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75 Years of NATO: Strong Foundations, Future Challenges

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Introduction

The organization of the North Atlantic Treaty, the NATO-alliance or, in the slightly older term, the NATO-pact, was created by the conclusion of an international agreement in Washington on 4th April 1949. This came after several years of political tensions between the former allies in World War II, a little more than two years after the start of the Cold War, and only about 5 months before the Soviet Union tested its first nuclear bomb. This also gave the new defense alliance of 12 Western countries additional meaning in the context of the confrontation, which began to be reflected not only in Europe but also globally.

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A total of 11 additional rounds of enlargement brought this security organization to its present state – 32 members, of which 30 are in Europe and two on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. However, it is not only the number of countries gathered in this way that has become an important factor in international relations in Europe and the world, but also the fact that

this alliance has been going on for 75 years. Just like the sheer number of members, the substantive orientation of NATO changed, from that of the Cold War focused on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), through the period of searching for a new meaning after the collapse of the USSR, to focusing on wider and global security – and then back again to the basic foundations of the Alliance. Throughout all those 75 years of existence, it is not difficult to see fluctuations in the unity of the members of the NATO alliance - where large members would often try to play some individual games within the framework of the Alliance when security challenges seemed smaller, only to come together again when the situation becomes worse.

Thus, the death of Stalin in March 1953 opened the way for international adventurism during the Suez crisis at the end of 1956 - and finally for the exit of France from the military wing of the NATO alliance in 1966 and 1967. However, both the Cuban crisis in 1962 and the further course of the Cold War showed that all these disagreements had limits, which, among other things, is set by the basic thesis that the members of the Alliance are stronger together than individually. A good sign on this path, until today, has been the repeatedly defined willingness of numerous states to adapt their national defense and security systems to the framework of the Alliance, so that in return they would enjoy the protection provided by the famous Article 5 of the Washington Treaty with its provision that an armed attack against one or more member of the Alliance shall be considered an attack against them all. It did not matter whether they were states of "old Europe", former enemies from the Cold War era, or small European states that have been approaching the Alliance individually or in smaller groups in recent years. Of course, there are also some of the basic sources of disagreement that have been periodically discussed within NATO (and sometimes beyond) for decades. First of all, the relationship between large members and small ones, then the limits and meaning of such an association and the limits of relying on the security guarantee of Article 5 with regard to maintaining one's own defense capabilities.

The big and the small

During the past decades of the NATO alliance, it has become clear even to non-experts that all members are not equally influential, equally militarily capable or powerful. So, while the dominance of the United States, the only remaining classical superpower, may occasionally come into question in the field of economics or international politics - in the military and security field it is undisputed. Of course, it is all the more interesting to note that in 2001 such a superpower was the only one in

a situation to activate the security guarantee from Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, after a terrorist attack by the Al Qaeda. On that occasion, the NATO alliance was united and ready to come to help its largest member.

Although this situation will lead to decades of action by NATO members in Afghanistan, the question of an informal ranking list among the members was never raised, at least as a subject of formal discussions in the environment of consensual decision-making, then still formed with the complete exclusion of France from military topics. And while the situation in NATO framework was clear, let's mention the fact that similar relations were resolved in other international forums - where the US and some allies in the UN Security Council on 17th March 2003, instead of risking a veto, preferred to abandon the resolution which aimed to gain United Nations support for intervention in Iraq - a result largely attributed to the foreign policy of France and Germany, along with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China.

Recently, friction within the NATO alliance has often been caused by unilateral moves by Türkiye, such as the procurement of the first Russian S-400 anti-aircraft systems in July 2019, which immediately led to the expulsion of that country from the production system of new F-35 fighter jets, and which at the end of 2020 also led to US sanctions against Türkiye, where at least partial regulation of relations had to wait

for the outbreak of war in Ukraine. On the other side, the actions of Hungary, which has recently and within the framework of NATO alliance partially practiced the blackmailing practices for which it is known in the EU. In particular, the willingness of major allies, especially the US, to fulfill their security obligations from the Washington Agreement in case of need is the issue here. But while the current President Joe Biden's administration is extremely classically oriented and emphasizes respect for traditional frameworks of allied relations - everything is different if we look at the practice and political views of the current Republican presidential candidate and former US President Donald Trump.

In Wales in 2014 it was agreed that NATO member should reach 2 percent of GDP in defense.

