

Opinion – The NATO Madrid Summit and the Alliance’s New Dawn

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, JUL 5 2022

After years of its relevance being questioned by former President Trump and even being described as ‘brain-dead’ by French President Macron, NATO is meeting at Madrid at a time of renewed strength and invigoration of the alliance. The past few months have witnessed significant alliance cohesion in the face of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, with two new states, Sweden, and Finland, set to join after Turkey has lifted its opposition. NATO’s cause for existence has never seemed clearer, yet serious rifts remain, and the unity of the alliance is not guaranteed as the war in Ukraine goes on and domestic pressures across member states increase. Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has led NATO closer to Russia’s borders, not further away, and more troops will be permanently stationed on NATO’s eastern flank, including a new permanent U.S. base in Poland. For Putin, this is undoubtedly the opposite effect of what he intended, however Ukraine is no closer to joining NATO and the prospect of a prolonged conflict in its disputed territories will likely stall Kyiv’s accession for the foreseeable future.

As NATO members meet in Madrid, there are two main challenges that alliance members will have to contend with. The first is continued isolationism and retrenchment in the U.S. amongst both Democrat and Republican lawmakers, including former President Trump. Washington is increasingly keen to pivot its resources to the Indo-Pacific and its strategic competition with China. As such, the U.S. is eager to see European member states spend more on their own defence to be able to rapidly respond to their security threats should U.S. leadership be absent or directed elsewhere. Defence spending amongst alliance members is increasing, and while Germany’s *Zeitenwende* or ‘turning point’ marks a notable shift in German defence policy, there is the risk of it being a cosmetic rather than a practical watershed, with tangible results likely years away. Support for an increase in German defence spending remains stubbornly low, with notable resistance coming from Chancellor Scholz’s own Social Democrats as well as other coalition members.

In addition, the cost-of-living crisis, economic, and energy security factors are likely to test European member states’ support for Ukraine as the autumn and winter loom. This has already divided NATO member states between those who wish to see a full Russian withdrawal and for Ukraine to regain control of the entirety of its territory, versus those who think Kyiv should accept a peace settlement with Russia to avert further bloodshed and economic pain in Europe. Poland, the Baltic states, the US, and the UK fall into the first camp, whilst France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and several others fall into the second. The alliance may now be formally united in recognizing the scale of the threat from Russia, but it is not united as to the degree that that threat should trump individual member states’ economic and security needs. ‘Ukraine fatigue’ is already setting in and it looks likely to increase as the months drag on, something that Moscow is all too eager to exploit.

For NATO, the past few months leading to the Madrid summit has also been a wake-up call as to the real source of Moscow’s antagonism. The 2022 Strategic Concept rightly identifies Russia as ‘the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.’ It is a bold statement after years of cohabitation and cooperation with Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when NATO membership remained on the table for Moscow as it charted its new course. Russia under Vladimir Putin has long railed against NATO enlargement and seen it as a threat to Russia’s security interests at its periphery. However, the invasion of Ukraine is about much more than NATO enlargement and Western influence. Rather, NATO is the easy scapegoat and object of Moscow’s

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ire to help distract from Putin’s neo-imperial ambitions that are less a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and more a result of the waning days of the Russian Empire. Catherine the Great, rather than any Soviet era leader, is the model in Putin’s quest to restore long-lost Russian territory and glory, making NATO’s aims and strategic outlook look fundamentally modern and fit for the 21st century in comparison. Putin is focused on the past while NATO is focused on the present and the future, something that wasn’t clear at the start of this year, but which has now been presented in stark terms because of Russia’s war of aggression.

Whilst Russia is the most immediate threat to NATO member states, given its geographical position, for NATO to remain forward-looking and relevant China has come to occupy a more prominent spot on the list of threats. This is so as Russia is no longer a superpower but a declining power capable of inflicting great harm upon its neighbours, yet posing no immediate threat to the structure of the global order. A heavily sanctioned Russia under Putin will exist as a pariah state for some time, while China will continue to threaten its neighbours in the South China Sea, all while increasing its economic and security influence from Eurasia to Central Europe and even Latin America. China has the bandwidth and political will to create new threats and challenge the global order, whilst Russia can act as a spoiler to the global order without having the capacity to present meaningful alternative alliances or systems of governance. Russia has retained its allies in the BRICs grouping of nations, but it will always be the junior partner to China, which has significant leverage in crafting the course of its relations with Moscow.

The Madrid Summit also marks a major turning point for NATO and transatlantic relations in (a) the post-Cold War, (b) post-9/11 and (c) post-Afghan War eras. The alliance is adapting to new threats and challenges whilst expanding its membership, all while recommitting resources to its original strategic adversary. It is easy to conclude that NATO has the upper hand and Moscow will fade into irrelevance, it’s actions in Ukraine proving that it should have no place at the table of respectable nations. However, NATO’s continued strength and unity is far from assured, and it will be important for European leaders not to become complacent. At the beginning of 2022, few would have predicted that NATO would be in the position it is today. A moment of crisis can unexpectedly galvanise an alliance of 30 very different member states stretching across three continents and with distinct histories. However, it can also reveal where true interests and values lie, and where the fissures that will inevitably outlast the current crisis are located and threaten the alliance’s response to the next challenge once the platitudes and commitments made in Madrid are long past. For now, however, Madrid is its own form of ‘Zeitenwende’, an unexpected but welcome watershed moment that demands bold and inspiring action amidst political upheaval.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

He writes in a personal capacity and not with any professional affiliation.