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The evolution of the relationship between NATO and Russia and future perspectives

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Abstract

The moment of February 24, 2022, was the one that closed even the last gate of dialogue between Russia and NATO. Although major security organizations had made huge efforts to prevent these actions of Russia, the state did not heed, continuing with its ambitious plans. After the end of the Cold War, the relations between Russia and NATO seemed to be stabilizing, and there was even collaboration in some areas. Even so, there was always a trace of mistrust, each side fearing the other's intentions. Russia, on the one hand, sees NATO as a threat to its own security as a result of the bloc's expansion, and NATO considers the Russian state the main danger to its member states, given the conflict Russia has triggered and is carrying on, despite all the naysayers and the accusations against it.

Keywords:

NATO; Russia; conflict; aggression; security; collaboration; Cold War.

Not only NATO, but the whole world is currently facing several factors of instability that mark the security situation. The brief period of calmness after the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s was interrupted by the Arab Spring and continued by the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the crisis in the Sea of Azov, the war in Syria, the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian aggression against Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022. In addition, phenomena such as organized crime, migration, the issue of autonomy in some provinces or regions, traditional rivalries, or the inequitable ratio between massive demographic growth in some areas of North Africa and the Middle East and insufficient economic growth further compound these major economic events.

Looked at in detail, the situation on NATO's eastern flank is far from stable, given the problems caused by Russia in Ukraine. If in the past this flank seemed safer compared to the southern one, from 2014 the situation began to change, the main focus of the Alliance being on Russia's actions. Even if in the south NATO still has to deal with the collaborative policies that Turkey maintains in some places with Russia or the Arab world, the conflict in the east is currently at the forefront of the work agenda of NATO leaders ([Fix and Kimmage 2023](#)).

Presentation of the evolution of relations between NATO and Russia

The outbreak of the conflict brought to the attention of all citizens the role of NATO and, in fact, the main tasks of this organization: to maintain a climate of peace and ensure collective security. There were various opinions within the Alliance, at times contradictions, but the whole world is interested in the evolution that this organization will undergo in the coming years.

The main threat to NATO, as it emerged after the Vilnius Summit in 2023, is Russia. In this sense, the Allies have decided to adopt major measures so that the military bloc is prepared for the challenges of the future. Also, NATO's defense plans were strengthened, and member states agreed on the need to commit to increasing defense investments. NATO maintains its interest in enhancing the deterrence of any hostile actions by a potential enemy and is constantly strengthening its collective defense posture. This military component of deterrence is based on the response and mobility of the force package with a high level of readiness and the semi-permanent presence of forces deployed on the territory of the states on NATO's eastern border with Russia. The main purpose of these forces is deterrence, but in the event of an attack from Russia, they will respond quickly. Although NATO's war plans had not been updated since the Cold War, the organization was forced to develop new ones as post-Soviet Russia, which until this point had not been considered an existential threat, became the organization's main adversary ([Chifu 2022](#)).

In the southern part of the organization, there are other types of challenges, which are determined by the fragility of states and their inability to prevent and combat problems related to transnational terrorism. What is worse is that the southern states cannot allow their own citizens to stay and prosper in their countries, because there is a huge gap between the level of economic growth and the birth rate.

In addition to problems within the organization, NATO must also deal with sources of instability from outside the Alliance and should effectively use the measures at its disposal to impose itself and to minimize or eliminate security risks.

Within the organization, some member states express a behavior that undermines the independence of their own legal system, tend to obstruct independent media, or are not in solidarity with other member states facing certain problems. These attitudes are contrary to the principles that led to the founding of the Alliance in April 1949.

Currently, NATO is making significant efforts to ensure the security of the eastern flank and to provide a rapid and credible response to new challenges, especially in the case of military, cyber, and hybrid threats. In contrast to the organization, Russia shows an attitude marked by aggression, and ideas such as common prosperity, regional stability, and peace are far from reality; therefore, it is hard to believe that NATO and Russia will be able to unite in the near future. Russia has been and, as it can be seen, continues to be the biggest threat to the independence and sovereignty of European states, and its course of action is an obstacle to the common values that bind the West.

Russia has been ruled by President Vladimir Putin for almost 24 years, and his provocative attitude is not unknown to its neighbors, or even to more distant states. Several times, Russia wanted to impose its own vision on the evolution of other states by getting involved in internal elections, sabotaging the activity of financial institutions, attacking civil infrastructure, and cyber-attacks. For example, Russia has repeatedly used malicious cyber activity to target international organizations such as the World Anti-Doping Agency or the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in order to impose its will (Ionaşcu 2016). Russia also defied international rules in 2018, in the notorious case of its citizen killed on British soil by Kremlin-backed assassins with a military-grade neurotoxin (European Parliament 2020). But, in addition to these examples, the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, is the greatest atrocity committed by Russia and has led to the exclusion of any possibility of keeping open any window of cooperation between the Russian state and NATO or other security organizations or democratic states in the world.

