



THE IMAGINED UNITY OF NATO

Posted on July 1, 2022 by Anastasia Tolokonina



Will NATO members be able to overcome their differences within the alliance?

After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) lost much of its meaning. Rather, it lost its initial common purpose of containing the Soviet Union, which at a certain point simply disappeared from the world map. Therefore, since 1991, the alliance began to look for its lost purpose; and while relations between Washington and Moscow were relatively normal, the organization became more and more anachronistic. But then Kosovo happened, followed by Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and then Crimea in 2014. Thus, as the confrontation between the West and Russia intensified, and as Moscow increasingly disagreed with the policies of the US-led NATO bloc, NATO's original and true purpose of deterring Russian power was gradually revived.

Nevertheless, there were still serious divisions within the alliance, which were dramatically sidelined when first the Russian military build-up on Ukraine's borders began and then the announcement of a military special operation. The conflict in Ukraine returned NATO to a common goal and, as many experts have noted, demonstrated the lost unity of NATO, which was especially noticeable after the fiasco in Afghanistan and the humiliation of France with the AUKUS nuclear submarine deal.

The conflict, which increasingly resembled the Cold War—with its dividing line across Europe, competing systems with different views on the enforcement of rules and use of power and force, and spheres of influence between Russia and the West—returned NATO to its role as a counterweight to Moscow, and forced a rethinking of the basics of relations with allies. The cohesion that the bloc's members had so long been unable to achieve for lack of a common global purpose seemed to have returned to the alliance. But is this unity really that strong? Is it a reality, or is it an illusion that will disappear as soon as the allies fail to find a compromise on existing differences?

Russia: Isolation or Dialogue?

Despite the fact that after the start of the Russian special operation, all NATO members reacted with lightning speed and unity by supplying Ukraine with weapons, anti-Russian sanctions, isolation policies, and attempts to "undo" Russia's culture, many contradictions emerged within the bloc.

Thus, in April, came the disagreements which arose regarding the further alignment of the relations of the alliance countries with Russia within the conditions of the new geopolitical reality. It was reported by [*The New York Times*](#), with reference to two high-ranking American officials. According to them, the Baltic states are in favor of breaking off relations with Moscow completely and intend "to bring Russia to its knees." They are concerned that whatever Russia presents as a victory will seriously damage the European security.

This position was expressed by Polish President Andrzej Duda, who called the dialogue with Russia "senseless," as well as the Lithuanian Seimas speaker, Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, who stated that Europe needs to isolate itself from Russia, not only in political and trade-economic contacts, but also in the sphere of culture. It is worth noting that the United Kingdom also has a tough stance on Russia: the head of the British Foreign Office, Liz Truss, has repeatedly made belligerent statements regarding Russia. For example, during a recent visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Truss said that she would call on the United Kingdom's Western partners to ensure Ukraine's victory and warn against attempts to appease Russia.

For their part, countries with more pragmatic and far-sighted policies, such as France, Germany and Turkey, intend to continue contacts with Vladimir Putin and are not ready to break off relations with Russia, despite all accusations of the West against Moscow. Back in April, French President Emmanuel Macron said that his policy of maintaining a dialogue with the Russian leader was the right one. The Chancellor of Germany also supports dialogue, regularly calling Putin on her own initiative and discussing the situation in Ukraine. The head of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is known for his ability to "have his feet in both camps," combining support for Ukraine, mutually beneficial relations with Russia, but also membership in NATO and attempts to mediate between the parties to the conflict. He also recently expressed his views on future relations with Moscow, saying that Turkey intends to continue relations with Russia "on all levels."

"We have clearly and courageously told Russia our position on the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. But we do not intend to get involved in this show, relations with Russia continue exactly on all levels," the Turkish leader said, addressing the nation after a cabinet meeting.

However, when talking about disagreements among NATO member states on the further development of relations with Russia, one should not forget who is the connecting link of the alliance. The conflict in Ukraine has once again demonstrated NATO's continued dependence on the United States. Today,

there is no independent European strategy or even a European viewpoint different from the one proposed by Washington. Therefore, Washington will obviously have the last word on the Russian vector of the alliance's foreign policy.

The Imagined Unity Concerning Ukraine

Three months after the start of the Russian special operation, some NATO members have begun to declare that the priority should be to end hostilities as soon as possible. The bloc members realize that the war will drag on for a long time, and they simply cannot endlessly provide military assistance by supplying weapons—the stocks of weapons will start to run out at some point, and they need them themselves. Moreover, on May 22, Josep Borrell, head of EU diplomacy, said that the EU's military reserves had already been exhausted because of supplies to Ukraine. "The depletion of reserves as a result of our military assistance to Ukraine is the most obvious example of our defensive shortcomings," Borrell said.