When he mentions "paying the bill", Trump is actually referring to the member's obligation to invest their own budget funds in their own national defense systems, i.e. to act according to the agreement from the summit in Wales in 2014, when it was agreed that NATO member states should reach an investment of 2 percent of GDP in defense and that 20 percent of that money should be directed to equipment and modernization. Bearing in mind the general political views of Donald Trump, as well as his practice of simplifying and twisting the facts - it

is no wonder that the mandate of this populist at the head of the USA in Europe and the NATO alliance caused strong emotions, just like the certain possibility that in November 2024 he would be elected as chief of administrative power of the US again. This possibility not only scares many, but recently it also causes concrete measures to adjust the international security policy, especially regarding the financing of military aid for Ukraine, which Trump is explicitly opposed to.

Limits of action and the meaning of Alliance

The area of operation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is determined in principle in Article 6 of the Washington Treaty, which is tight connection to the previous article 5, elaborating it and indicating the importance of collective self-defense within the Alliance. While during the Cold War the area of activity was clearly focused on the area up to the so-called "Iron Curtain", and then especially militarily to topographical locations such as the "Fulda Gap" or the "Ljubljana Gap" - things became more complicated after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact on 1st July 1991 and the fall of the USSR itself on 26th December 1991. Although in the process of unification of Germany only a few months earlier it was possible to hear that the Alliance would not expand further, this idea was nowhere put on paper. States that would express a desire for membership, after a certain procedure, would receive an invitation - a practice that began in July 1997 with invitations to Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland, which joined NATO on 12th March 1999.

Slovenia joined Alliance in 2004 with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Baltic republics.

At the same time, it should be noted that, just like today, one of the main arguments for NATO membership was and remains the security provided by the Alliance and its collective security clause. While the Russian war adventures in Chechnya had an impact on the first members from Eastern Europe, the final ending of the local wars of the Republic of Serbia through the NATO intervention in 1999 had the effect of strengthening interests in the area of the former SFR Yugoslavia - where Slovenia joined the Alliance already in 2004, in a wider group together with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and the three Baltic republics from the former USSR. On the first day of April 2009, Albania and Croatia joined NATO, where public support suddenly jumped after the burning of the Croatian embassy in Belgrade following Kosovo's declaration of independence on 21st February 2008, followed by Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020.

In conclusion, the most recent candidacies are again directly caused by Russian military adventures, since Finland and Sweden, after long periods of neutrality, began to think about such a move only after the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24th February 2022. Of course, here too, it turned out that an orderly state structure, democratic institutions and a strong defense system are not enough for quick and easy membership. Both Finland and Sweden applied for membership on 18th May 2022, and received a formal invitation for membership on 29th June 2022 at the summit in Madrid. However, it took Finland until 31st March 2023 to collect the ratifications of all other members to became a member on 4th April 2023, while Sweden struggled to collect ratifications until the beginning of this year and finally became a full member on 7th March 2024. So, NATO is not expanding by itself, but the countries have every reason to ask for membership, for which they have to make an effort - no matter what the Russian Federation thinks about it.

Collective security and ability to defend

After the country's entry into NATO, the question of its investment in its own defense system and its modernization is raised. At the same time, it is not difficult to see that newer members, especially those that are close to certain regional sources of instability - be it the Russian Federation and Belarus, Serbia and Republika Srpska in B&H, or a relationship similar to that between Greece and Türkiye - more easily decide to invest seriously in defense. However, although the goal of 2 percent of GDP was set back in September 2014 as part of response to Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and support for the separatists there, to date only 18 member states have met this requirement. During that time, from the Baltic States and from the states on the Russian border, it is already being heard that this value should actually be the minimum, while the goals of the Alliance should be significantly higher.

In Afghanistan the difference in combat capabilities of various NATO members was visible.

All this is not accidental. Even in Afghanistan, where NATO was operational from August 2003 to August 2021, the difference in the equipment and combat capabilities of various NATO members was visible. All this was repeated during the operation of the "coalition of the willing" under the leadership of the USA in Iraq, and then it was even more clearly put to public view in the initial stages of the so-called "Arab Spring". During the summer of

2011, the difference in the scope of the military capabilities of the US, which only partially had direct involvement, and its European allies - who were the first to embark on a military adventure - became particularly clear in Libya, and only at the end of March 2011 did NATO itself take control over the local no-fly zone and naval blockade, until the end of October 2011. In particular, there was evident lack of air refueling capacity, lack of unmanned reconnaissance systems, but also lack of basic types of aviation weapons whose stocks proved to be sufficient primarily for politicians' PR, but not for even more intense military operations, even of short duration.

There is an obligation for the members to develop their own defense capabilities.

