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Time to Consolidate NATO?

After two decades focused on the Middle East and Asia, American policymakers are again paying significant attention to European security. Russian bellicosity has seemingly given new life to the transatlantic alliance, leaving the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) appearing more relevant and resilient than ever. Indeed, despite pre-election rhetoric that painted NATO as “obsolete,” the Trump administration has moved in its early days to underscore the United States’ continued “commitment to NATO,” to praise “the importance of the alliance in troubled times,” and even to consider bringing additional members into the alliance.¹

Concurrently, fears of American abandonment amidst Russian saber-rattling have led NATO’s European members to seek a sustained American role on the continent and even, in some quarters, to consider additional defense spending for NATO activities.² These efforts, moreover, come after palpable worry over Russian aggression spurred renewed efforts during the second Obama administration to give teeth to NATO’s collective security provisions and defend NATO’s East European members from external attack.³ To this end, NATO has begun deploying four battalions of troops in the Baltic states and Poland, while rotating additional American forces onto the continent as a strategic reserve and upgrading allied military capabilities.⁴ Meanwhile, a sustained push is underway to increase investment in the U.S. nuclear arsenal to craft a strategic force able to make deterrence credible across the full spectrum of operations.⁵ As

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then-President Obama noted in July 2016, NATO members “haven’t simply reaffirmed our enduring Article 5 obligations to our common security; we’re moving forward with the most significant reinforcement of our collective defense any time since the Cold War.”⁶

Appearances are deceiving. President Trump’s occasional digs at NATO’s relevance and calls for greater allied military spending aside, two decades of NATO expansion have changed the strategic situation in Europe from what it was during the Cold War.⁷ Although these changes improve the military stability of Europe on a day-to-day basis, they paradoxically undermine the credibility of the U.S. commitment—as the alliance’s strongest member and main military guarantor—to defend those NATO members most threatened by Russia. Put simply, NATO has become a tiered alliance: the U.S. promise to defend the allies most at risk of Russian aggression is ultimately implausible, while the pledge to

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defend other NATO members, though credible, is of limited relevance. The resulting strategic arrangement carries large dangers, as the United States risks having its promises revealed as meaningless and its East European allies risk being left isolated if Russia challenges the status quo. The longer Washington deceives itself into believing and acting otherwise, the more fraught this situation will become.

American Security Guarantees: Not Credible and Risky

The credibility of the U.S. commitment to its NATO allies has long been unclear. At root, credibility hinges on the perception in the minds of foreign decision-makers that a state has sufficient interest in a given issue that it is willing to pay a certain—potentially large—cost to obtain or secure that objective. Owing to the exorbitant prospective costs of a U.S.–Soviet nuclear exchange during the Cold War, regular transatlantic crises revolved around the question of whether the United States would trade “Boston for Bonn” in the event of a general European war.⁸ So long as the United States retained sole control of NATO’s decision to escalate past the nuclear threshold, U.S. policymakers faced a real problem in making Soviet policymakers and American allies alike believe that they would willingly take the nuclear plunge if events dictated.⁹ As Thomas Schelling noted long ago, it is inherently difficult to convince other actors that the United States will commit suicide for other states.¹⁰

Still, this problem was at least plausibly manageable during the Cold War.¹¹ Despite the prospective costs, the United States retained a large and pervasive interest in keeping Western Europe’s economic and military potential beyond

Soviet control. These objectives, in fact, heavily shaped the United States' Cold War commitment to European security as the United States moved (1) to defend Western Europe from potential Soviet machinations, and (2) to deter Soviet adventurism against the area in the first place.¹² The alternative was clear: if the Soviet Union were to dominate Europe's war-making strength, it might tip the balance of power against the United States, requiring a potentially ruinous counter-mobilization and global competition that an isolated United States might be unable to win. Geography reinforced this imperative, as failure to deter or defend against a Soviet assault across the inner-German border meant the USSR could quickly overrun the region. The result was a concerted effort by the United States to make its promise to defend its NATO allies as credible as possible by forward-deploying large military force and seeking ways to escalate a contest with the USSR should it prove necessary.¹³

Today, the situation is reversed. The grand bargain in which Washington kept its finger alone on the nuclear button remains intact; if the United States is to fully honor its treaty commitments, it must ultimately be willing to engage in a nuclear exchange with Russia for the sake of its allies. However, where the United States could plausibly claim to trade Boston for Bonn prior to 1991, no amount of reassurance can make the promise to trade Toledo for Tallinn credible today—the stakes of the game are too low.