Many countries have already refused to supply weapons to Ukraine, despite pressure from the alliance to increase arms supplies. For example, Bulgaria initially limited its contribution to Ukraine's defense to humanitarian aid, helmets and body armor, even though it is a producer of Kalashnikov assault rifles. The reason for Bulgaria's refusal of military aid to Ukraine, in addition to disputes among government participants, was also the long history of ties with Russia.

Greece has also refused new arms supplies, saying that the country is not obliged to provide military assistance to Ukraine at the expense of its own defense, especially the defense of its islands. According to Greece's national defense minister, weapons were provided to Kiev from the country's own stockpiles. Ukraine was also criticized by Germany, which refused to supply Kiev with tanks and heavy equipment.

Presence in Eastern Europe

In addition to disagreements over the provision of weapons to Ukraine, disagreements are emerging among NATO members over how to deploy additional troops in Eastern Europe after the start of Russia's military special operation. *The Washington Post* has [reported](#) about this controversy.

The source of the disagreement is again the Baltic states and Poland, which demand a significant expansion of the military presence on their territory and new capabilities, such as air defense, which could make further Russian "invasion" much more difficult.

"Direct Russian military aggression against NATO allies cannot be ruled out," said a confidential joint statement from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia obtained by an American newspaper.

Other countries, notably France and Italy, are highly skeptical that Russia will pose a threat on alliance territory in the near future. Many alliance members are cautious about committing to Eastern Europe, fearing to sign up to large-scale troop deployments that would cost them dearly.

This disagreement stems in part from fears that NATO's support for more vulnerable allies (i.e., those close to Ukraine's borders) will end in the post-conflict period. In addition, some countries fear that the alliance will turn its back on other threats on which it has focused in recent years, including terrorism and illegal migration across the Mediterranean Sea. These threats are of particular concern in countries close to North Africa, such as Italy and Spain.

The issue of NATO's presence on the eastern flank will be one of the topics of discussion at the Madrid summit in June. The same summit will also determine the fate of Sweden and Finland, if Turkey drops its objections.

Erdoğan's Bargaining

The Russian special operation has forced many countries, including "neutral" Finland and Sweden, to think seriously about their security. And it would seem that their accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would be quick and painless, given that they have long been leaning toward the West, despite their declared neutrality. However, things did not go according to plan.

In mid-May, Turkey blocked applications from Finland and Sweden to join NATO, taking its allies by surprise. The country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, said he could not support the inclusion of Sweden and Finland in the military bloc because the organization would then become a "guesthouse for terrorists." The statement came as a result of the Turkish leader's discontentment with the fact that members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Hizmet movement (FETO), which are recognized as

terrorists in Turkey, are living in Sweden and Finland and participate in the Parliament. The Republic even began to talk about the possible withdrawal of the country from the alliance in case Sweden and Finland join it. Will Turkey block the new NATO expansion, or is Erdogan simply bargaining politically?

Everything that is happening really indicates that Ankara has decided to use the issue of Sweden and Finland joining NATO for its own purposes—as leverage against Washington, despite the statement of Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu that this is not an example of political bargaining.

The fact is that the crisis in the alliance has brought Ankara's grievances against its NATO allies to the forefront, while at the same time allowing it to use its position in the bloc to obtain concessions. Of course, an agreement with Erdoğan is feasible, but it ought to be Washington, not Helsinki and Stockholm. Turkey has repeatedly complained about the lack of support it needs to fight Kurdish militants, the main threat to Turkey's national security. The government has accused Sweden of harboring its opponents and supporting Kurdish fighters in northern Syria. The issue of Ankara's extradition request also remained open: Sweden and Finland refused to extradite 33 people who are members of organizations banned in Turkey. Another of Erdoğan's demands was that Sweden and Finland lift the arms embargo, which was imposed on Turkey in 2019.

And these are only the obvious demands made by Turkey. However, there are many more hidden reasons. A key issue may be the Turkish president's frustration over his failure to establish a stable working relationship with Biden, as he did with Obama and Trump. Therefore, he expects to be persuaded and eventually rewarded for his cooperation. In addition, Erdoğan probably wants a green light from the U.S. for a new military operation in northern Syria. Also unresolved is the issue of the extradition by the US of Iranian-Turkish businessman Reza Zarrab, who was arrested in the US in 2016 and accused of helping to circumvent US sanctions against Iran as well as money laundering. Turkey had already sought his extradition, but was unsuccessful. At the same time, elections are coming up in the Republic, and Erdoğan needs to consolidate voters' votes around him; and given the current state of the country's economy—record high inflation and a currency that has lost almost half its value—the Turkish leader has to use any leverage to gain the support of the electorate. After all, Turkey's veto of Sweden and Finland joining NATO may be an attempt to please Russia, since Erdogan has long been famous for his "Turkish loop" stretching from Washington-led NATO to Moscow.