Past experiences, but especially Russia's decision to invade Ukraine, have demonstrated to the whole world that this state does not deserve trust. NATO has decided to end all collaboration with Russia and the image of building a positive relationship, dominated by cooperation and the development of mutual trust,

transparency and respect no longer exists and most likely will not exist for a long time. Despite the current situation, NATO does not seek a confrontation with Russia and even insists on ending the aggression against Ukraine and returning to dialogue. The organization does not compromise on the principles underlying the operation of the Alliance and does not want to jeopardize the security of the citizens of the Euro-Atlantic space.

Before the time of February 24, 2022, the Cold War was the most intense and suspenseful period regarding the outbreak of a new conflict between two great powers: NATO and Russia. Since then and until Russia's aggression against Ukraine, NATO made considerable efforts to establish peaceful relations with Russia, and even to conclude some partnerships, including through the mechanism of the NATO-Russia Council (CNR), based on the NATO-Russia Founding Act and of the Rome Declaration. The Founding Act was signed in 1997 by the American and Russian presidents and aimed at establishing mutual relations based on cooperation and maintaining security between Russia and NATO. Through this act, NATO aimed to expand, by accepting some states from the former Soviet bloc, but committed itself not to place nuclear weapons, including warehouses, on the territory of future member states and not to strengthen its permanent troops on their territory. However, after coming to power, Vladimir Putin considered this act a betrayal on the part of the states of the former Soviet bloc and a humiliation for Russia, and it still represents one of the main reasons for the dispute between Russia and NATO. The finality of these efforts was always a negative one, because of Russia, which violated most of the agreements and commitments it undertook to respect. Over time, NATO began to lose confidence in Russia ([Srimbovschi 2011](#)).

The NATO-Russia relationship is a significant part of European security policy. The first contact between the two blocs was after 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed and the Warsaw Pact was dissolved. After these events, NATO changed its policy regarding its relationship with former irreconcilable enemies.

In 2002, in an attempt to create a closer link between the two forces, the NATO-Russia Council was born, in which they were equal partners. Thus, at the beginning of this initiative, it was aimed to start discussions regarding security issues and cooperation in areas of common interest. Things worked relatively well until 2014 when Russia violated its commitments by annexing Crimea. Even so, the CNR continued to exist until 2022, and a work schedule was established annually. Although significant efforts were made to prevent a conflict between Russia and Ukraine through discussions within the CNR, they were not sufficient to prevent further Russian action. Officially, this council did not dissolve, but considering the actions of the Russian state, it is more than obvious that it remained only a document with a symbolic meaning.

Although they were evolving somewhat favorably, relations between the two blocs were interrupted in 2008, when Russian troops invaded Georgia. From that point on, things continued to deteriorate ([Trenin 2009](#)).

Another turning point in the relationship between NATO and Russia was the beginning of the occupation of Crimea by the Russian state in 2014. At that time, all the leaders of NATO and the rest of the civilized countries condemned this attitude and asked Russia to withdraw its forces from Ukraine. This attitude was disrespectful to the norms of international law, but also to the obligations and responsibilities assumed at the international level. Russia's actions that ultimately led to the annexation of Crimea made it clear to both NATO and other democratic states that the Russian state could no longer be trusted and, despite the sanctions it was subjected to, continued its plan, appropriating, unfairly, a territory (Kolesnikov 2023).

What strengthened the belief that the relationship between NATO and Russia is difficult to stabilize was the state's decision to attack Ukraine and, more than that, to maintain troops on Ukrainian territory even today. Wanting to annihilate the danger on its borders, but also to provide substantial support to face the fighting, NATO decided to establish five multinational battle groups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania, expanded its air policing capabilities in the Baltic Sea, and Eastern Europe so that any Russian aircraft entering the airspace of member states is intercepted and continued the process of equipping its troops with state-of-the-art equipment and technologies. Despite Russia's desire to receive more assurances from the West, this is no longer possible, as relations at all levels are damaged.

Even if there were moments of collaboration, the relationship between the two powers is almost non-existent at this point. NATO vehemently condemns Russia's internal policy, the aggression unleashed against a sovereign state, and Russia, on the other hand, considers NATO guilty for expanding its borders and getting closer to its territories, for the problem of the South Caucasus and the future status of the province of Kosovo. The Russian president believes that the "red line" he established was violated by NATO. He criticizes and accuses the organization of supplying equipment and weapons to Ukraine. On the other hand, NATO judges Russia for violating the principles of international law and requests the withdrawal of troops. Since the outbreak of the war until now, NATO has strongly strengthened its position on the western flank, deploying troops from various member states to prepare to act quickly in the event of a possible Russian attack on the territory of any member state (Clapp 2022).

Even before the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, NATO accused Russia of using the energy at its disposal to control the Western states. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline highlighted Russia's role as a major energy supplier. At that time, several European deputies requested the cessation of work on the gas pipeline connecting Germany to Russia, citing the fact that the Russian state could no longer be considered a strategic partner. After the conflict began, it became clear that the Russians were using their energy advantage to manipulate NATO member states to their own wishes. They threatened to stop the delivery of gas, thus slowing down the production of European states (Clapp 2022).

