasp the implication of this view: Russia can strike anytime, anywhere, with whatever means it considers appropriate. This realization should dramatically motivate Alliance members to boost their readiness for conflict and to find effective ways of dealing with agents of Russian influence like Orban. And be unafraid to dramatically enhance Ukraine's offensive capabilities.

For the makers of strategy, one of the most disturbing things about Russia is its irrationality and unpredictability. Theory holds that rational decisions in international politics result from the deliberative decision-making processes and are based on credible theories about the world (Mearsheimer and Rosato, 2023), both of which Russia notoriously lacks. While Kremlin's decision-making after World War II has followed certain common patterns, it has always borne a strong element of individual irrationality of the leader, associated with many dictatorial regimes (Radchenko, 2024). Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has proved that things had not changed.

NATO's strategic predictability associated with conflict avoidance strategy may have the benefit of pacifying the mind of the Russian leader. Yet, the resulting asymmetry is disadvantageous to the Alliance. The imbalance was once effectively redressed by Emmanuel Macron's words that he does not rule out troops for Ukraine (Economist, 2024). These words left Russian leadership scared and guessing, and introduced a much-needed element of strategic ambiguity into NATO's dealing with the rival. Unfortunately, some European leaders seemed to be equally scared and baffled by the proposal, which was soon dropped. Still, this maneuver became a valuable master class on wartime leadership and should become part of NATO's strategic toolkit.

### **Long-term security assistance to Ukraine**

When it became obvious that Russia was forcing Ukraine into the war of attrition, Western leaders expressed their unwavering commitment to the Ukrainian cause and pledged long-term assistance. This seemed to be an easy decision: NATO has always believed it can outlast Russia in major conflict which is often decided by economic factors (Moore and Coletta, 2017; Rynning, 2024).

This strategy can help Ukraine win by slowly bleeding Russia's resources dry, and thus perfectly combines with the strategy of conflict avoidance and non-escalation. It also wins time for the West to prepare for possible confrontation with Russia, especially by fortifying eastern flank and reforming military industrial complex.

The Alliance has also demonstrated that it can deal with the challenges to this strategy. After US domestic politics delayed aid to Ukraine by six months and the possibility of Trump's return to the White House renewed concerns about the direction of the American foreign policy, NATO took steps to further institutionalize its assistance to Ukraine. At the Washinton summit it announced a Pledge of Long-Term Security Assistance, committing to sustainable levels of funding in the coming years, a new command that will coordinate arms deliveries to Ukraine and the training of Ukrainian soldiers, and appointed a NATO Senior Representative in Ukraine to coordinate interaction with the country's authorities (NATO, 2024a; NATO, 2024b). Many NATO member-states have also committed to long-term assistance to Ukraine by signing bilateral security agreements.

For the strategy to be effective, though, it should correctly gauge the potential of all the sides. Third year into the war, it is becoming obvious that Russia's endurance has often been underestimated, while Ukraine's and NATO's resilience may sometimes be lacking.

Mobilization in Ukraine shows that for the country with a smaller population and higher value of life it is difficult to sustain fighting spirit with no end of war in sight. Russia's enormous combat losses, by contrast, seem to go almost unnoticed back home. Most Russians feel little effect of war, while people in Ukraine experience regular strikes and blackouts that drain their physical and emotional resources.

Multiple corruption scandals, persisting identity split and growing dissatisfaction with leadership undermine morale and national unity of Ukrainians. In the West, the sluggish distant war that is a constant drain on budget loses public support, boosts popularity of advocates of reproachment with Putin's Russia who provoke further divisions in societies and jeopardize support for the Ukrainian cause. At the same time, Russian crackdown on dissidents and effective propaganda has created a widespread continuing support for the leader.

Russia has effectively shifted to wartime "command economy," developed "parallel economy" that allows it to defy Western sanctions, and deepened economic and military ties with major allies in the East and South. Western defence companies often fail to adapt to the changed circumstances and meet the growing demand. The war in the Middle East offered an example how security threats can be coordinated by autocracies to make the West scatter resources and experience political fragmentation at home.