This brings us to the question of readiness of many member states of the NATO alliance, if nothing else, at least to fulfill the obligation they undertook under Article 3 of the Washington Agreement, which requires from the member states to maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack. So, there is an obligation for the members not to rely exclusively on the resources of the Alliance, and often these are the resources of its largest members, especially the US - but to first and foremost develop their own defense capabilities as the basis and foundation for

participation in NATO activities. And it is not only Germany that is an issue here, which, even after ten years of talk about increasing defense allocations, has struggled to raise its GDP from 1.19 percent of GDP in 2014 to 1.66 in 2024 - but it is a problem that actually troubles the vast majority of NATO members. Namely, it is not just a matter of pure allocation of money, but it is even more important that this money manages to buy real abilities. This is especially difficult in today's conditions of extremely expensive equipment that is often produced only by some large world manufacturers, even if they are from the Alliance members themselves, which is ultimately available in so few copies that it is difficult to imagine its practical survival in the circumstances of a major conflict, with serious ongoing combat losses and increased technical use.

Conclusion: The war in Ukraine as a trigger for change

Of course, the current war in Ukraine. the biggest military conflict since the Second World War, has put not only the issues of defense financing and military modernization in a special light, but also the specific military capabilities of individual NATO countries. After the mass protests in Kyiv known as the ''Euromaidan'', that began at the end of 2013, the war began with the Russian occupation of the Crimean

peninsula on 27th February 2014. Although there was initially mention of "green people" without military insignia, it was clear from the beginning that they were in fact Russian forces, whom the Russian Federation could keep in Crimea up to 25,000, reinforced by various other special and elite units.

Soon, Crimea was annexed on 18th March 2014, and the fighting moved to the east of Ukraine, to an intensified armed rebellion in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. After the first successes of the Ukrainian forces, Russia intervened there in mid-August 2014, and covert reinforcements - volunteers in the fight for the "Russian world" - helped establish two separatist areas, the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic" (7th April 2014) and "Luhansk People's Republic" (27th April 2014). Their borders were drawn in combat until September 2014 ("Minsk Protocol"), and after further fierce fighting the peace agreement ("Minsk 2") would really stabilize the situation until 15th February 2015. This situation would last with numerous incidents until the end of February 2022. In contrast to Crimea, which was an operation of elite forces, the conflict in the Donbas began in their style as a chaotic confrontation between weak military forces and numerous guerrillas, and with the wider involvement of the Russian Federation in the conflict, and it turned into a conventional war similar to the one in the area of the former Yugoslavia.

In contrast, the war launched by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022 is of a completely different nature. In it, the Russian Federation soon engaged over 75 percent of all deployable military forces (about 200,000 people), only to lose up to 90 percent of the active military personnel it had at the beginning of the invasion in the fighting by the end of 2023. Nevertheless, the number of Russian personnel in Ukraine grew from around 360,000 at the beginning of 2023 to around 410,000 in June 2023 and up to 470,000 at the beginning of 2024, while numerous reorganizations of their force structure and military doctrine were carried out. After two years of war, it was possible to somewhat limit the effect of the Russian Air Force, except for the frequent use of so-called "planning aerial bombs" with relatively precise guidance, and the Russian naval forces on the Black Sea were largely pushed to the east - which enabled a gradual revival of Ukrainian maritime exports of grain and other products. Nevertheless, on land, the aggressors continued their gradual advance, taking advantage of their numbers and Ukraine's problems with maintaining a stable supply of military assets from the west.

The sheer size of this conflict and its consumption of resources, the scale of military losses of men and equipment, and the high intensity of fighting on about 1,000 km of the front (after concentrating the invasion on

the east, southeast and south of Ukraine in April 2022) - have led to a series of practical challenges that NATO observes, analyzes and tries to find solutions to them. On the one hand, the inadequacy of the overall Western military production, especially artillery rounds, which in Ukraine due to the common lack of effective aviation are being consumed at the level of the First and Second World Wars, and the distinct Western lack of land-based air defense systems capable of protecting against long-range missiles in ballistic trajectory (anti-missile defense) are all but evident. In addition, although assistance in basic manpower training has greatly helped Ukraine, Western military advices had often proved to be of limited use, especially in insisting on maneuver warfare against Russian deep line defense in early 2023.

Things were made worse by delays in the delivery of military aid (armored equipment, aircraft, long-range weapons), which arrived protractedly and in almost symbolically small quantities. Ukraine was able to make up for some of these deficiencies by changing its own combat methods, inventive coping and increased use of advanced technologies - computerization of combat operations, use of mobile satellite communications (Starlink) and wide use of unmanned systems in the air and at sea. One should hope that at least part of the identified problems will be solved by the outgrowth of the so-called intervention system of aid, so-called "Ramstein Group", into organized NATO system of multi-year supply of military equipment to Ukrainian veterans. This is just one of the challenges that the war in Ukraine poses for the next NATO summit, convened for July this year in Washington, D.C.

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