No reassurance can make the promise to trade “Toledo for Tallinn” credible today.

Alliances function when states decide that their mutual preservation adds to each side's national security and can be attained at a cost proportional to the benefit. For better or worse, NATO's post-Cold War enlargement altered this equation by notionally committing the United States to defend a host of states in Eastern Europe of questionable relevance to U.S. security. Indeed, those states most immediately threatened by Russia—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, followed by Poland—are among the least important allies in crude geopolitical terms. The three Baltic states combined accounted for only 0.13 percent of total NATO defense expenditures and 0.26 percent of NATO members' GDP as of 2016; Poland represented 1.17 and 1.54 percent, respectively.¹⁴ American exchange with these states is similarly limited: trade with the Baltic states as a whole came to less than \$3 billion in 2015 against over \$3.75 trillion in total U.S. trade.¹⁵ Baldly stated, these states could disappear without compromising the United States' economic security or NATO's military viability. The questionable value of these states alone thus renders the U.S. commitment to their defense highly contestable.¹⁶ The American public, meanwhile, seems to recognize this very dynamic at some basic level, with 37 percent of U.S. citizens in a

2015 Pew Global Attitudes survey expressing reluctance with aiding a NATO ally threatened by Russia.¹⁷

Political geography further compounds NATO's problems. Not only can countries threatened by Russia be lost without compromising NATO's ability to defend the rest of Europe, but even an expanded Russia would be poorly placed to dominate the continent. Belarus and Ukraine, after all, lie across any Russian advance into Central Europe, while simply retaining control of a unified Germany affords NATO a defense-in-depth it never enjoyed during the Cold War. Add in the reality that Russia is an economic, political, and military pygmy compared to the Soviet Union everywhere except in the nuclear realm, and the United States' intrinsic interest in those states most immediately threatened by Russia is substantially less than during the Cold War.¹⁸ Simply put, unlike the situation vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, Russian dominance over the Baltic states, Poland, and other new(er) NATO members would not result in the United States' eviction from Europe and concomitant loss of the region's economic or military strength.

Military pressures reinforce these dilemmas. Whereas a conventional defense of Western Europe was at least a possibility prior to 1989–1991, distance, reinforcement rates, and force-to-space ratios mean a conventional defense in Eastern Europe is not a realistic option today.¹⁹ War games by the Rand Corporation highlight the problem in the Baltics context. To be sure, forces stationed in Eastern Europe can serve as a tripwire to deter Russian aggression by seemingly promising to bring NATO members' collective strength to bear.²⁰ If deterrence fails, however, and short of committing nearly all of NATO's conventional ground and air power to the theater, even heavily-armored NATO forces can only slow down a Russian assault and promise a lengthy East–West conflict. Yet here, NATO again faces real limits to fighting in and around NATO's East European members.²¹ Though the United States can threaten conventional escalation, it cannot credibly commit to fighting for states of low strategic value if doing so risks a strategic nuclear exchange.

Nevertheless, the United States would undoubtedly face calls for precisely such steps that might lead to nuclear escalation in any losing conventional fight. Moreover, since any sustained effort to defend or retake the Baltics requires NATO conventional operations close to the Russian homeland, it risks attacks (accidental or otherwise) on Russian territory that invite an escalatory response. Russian anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) assets used against reinforcements flowing into the region—to say nothing of direct attacks on Poland—may also result in strikes on Russian-owned Kaliningrad, generating a similar escalation problem. In short, NATO cannot readily defend its Eastern flank through conventional means, faces implausibly large strategic risks if it tries, and so confronts an insoluble credibility crisis.²² Indeed, that Estonia is now preparing to wage a lengthy guerilla

war against a prospective Russian occupying force, while Lithuania is slowly moving to reinstate a military draft suggests vulnerable states recognize the United States' credibility dilemma and are hedging their security bets as best they can.²³

If anything, the main function of NATO deployments has been to antagonize a Russia that has far more at stake in Eastern Europe for geographic and historical reasons than the United States.²⁴ To be clear, NATO expansion in and of itself did not cause East–West relations to deteriorate.²⁵ However, U.S.-backed efforts to expand NATO eastward and subsequently deploy military forces to the region have been met with Russian pushback—Russian overflights of NATO airspace, diplomatic obfuscation, and military deployments have all accelerated in recent years.²⁶ Assuming NATO efforts in Eastern Europe continue, Russian leaders are prone to respond with further bellicosity that generates further strains in NATO–Russian relations.²⁷ Paradoxically, the resulting insecurity spiral increases the likelihood that efforts to deter Russia will result in deterrence failure.²⁸ Combined with the possibility that a NATO–Russia crisis may see Russia escalate the confrontation in order to de-escalate the situation, the risk of miscalculation is clear.²⁹ Collectively, this situation simultaneously invites Russian actions designed to discredit the United States in the eyes of its allies, gives threatened allies incentives to force events with Russia to tie American hands and deepen the United States' involvement, and increases the risk of an action-reaction cycle.³⁰