In fact, blocking NATO expansion is not the only case of Turkey's disruption of the alliance's unity. This week Erdoğan also lashed out at Greek Prime Minister Kiriakos Mitsotakis for trying to block the sale of

American F-16 fighter jets to Ankara. "For me, there is no one named Mitsotakis anymore," the Turkish leader said after a cabinet meeting on Monday, May 23.

Erdogan also said he would cancel a meeting with his Greek counterpart at a previously planned summit later this year. The Turkish president's comments came a week after the Greek prime minister met with U.S. lawmakers on Capitol Hill and urged them to consider NATO security when making "defense procurement decisions concerning the eastern Mediterranean." And while Mitsotakis did not mention Ankara, his comments clearly hinted at a longstanding quarrel with Turkey over alleged airspace violations.

Erdoğan is now perhaps the main source of undermining military bloc unity. Some analysts even speculate that Turkey is acting as Putin's "Trojan horse" to block NATO expansion and sow turmoil within the alliance. But such assumptions are unlikely to be correct—Erdoğan is not that simple; and he does not want to be anybody's pawn. The Turkish leader is simply trying to balance his advantages by minimizing his disadvantages.

Oil and Gas Contradictions

It is worth noting that Erdoğan is not the only leader within NATO to sow the seeds of discord in the alliance. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban also often has his own point of view, different from the bloc's member states, on all issues that are on the agenda of NATO or the EU. For example, the Hungarian prime minister continues to block attempts by the European Union to impose an embargo on Russian oil, which is part of the sixth package of sanctions against Russia.

While Hungary has endorsed all previous sanctions packages, including the embargo on Russian coal, Orban stated that an oil embargo would be the equivalent of an "atomic bomb" for the Hungarian economy. The Hungarian prime minister also recently suggested that discussion of the oil embargo be postponed until differences are resolved.

"Discussing the sanctions package at the leadership level in the absence of consensus would be counterproductive. It would only emphasize internal disagreements and not provide a real opportunity to resolve them. Therefore, I propose not to raise this issue at the next meeting of the European Council," Orban said.

However, Orban's decision was gladly received in Moscow. The deputy head of the Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, called Hungary's rejection of the oil embargo "a courageous step for a voiceless Europe."

The European members of NATO also had a disagreement over the purchase of Russian gas. The reason for this was Vladimir Putin's demand that gas imports from Russia be paid for in rubles. When the EU was finally able to work out a mechanism for purchasing Russian gas without violating sanctions, which implies the possibility of opening accounts at Gazprombank, while making payments in dollars or euros, the countries began to have disagreements. Germany, Hungary, France and Italy immediately supported the proposed plan, but Poland had questions about the legal side of the new solution. In addition, some countries were unhappy with the fact that the new rules did not specify the possibility for European companies to open ruble accounts in Gazprombank.

In addition to disagreements over paying for Russian gas in rubles, there are other problems. Unity may also be undermined by the nuclear failures of the French company Electricité de France SA, which are causing fluctuations in European energy markets, threatening to disrupt allies' plans to completely abandon gas imports from Russia in the future. The company has already cut its nuclear power production plan three times this year, pointing to a worsening energy crisis in the region. The situation could get even worse in winter, as France, traditionally an electricity exporter, could be forced to import more electricity from its neighbors.

"We have a French problem that comes at the wrong time, given the geopolitical situation. The whole European equilibrium could be at risk," said Nicolas Leclerc, co-founder of the Paris-based energy company Omnegy, in a conversation with Bloomberg.

Therefore, the unity of Europe on the issue of rejection of Russian gas in the near future may be undermined. In particular, Germany, which is 40% dependent on Russian gas and has decided to shut down its own nuclear industry, may have problems. Attempts to replace Russian gas with supplies from the United States, North Africa and the Mediterranean could also fail, since the current climate agenda, investor sentiment, political instability, and territorial disputes between potential fuel suppliers make it difficult for the EU to reject Russian gas.

All of these issues seriously undermine NATO unity that allies have been demonstrating so blatantly of late. Therefore, these contradictions will be a good test for NATO. And if it can pass this test, it will

prove its true unity. But if there is no consensus on the disagreements, the alliance will once again prove that this unity is just an illusion, based on the common anti-Russian sentiment (which, in fact, is not apparent in all members of the bloc, either).

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