



Challenges for NATO since 1991: Russian Invasion to Ukraine as a Common Threat

By Monika Begović

Introduction

The fall of the Berlin Wall caused tectonic shifts in the European security architecture, while Russia, especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the end of 1991 and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, started to realize it is not one of the two superpowers anymore, and that it could be left out from the great powers influence in the international order. Its new policy consisted of non-intervention and no military control over Eastern Europe. After 'losing' around one third of the former

Soviet territory, this country entered a period of economic decline. That affected the size and strength of the Russian military, too, which made West practically losing its enemy. Because of that, at the same time, the future existence of NATO was posed as a question. Representatives of international relations theories - realism and neorealism tried to defend the hypothesis that the main *raison d'être* of NATO's existence of balancing Soviet threat is gone, therefore the military alliance should be dissolved. However,

NATO adapted quickly to new conditions on the European security arena. Liberal scholars put an accent of NATO's existence, even after the end of the bipolar world, on common values that the transatlantic community shares and this increases the benefits of Transatlantic cooperation. NATO Strategic Concept, first ever made public after the end of the Cold War, endorsed in 1991, reaffirms the defensive nature of the Alliance, and shows that NATO member countries are aware of new risks to allied security. NATO adapted, its existence was not under a question mark.

Development of NATO-Russia relations

With new European architecture, the intention was to start building a new European defence system, with new European countries involved, and NATO to embody the Transatlantic link through which the security of North America is permanently tied to the security of Europe. NATO's role was reaffirmed. It was directly connected to the security of the Transatlantic community that was facing new world order, challenged with new threats and challenges. The Alliance had an additional challenge in opening its door to new Eastern European, former Soviet, countries, but also towards Russia.

NATO became an alliance to promote values, principles and democracy.

It had the mandate of deterring the rise of militant nationalism and providing foundation of collective security for adequate process of democratization of new independent European countries. During the process of dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, that was followed by wars, NATO had its role, as a support to United Nations efforts, to provide crisis management measures, with the aim to end the conflicts. It was clear that the post-Cold War world was a source of new instabilities, affecting European stability with possible spill-over effect. NATO, in its attempts to prevent new threats, became an alliance to promote values, principles and democracy, much needed for European continent at that time.

Where was Russia?

Russian Federation established formal relations with NATO in 1991. Trying to build new partnerships, that included also relations with Russia, NATO created Partnership for Peace program (PfP) in 1994, that allowed non-NATO countries (partner countries) to cooperate with NATO, share information and modernize

their militaries in line with modern democratic standards. The same year, Russia became the first country to join NATO's PfP program, showing a will to cooperate with NATO, sharing goals of increasing stability, diminishing threats to peace, and building strengthened security relationships. Cooperation was deepened with a political agreement, the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997, expressing the determination to *build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security*. The basis of this cooperation was made of values and principles.

Russia became the first country to join PfP program, showing a will to cooperate with NATO.

This Act announced creation of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council to increase the level of trust in cooperation between NATO and Russia. It showed a commitment by both sides that do not consider each other as adversaries anymore, but share the common goal in overcoming disputes, while strengthening mutual trust and cooperation. Framework of political consultations was said to be the only field in which the disagreements would be settled, with the aim of achieving greater stability and security in the Euro-Atlantic area.

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During the President Yeltsin's administration the Russian Federation was showing determination to deepen the political cooperation with new western partner countries. In the 1999, three former Warsaw Pact nations – the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland - joined NATO, and it became evident that the Alliance will keep its door open to new members, mostly former Eastern European countries. Prior to that, Russia, unlike any other PfP member, was invited to establish a mission at NATO headquarters, so Yeltsin actually blessed this round of NATO enlargement, but made clear that Russia strongly opposed new enlargement to east, especially to the Baltic countries, calling it a “red line” that goes along the borders of the former Soviet Union. The NATO-Russia relationship was deteriorated with NATO reaction in Kosovo the same year. President Yeltsin asked President Clinton to seek a diplomatic solution to NATO's air campaign against Serbia, warning of political and military consequences. However, at the same time, Russia was going through economic and social crisis, which led towards Boris Yeltsin resigning and Vladimir Putin winning the elections in 2000.