The net result is a dangerous standoff. To deter aggression, NATO relies on a collective security promise ultimately capped by the pledge that the United States will risk its own survival by putting its nuclear forces to use on behalf of its allies. For the Baltic states, Poland, and—potentially in the future—NATO's other post-Cold War additions, this pledge is no longer realistic on strategic or military grounds. The steps the United States and its allies are taking to reassure the most vulnerable members of NATO, however, increase the odds of a NATO–Russia crisis. Yet if and when a crisis erupts, the clarifying effect of a prospective nuclear exchange is apt to cause cooler heads to prevail and encourage U.S. efforts to restrain the dogs of war—*revealing that American security guarantees to Eastern Europe were not credible in the first place*. The more the United States continues pretending that its commitment to all NATO members is created equal, the more it risks creating a situation that will reveal the shibboleth of the U.S. commitment.

Managing NATO as a Tiered Alliance

NATO, in sum, is now a two-tiered alliance.³¹ There are some members for whom the United States might have an interest in risking nuclear war to protect; the

majority, including those states challenged by Russia today, are not worth the cost. The United States can, of course, threaten conventional escalation on the latter's behalf for a period of time, but doing so may (1) itself increase the risk of a deterrence failure by abetting a spiral with Russia, and (2) force a situation that reveals the implausibility of American nuclear pledges.³² Unless the United States is interested in relinquishing dominance over NATO nuclear matters—a seminal feature of NATO strategy since the early 1960s—the issue then becomes managing the dilemma.³³

Although rarely discussed by U.S. policymakers, three options are theoretically possible. First, the United States might seek some way to push those states that it is unlikely to defend to the last full measure out of NATO.³⁴ The benefit of this option is clear: by reducing its formal commitment to these states, the United States would presumably face fewer calls to put its own security on the line (even if it would never actually do so in the first place). Moreover, to the extent that some degree of NATO–Russian tension can be traced to NATO's creep into Eastern Europe and Russia's resulting fear of NATO encirclement, then reducing NATO's East European presence may improve relations with Russia and mitigate the chances of an East–West crisis in the first place.³⁵

Still, evicting members from NATO is likely a political non-starter. For one thing, the alliance lacks a mechanism for eviction—states can decide to leave on their own, but their partners cannot force them out.³⁶ Crafting an eviction mechanism, meanwhile, is likely to be a nigh-impossible task. Since NATO political decisions require allied unanimity, if the United States were to propose creating an eviction mechanism and have NATO Heads of State endorse it, states on the chopping block would understandably veto the option. Notably, the same constraint would hold even if the United States tried to create incentives for states to withdraw from the alliance by, for instance, having NATO mandate a minimum security contribution that the countries in question could not meet: again, states threatened with the loss of NATO protections would be able to use NATO's consensual decision-making style to stymie any U.S.-led effort. These practical difficulties are reinforced by the bureaucratic and ideological realities that many elites on both sides of the Atlantic—including several members of the Trump administration—continue to see the alliance as a cornerstone of the post-1945 international order, and so have a personal and bureaucratic stake in keeping the alliance intact.³⁷

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Second, the United States could endorse plans to transform NATO into a less-explicitly military, and more political, alliance. This would see American

policymakers gradually wind up the premium placed on NATO for European security by reducing the diplomatic, financial, and doctrinal attention on transatlantic affairs. As a corollary, U.S. policymakers could privately clarify that they interpret NATO Article V—calling on NATO members to consider an attack on one an attack on all and take “such action as it deems necessary ... to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area”—in narrow fashion. Given that NATO’s founders intentionally left it ambiguous what assistance states will “deem necessary” at any given point, U.S. leaders could here announce they see the matter largely involving diplomatic and economic backing short of force; this would be particularly true for countries geographically far removed from the actual North Atlantic area. Unlike the first option, this approach would thus use existing NATO structures to reduce the scope and function of the alliance, thereby watering down American security commitments.