Although they currently have opposing goals, there are also areas where the two forces can work together to achieve better results in terms of ensuring a climate of security for their own citizens: the fight against terrorism, defense reform, counter-piracy, crisis management, the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. For example, after September 11, 2001, when the terrorist attacks in the United States of America (USA) took place, Russia and NATO made joint efforts to effectively respond to terrorist threats. At that time, Russia carried on the fight against terrorism in its own style by allowing Alliance aircraft to use Russian airspace in the Afghanistan campaign. Over time, there have been several exchanges of information between NATO and Russia on the issue of terrorism.

Russia's relations with NATO are going through a frozen period after the Russian state invaded Ukraine in an operation called by Moscow a "special military operation" and by the West and Ukraine as an unjustified and unprovoked aggression against a sovereign and independent state. Russia accuses the West of unjustly expanding eastward, towards its borders, and does not accept the fact that more and more states, including its neighbors, want to join NATO. In fact, Russian leaders state that the reason for the invasion of Ukraine is the very fear that NATO will expand so much that it could attack Russia, and they believe that they are not waging a war against Ukraine, but against the West ([Hamilton 2016](#)).

At this moment, there is also the issue of Ukraine's accession to NATO, so that this state receives protection from the Alliance, considering the huge losses it has suffered. Although it has faced brutal attacks received by Russia for a year and a half, Ukraine still does not fully meet the conditions to become a NATO member state. On the other hand, the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine opened a quick access gate to NATO for Sweden and Finland, given the concerns of the two states about their own security after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Finland has already been accepted into NATO in April 2023. Sweden is following the same path, even if there are and have been some differences of opinion on what it stands for Turkey, which does not fully support the idea of accepting this state into NATO. This idea infuriates Russia even more, and the declaratory war on both sides becomes stronger.

NATO is the security organization that aims to promote peace, security, and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region. The crisis in Ukraine was an opportunity to demonstrate how prepared it is to defend its citizens, assess its capabilities, evaluate the level of training of the force package, gauge the technical and technological equipment of the troops, and determine whether states can set aside individual differences in favor of cooperation to eliminate the common enemy. The supply of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine has significantly reduced the stocks available to NATO member states, and this is a challenge for the Alliance, since, in the event of a possible attack by Russia, some member states' armies do not have enough ammunition and weapons to use against the invasion. Russia, too, is dealing with a conflict of its own making. As early as February 2022, many states of the world

reacted against this attitude and withdrew the support they had previously offered to Russia. This state is on the verge of becoming an outcast in the civilized world, its actions being judged more and more harshly. The measures taken so far at the state level or by major international security organizations have weakened Russia's power to act. Many important companies have withdrawn their branches from Russia, and the effects are felt economically, the life of ordinary citizens is not an easy one at all. In addition, the embargoes imposed seem to further weaken Russia. These measures, also supported by NATO, aim to end a war that brought losses not only to Russia or Ukraine but to the whole world.

Although in some places there are states that still maintain relations with Russia, such as, for example, Belarus, China, and, in some places, Turkey, the Russian state has lost a lot of its credibility and no longer enjoys the trust that it hardly won. Currently, the Russian president is looking for allies in African states, fearing the actions that NATO could take, given the package of forces and equipment that the organization has allocated on the eastern side of its borders.

The future of relations between the two forces no longer seems to be one based on collaboration. Although at times NATO and Russia have cooperated, it seems that those times will not return anytime soon. Each side stands for its own truth and refuses to give up the principles it has established. Neither NATO nor Russia rules out the outbreak of a conflict between the two forces. At the declarative level, both sides issue warnings and support their own points of view. In the field, NATO is conducting training on the entire eastern strip that delimits it from Russia, whether we are talking about training on the ground, in the air, or on land, and Russia is fighting directly with Ukrainian troops. These images are difficult to understand in the year 2023, as no one expected this situation after humanity went through two world wars in which the losses were huge (NATO 2022).

Conclusions

The relationship between NATO and Russia has always been complicated. The two entities accused each other of undue expansion and saw each other as a threat, even though there was sometimes space for dialogue and, at times, even cooperation. However, the actions taken by Russia in recent years have stopped any common path it could have had with NATO. If in 2014 international organizations responded promptly to the annexation of Crimea, but the results were not as expected, and Russia was still invited to talks, today this state is excluded from any activity involving international security and is considered an aggressor state, which can no longer be part of a society where international rights, integrity and national sovereignty are respected.

NATO troops are currently preparing on the Alliance's eastern flank. The number of troops deployed in this part is higher than ever, and the joint training of the

militaries of the member states proves that NATO is prepared to respond with the greatest force to any attempt by Russia to destabilize it. Given the fact that Russia does not give up the conflict in Ukraine and seems to respond with more forces and technology to the defense of the Ukrainian military, NATO expects anything in the future, including a direct confrontation with Russia. This emerges from the plans adopted by NATO following the last summit in Vilnius.

Its actions are not befitting of a state that holds an important role on the international stage, is a member of security organizations, and possesses power from economic, military, or energy perspectives. Even if Russia were to cease aggression in the near future, it would take a long time for this state to regain international trust.

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