Russia after Putin gains power and new relations with the West

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the role of NATO has shifted into the Alliance having a global security role. The combination of NATO enlargement and its emergence as a global security actor, raised challenges for Moscow, the first being uncertainty. Despite positive development of mutual relationship, Russian leadership became again unsure of NATO's future role, especially in Europe. Their concern was mainly towards the possibility of Eastern European countries becoming new allies. However, with the new emerging challenges in international arena, the policy of Russia's supporting the cooperation with NATO remained intact. During the first NATO Summit in 2002, held in Rome, NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was established, replacing Permanent Joint Council, as a mechanism for consultation, cooperation, joint decisions and joint actions. Russia's President Vladimir Putin continued with good cooperation and within two years of his presidency he signed a declaration in Rome "NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality", which actually established NRC, as a consensus-based body of equal members, aiming to advance the relationship between NATO and Russia. Russia also cooperated on supporting NATO's mission in Afghanistan.

During the NATO Summit in 2002 in Rome NATO-Russia Council was established.

Looking from today's perspective, it could be said that strong ties that Russia had with Europe and the West were related mostly to Moscow wanting to improve its economic capacities, while cooperating with enlarging political union, developing trade relations, infiltrating into the European Union, that was slowly becoming a central place of Russia's foreign policy and its international engagement. EU was Russia's most important economic partner, but it did not allow the EU's influence in its domestic policy. With the enlargement of the EU, the enlargement of NATO happens too, and during the second Summit in 2002 held in Prague new countries were invited into the membership. They eventually became members in 2004. That was the year when President Putin was elected for a second term, while NATO welcomed seven new members into the alliance, including the three Baltic States: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. That was also the year of the largest expansion of the EU, with seven new countries that were part of the former Eastern bloc. The accession of the Baltic States to NATO had generated strong reactions in Moscow, it even made Russia's Security

Council to consider deploying additional forces to regions bordering NATO members. Russia's objections to additional rounds of NATO enlargement were rather serious, and Putin continued Yeltsin's "red line" policy, adding that Russia would be able to accept the next round of enlargement if the Alliance becomes only a political organization.

The accession of the Baltic States to NATO had generated strong reactions in Moscow.

However, official Moscow remained silent on the 2004 enlargement, but it was in a way a turning point in relations between NATO and Russia. Moscow started to focus more on Georgia and Ukraine, especially concerned with the anti-Kremlin Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. While both Georgia and Ukraine showed their interest in joining NATO that was just a contribution to Russia's 'reasons' for invasion of Georgia in 2008. Namely, for Russia, NATO enlargement to east, together with the debate about Georgia and Ukraine joining it, remains their main complaint. Russia's military action in Georgia led to the suspension of formal meetings of the NATO-Russia Council and cooperation in some areas. Decisions taken at the NATO's Summit in Bucharest in April 2008 showed a direction of how the relationship between Russia and NATO will

continue to develop, especially after the Bush Administration fully supporting the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia in the Membership Action Plan (MAP). President Putin strongly opposed to MAP for these countries, warning of political and military consequences of moving forward with such plans. The compromise needed to be made. It was decided that these two countries will not join MAP program, but the Summit Joint Communique would state a declaration that these countries will become members of NATO. However, although made as a compromise, Bucharest Summit's outcomes contributed in a way to president Putin's decision to launch the war in Georgia four months later. With Russia's invasion and occupation of Georgian territory, President Putin decided to actually start drawing the *red line* on NATO enlargement to the former Soviet Union territory that President Yeltsin was talking about, but did not make any moves at the time. NATO and Russia started to lose the common agenda that was being built since 1991.

Bucharest Summit's outcomes contributed to Putin's decision to launch war in Georgia.

A year later, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, as new NATO Secretary General, in the first public speech, expressed his still existing belief that NATO-Russia relationship holds great potential,

that was actually burdened by misperceptions, mistrust and diverging political agendas. It was evident that NATO still wanted to reinforce relations with Russia, under the common umbrella of sharing same challenges, threats and risks, that could easily present basis for future cooperation. Key among these areas was the fight against terrorism. In 2010, Russia and NATO started to cooperate again, and NATO leaders and President Dmitry Medvedev agreed to embark a new stage of cooperation towards a true strategic partnership, especially in missile defense, fight against terrorism, support in Afghanistan mission, seeking a new stage of cooperation. That, however, did not last long, despite the fact that NATO Strategic Concept from 2010 was still showing a will of the Allies for building a strategic partnership where it was clearly stated that NATO posed no threat to Russia. However, NATO Summit in Lisbon was the last Summit attended by a Russian President.