Yet, while offering a backdoor to U.S. strategic adjustment, this second approach carries with it the aforementioned problem of allied spoilers. Facing an eroding American commitment, NATO allies on the front lines with Russia would face stark and growing incentives to force a crisis in a bid to ratchet up tensions and reverse the American withdrawal.³⁸ This effort may not work, but the danger would exist as long as NATO’s transformation was ongoing. Furthermore, it is worth recalling that it was precisely the idea that NATO after the Cold War would be a transformed alliance more political than military in nature that helped U.S. policymakers justify NATO’s eastward expansion, and so helped bring about the present crisis in transatlantic credibility.³⁹ It is therefore questionable whether policymakers, having recently decided to again treat NATO as a military vehicle, can reverse course a third time and treat NATO as a political organization at a moment when relations with Russia seemingly necessitate a military response.

Finally, American policymakers can pursue a third option by preparing for the day after the shaky foundations of the United States’ security guarantees are revealed while nominally maintaining existing American commitments. This may be a difficult task and rife with risks, but may be the best option available. The aftermath of a crisis—such as a Russian invasion of the Baltics which the United States opts not to escalate, a *fait accompli* akin to the Russian seizure of Crimea, or a limited seizure of Baltic territory that NATO did not fully contest—is liable to see pervasive questions from remaining allies over the future of American security guarantees. Such questions are likely to be overlaid with domestic U.S. disputes over who “lost” the ally or territory, alongside pressures from vested interest groups to showcase U.S. resolve to its remaining partners. Although it cannot eliminate these issues, preparation can ameliorate post-crisis dilemmas through a combination of public diplomacy, private engagement, and unilateral strategizing.

Day-after preparations consist of two elements. First, policymakers must be prepared to offer remaining partners compelling explanations as to why the United

States de facto abandoned one or more allies. Again, questions over the future credibility of American security guarantees would abound in a post-abandonment world. Still, this environment is also likely to see a growing sense of an even-more pressing Russian threat. Among critical allies, policymakers should be prepared to use this renewed sense of a Russian threat to beat back questions over the future of the American pacifier. States, after all, tend to balance in the face of external threats while husbanding resources to address those threats at the most propitious time and place. Hence, American policymakers can use post-abandonment fears of Russia to (1) reinforce solidarity among remaining NATO members, (2) remind remaining allies that the United States now has a proportionally larger interest in guaranteeing their security, and (3) explain prior American abandonment by pointing out the limited utility and difficulties of acting in those particular episodes. Just as General Omar Bradley warned that a war against China over Korea in 1951 would have been “the wrong war, at the wrong time, in the wrong place,” so should future leaders be prepared to argue that defending all of Eastern Europe at unlimited cost would be “the wrong operation, at the wrong time, in the wrong place.”⁴⁰

Second, and relatedly, U.S. policymakers must work among themselves to cultivate a domestic base of support to resist pressures to stand firm on every remaining commitment. This requires not only discussions inside the U.S. government to outline the steps that should be taken after abandoning states such as the Baltics and Poland, but also quietly reaching out to key stakeholders in the think tank, university, NGO, and media communities. Like conversations within the alliance, discussions should involve plans and procedures for (1) managing expectations going forward and (2) using the Russian threat to buttress the newly-circumscribed alliance, all while (3) calibrating the United States’ political-military response. The objective throughout should be to generate thinking so that, if the American credibility bluff is called, U.S. strategists would have guidelines in place to shape a cohesive response focused on truly vital interests and backed by the requisite political support.

Of course, preparing for the day-after leaves open the question of where to draw the line regarding future abandonment. This is not so much an issue of managing European concerns—so long as European actors feel threatened by

Preparing for the day-after is a third option.

Russia, they have reasons to seek American backing and overlook prior U.S. abandonment—so much as the United States itself considering what its interests in Europe entail and where the boundary falls in defending them. There is no hard and fast answer, since the solution will change over time depending on NATO and Russian capabilities,

and Eastern Europe’s value to the United States in light of the distribution of power.

Still, given Russia's relative geographic isolation, economic and military weaknesses, and the European distribution of power, a NATO that simply contained all the states that were in the organization in 1991 seems to be more than enough. Even this "rump" NATO would enjoy significant defense in depth, control the majority of Europe's economic and military potential, and encompass most of the United States' main European trading partners. Again, recognizing that this division exists does not mean *ex ante* abandoning NATO members beyond this line; after all, doing so might otherwise invite a Russian test of American resolve, or steps by regional allies to precipitate a crisis and try to reverse American retrenchment. Nevertheless, it does call for U.S. policymakers to shape their internal plans and preparations in light of NATO's two-tier status.