This quick analysis shows that the strategy of long-term assistance often underestimates long-term political, economic, social and security risks facing Ukraine and its allies. Instead of following Putin into the war of attrition, the Alliance should focus on bringing the conflict to an end as quickly as possible – in maximum compliance with international law. Can victory be won on the battlefield? Former Ukraine's commander-in-chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi believes is possible only with a massive technological leap on the scale of the invention of gunpowder (Economist, 2023). Yet, such breakthrough in military technology is unlikely to materialize in the nearest future and is even less likely to be tested in this conflict. There is still one option remaining. And using it is both the easiest and the most difficult strategic decision of all.

### **Delaying Ukraine's membership in the Alliance**

At the two last summits, NATO reaffirmed commitment made in 2008 in Bucharest that "Ukraine will become a member of NATO" and that the invitation will be extended "when Allies agree and conditions are met" (NATO, 2023; NATO, 2024). After Ukraine's lobbying campaign failed to win more concrete pledges, Ukrainian and NATO leaders articulated a shared understanding that the country will not be invited into the Alliance before the end of the war. Given the unprecedented level of support offered to Ukraine by the Alliance, along with a more forceful rhetoric and policies clarifying Ukraine's path into the organization, this formulation is optimistically interpreted as equivalent to the promise of post-war membership. For sceptics, it is just another step in a long series of efforts to frame Ukraine's membership prospects without letting it in.

There are strong doubts that the current NATO partner status enhanced by bilateral agreements will protect Ukraine in the future. Russia cannot reemerge as a European great power without control

over Ukraine, thus only nuclear-backed collective security guarantees can raise the stakes of a new invasion high enough for Russia to abandon its goal.

Yet, even on the most optimistic reading, NATO's position on Ukraine's membership carries not only high hopes, but also enormous risks for the country: If the end of the war brings Ukraine into NATO, the best chance for Russia to halt the accession is to wage the war without end. As in 2008, NATO's balancing act may end up not pacifying, but encouraging Russia's aggression. As long as the war rages on, Russia can hope to force Ukraine into neutrality, or destroy beyond repair, or conquer and use the territory and resources to threaten the Alliance in the future. In this case the quickest and surest way to end the war is to invite Ukraine into the Alliance, albeit with temporary security guarantees for it as a candidate and only for the territory Kyiv controls. To make it happen, the logic of the strategy "Ukraine will join NATO only after the war ends" should be flipped to read "The war will end only after Ukraine joins NATO."

To achieve this reversal of thinking and encourage NATO to grant membership to Ukraine, it is necessary to challenge the deeply rooted idea repeated by many Western and Ukrainian officials and commentators: that the fall of Ukraine will inevitably lead to the war between NATO and Russia. This thesis raises the question: What benefits can Ukraine's membership in the Alliance bring to Ukraine and to the West? Is not a slow-dragging conventional war contained inside the borders of a single country a much-preferred option than a conflict of a continental or nuclear scale? From this perspective, NATO's current strategies toward Russia and Ukraine make perfect sense, and the calls to change course emanate from irresponsible recklessness or egoism.

The possibility of military clash between Russia and NATO cannot be completely ruled out, especially given the unpredictable irrationality of Putin and Trump. Still, it is utterly unlikely. Instead, the war between major powers *is* and *will be* conducted by hybrid means. This does not mean that the West should not invest in military readiness – even the tiniest chance of armed conflict justifies all the expenses. But it means that it is in the best interests of democracies to put a swift and decisive end to military actions and focus on developing long-term resilience to all types of threats that can come from any direction.

War in Ukraine, like other wars of increasingly technocratic post-World War II era, has demonstrated the indispensable role of leadership (Petraeus and Roberts, 2023). In a turbulent global political milieu of the past decades NATO has always acted as true aristocracy of the free world with a strong sense of noblesse oblige. The round table at the NATO meetings has become the strongest modern-day analogy of the legendary fellowship of King Arthur that captured imagination for centuries before the advent of the concept of the end of history. The Alliance has never been short on power or will because it has never been short on inspiration. Keeping it high through the confrontation over the future of Ukraine, Europe, rules-based international order and freedom will help NATO lead and prevail at every turn.

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