Was there a misjudgement in Moscow aims?

The West and Russia have conflicting visions of European security, with Moscow denying the right of its neighboring countries to choose their own future. Despite the 2010 Strategic Concept and belief in the continuation of

cooperation, the Russians have declared NATO as an adversary, after Putin came to power as the Russian president in 2012, so the question was could NATO view Russia as a partner any longer. Especially after the anti-Russian Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, Moscow decided to use Russian military forces to illegally take over Crimea in 2014, which then voted to join Russia in a sham referendum. The Ukrainian revolution of 2014 was a turning point in Europe's post-Cold War history, which Russia saw as a scenario prepared by the West against Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet area. No one expected Russia would change the borders in Europe, with invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. That caused NATO to suspend cooperation with Russia. Official Russia claimed the revolution was provoked by the West, which, according to Russia, broke a promise not to expand the Alliance to the Russian borders. This was used to justify invasion to Ukraine.

The Ukrainian revolution of 2014 was a turning point in post-Cold War history.

Russian actions at that time, that culminated with the annexation of Crimea, appear as they have always been following realist approach to international affairs, trying to change the status quo Russia had since the end of the Cold War. Russia obviously never gave up on achieving

the status of rising power with the appetite to become a global superpower again, creating a multipolarity in the world order, claiming the provocation came from NATO and EU expansion. After Georgia, but especially after the annexation of Crimea, a decline of liberal internationalism could be seen, with western allied countries making geopolitical moves to the east, while making Russia to perform offensive realist policy.

Russia never gave up on appetite to become a global superpower.

With decreased power and ability to pursue its interest, Russia still managed to keep the situation in Ukraine unresolved, in a way as a status quo, despite the sanctions that slowed down the economic growth, causing many Russians to question the need for military actions. Still, sanctions failed to cause changes in Russian foreign policy behavior. Based on realist assumptions, it concentrated on establishing geopolitical spheres of interest with President Putin's idea and aim of restoring national pride while promoting Russia as an equal player in world affairs.

New world order?

The obligations Russia took under the deal of

Minsk agreements to end Donbas war were not fulfilled. Unfortunately, it did not refrain from using the force against Ukraine again in 2022. Russia's hybrid warfare strategies are, more than ever broadened with propaganda techniques, attempting to undermine Western institutions, through funding anti-EU and anti-NATO political parties, spreading disinformation and using many other covert means to undermine democratic governance. At a geopolitical level, even since Crimea, a unity on Russia has emerged in Europe, with no country recognizing the Russian annexation of Crimea, and all maintaining sanctions. The new Russian offensive is seen as a manifestation of renewed geopolitical rivalry between East and West, and the attempts to contain Russia are seen through financial, diplomatic and strategic means. NATO allies agreed on measures to enhance Ukraine's ability to provide for its own security, stepping up with their bilateral support. As of October 2022, the United States has provided Ukraine 17 billion USD in security assistance, which shows how NATO allies continue with their practical support to Ukraine to uphold its right of self-defense, providing also financial and humanitarian aid.

It could be said that NATO Allies were constantly making an effort to reach out to Russia since the 1990s, as a partner country and even as an ally. However, the latest crisis caused

by Russian actions towards Ukraine pushed NATO - Russia relations back to its beginning in a way. A question can be posed is NATO going back to its roots as a counterweight to Moscow. A famous statement by former NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner about less threat and also less peace in the post-Cold War period can be recalled here. The contemporary international relations show there was threat all the time, but hidden until ready to become a reality. The role of NATO in the 21st century is multi-layered – to safeguard the freedom and security of its members, to secure a lasting peace in Europe and in broader Transatlantic community through crisis-prevention and management, while promoting common values such as democracy, freedom, human rights and rule of law.

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