To be clear, none of these options are politically palatable. Moreover, any effort to adjust the United States' NATO commitments will be at once contentious and politically expensive given the central role support for the alliance has played in post-Cold War U.S. grand strategy debates.⁴¹ Strategic stability, however, has never been easy. Insofar as the United States is a member of NATO to ensure its own well-being—and it cannot be otherwise—policymakers would thus be better served getting ahead of the looming transatlantic crisis rather than wishing away the problem. Ultimately, at a moment when the U.S. security guarantee is no longer credible for all of NATO, it is necessary to recalibrate the American role in continental security affairs.

The Commitment Myth Today

Proponents of the status quo will contend that the cure outlined here is worse than the disease. Having undertaken commitments to defend Eastern Europe, the United States cannot fail to back its allies lest it ruin its credibility, encourage nuclear proliferation among insecure states throughout Europe (and potentially beyond), and destroy NATO. To do this so the logic goes, the United States should deploy forces to Eastern Europe that ensure that the United States has escalation dominance in the conventional and nuclear realms to deter Russia in peacetime, or force Russia to back down during a crisis. And, since Russia would risk its own destruction by threatening states backed by American nuclear guarantees, preparing to abandon parts of Eastern Europe is unnecessary since deterrence—provided the United States is able and willing to escalate—can hold.⁴²

These arguments are flawed. In a world of robust second-strike nuclear forces, escalation dominance can, at best, limit the damage that the United States faces; it will not be zero. Moreover, in the net assessment of the interests at stake, Russia would win out: Eastern Europe is important to the United States for what it might say about U.S. credibility, but matters to Russian territorial

security, national identity, and the political survival of Russia's leaders. Combined, asymmetry of interests and high costs means that it is neither easy to deter Russia, even if a fuller range of military tools were available, nor a game American policy-makers are likely to play. Simply put, if a crisis erupts, the balance of interests and resolve would favor Russia no matter what assets are at the United States' disposal.

As importantly, the notion that U.S. credibility will collapse and nuclear proliferation take off if the United States backs away from existing NATO commitments rests on shaky foundations. As research by Professor Daryl Press highlights, allies and adversaries tend to see higher credibility in a state's promises

Abandoning certain allies may actually increase the credibility of remaining U.S. security guarantees.

the more a state's interests are engaged in the issue at hand and the greater its capacity to advance or protect these interests.⁴³ Thus, even if the United States abandons certain allies, American credibility would remain intact provided the United States has an interest in the security of remaining partners and the means to protect them. If anything, abandoning certain allies may actually increase the credibility of American security guarantees to remaining NATO members, since the more aggressive Russia becomes and further west it

moves, the proportionally larger the American stake is in remaining allies and the stronger the American incentive is in holding the line. Added to the reality that Central–West European states are apt to be even more interested in obtaining allies if Russia expands, then the dangers of the United States backing down are much reduced. Counterintuitively, a shrunken NATO recently witness to some American abandonment and growing fears of Russia may actually be a NATO in which the American commitment becomes more—not less—credible.

Time to Consolidate NATO

For nearly 30 years, American policymakers pushed NATO enlargement as a way of consolidating the United States' Cold War victory. They did so seemingly convinced that the United States would never have to do that for which NATO was originally intended—fight a war against an adversary capable of hurting the United States.⁴⁴ Today, a variety of changes render war a possibility, calling into question the credibility of American pledges undertaken at the height of the post-Cold War era. Though many analysts seek means to make the American promise to all NATO members credible, there are good reasons to doubt whether

any American pledge to commit national suicide for allies of dubious importance will truly be viable.

Instead of struggling against the reality, a sounder course would recognize NATO's two-tiered status and accommodate U.S. diplomacy to this situation. The key is not necessarily to preventively change formal American security commitments. Instead, the United States must prepare politically and diplomatically for the possibility that some state might call the American security bluff, while accepting the constraints this risk imposes on American foreign policy. Carrying out these steps will, in turn, require both careful coordination throughout the U.S. government and foreign policy establishment, alongside efforts to sustain relationships with those states deemed vital to American interests. If successful, this course may ultimately allow for a more cohesive American policy vis-à-vis Europe and Russia, while reducing the dangers of brinkmanship and crises in the first place. Trading Toledo for Tallinn is not credible—but U.S. strategists can still minimize the fallout from three decades of NATO enlargement that has left the United States exposed in an increasingly conflictual Europe.

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