



President Harry S. Truman (*seated*) signs a proclamation declaring the twelve-nation North Atlantic Pact into effect 24 August 1949 in the White House's Oval Office, Washington, D.C. Witnessing the signing are (*from left to right*) Sir Frederic Hoyer-Millar of the United Kingdom, Ambassador Henrik de Kauffmann of Denmark, Canadian Embassy Counselor W. D. Matthews, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, Ambassador Wilhelm Munthe de Morgenstjerne of Norway, Ambassador Henri Bonnet of France, Ambassador Baron Robert Silvercrux of Belgium, Ambassador Pedro Pereira of Portugal (partly obscured by Acheson), Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Netherlands Minister Jonkheer Otto Reuchlin, and Italian Embassy Counselor Mario Lucielli. (Photo courtesy of the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum)

From the Hindu Kush to the Banks of the Dnieper

NATO's Promise and Peril in a New Reality

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The most successful alliance in world history began three-quarters of a century ago in the wake of the most significant conflict the world had ever seen. The Western powers that defeated fascism in Italy and Nazi Germany came together not to fight a war but to deter the country that had borne the brunt of Adolf Hitler's aggression, Soviet Russia. After absorbing some 80 percent of the casualties, and in the wake of a devastating war in Europe, Soviet Russia dropped an "Iron Curtain" over Eastern Europe, in the words of the always quotable Winston Churchill.¹

Western concern over the Soviet Union long predated the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) formation, of course, but that antipathy flipped when Hitler's legions invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. Underlining the change, Churchill joked to his secretary after the initiation of Operation Barbarossa, "If Hitler invaded Hell, I would at least make a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons."² Postwar Soviet intentions toward Europe were primarily an American and British concern, even as the USSR broke the back of the Nazi juggernaut. Hitler had only five days to live by the time Soviet and American troops linked up at the Elbe River in Germany on 25 April 1945, eventually leading to separate Russian and Western visions emerging for postwar Europe.

NATO's establishment to confront Soviet aggression was never a foregone conclusion. There was resistance in Europe and America, as old ways of thinking gave way to the ideas of reconstruction and integration as the best hopes for obtaining peace and security. However, since its tumultuous birth, NATO's ability to maintain credible deterrence in the face of threats and to adapt in changing times has reinforced its vital importance. Founded to "Keep the Americans in, the Soviets out, and the Germans down," as the wag put it, the Western Alliance now faces both opportunity and peril.³ Western states are confronting an old threat from the East, and new countries, such as Finland, Sweden, and Ukraine, have actively sought membership. Even some in America, the founding and indispensable pillar of NATO, question its commitment to the cause for the first time in five generations.

Toward Integration, Peace, and Security

Competing visions for postwar Europe collided at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945.⁴ Continuing Franklin Roosevelt's foreign policy, Harry Truman came to the conference to preserve the wartime alliance between the United States and Great Britain and to gain cooperation from the USSR to manage European peace and security. The ever-pragmatic Churchill was concerned that the Soviets would consider Germany's demise an opportunity to establish dominance over the European continent. As usual, he was right.

Joseph Stalin, citing the enormous Soviet sacrifices during the war, demanded basing on the Bosphorus Strait, German war reparations, and refused to endorse democratic elections in Eastern Europe. Subsequent meetings of foreign ministers in 1945 and 1946 only confirmed the emerging reality of two spheres of influence. As Churchill correctly anticipated, the Soviets consolidated gains in their sphere. They expanded their influence outside it through political intrigue and military pressure in the case of Czechoslovakia, Greece, and Türkiye.

Soviet aggression forced Western leaders to lay aside ancient rivalries and unite voluntarily for the first time in history. After much debate in Congress, the United States pursued

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the Economic Recovery Plan, better known as the Marshall Plan, as the best approach for confronting Soviet expansion and suppressing subversive communist movements in Western Europe. The Committee of European Economic Cooperation, established in

the United States.⁸ That proposal gained strength after the Soviets engineered the ouster of Czechoslovakian President Edvard Beneš a month later. Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom signed the Treaty of Brussels on 17 March



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1947, distributed Economic Recovery Plan funds and demonstrated the benefits of U.S.-European economic cooperation.⁵ Deeper integration occurred in 1951 with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community—a precursor to the European Union.⁶

The idea behind reconstruction and integration was straightforward. Instead of competing over limited territory and resources, Western Europe would develop institutions to foster cooperation and manage interstate affairs peacefully. Norms and rules would dictate the settlement of disputes instead of war. Unfortunately, building peace and security solely through economic integration was impossible with the Soviet threat looming. Security was essential to allow economic integration—or, given the danger, capitalism. To this end, British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin and French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault started a diplomatic process that eventually led to the birth of NATO.

NATO's origins date back to the Treaty of Dunkirk in March 1947, when Britain and France signed a mutual defense pact that grew to include the Benelux countries.⁷ Bevin and Bidault wrote a treaty that committed member countries to defend each other from a revanchist Germany as strategic misdirection; in fact, Germany was less of a concern than the Soviet Union. While the treaty alleviated French concerns about another war with Germany, it also served an essential function in coalescing Western European security concerns around the Soviet threat.

In January 1948, Bevin took the idea of integration further through a speech to the British Parliament urging the organization of the “kindred souls of Europe” in a union that would eventually require the support of

1948, forming the Western Union.⁹

However, without American support, the Western Union could not mount a credible defense against Soviet arms. The Truman administration supported an alliance with the newly unified Europeans but confronted difficulties convincing Congress of the need for U.S. involvement in European security—a problem again rearing its nativist head today. U.S. resistance to joining this alliance came from both political parties but was most acute among Republicans. Conservative isolationists like Sen. Robert A. Taft argued that America should avoid entangling European alliances.¹⁰ Truman made Republican resistance a campaign talking point in 1948. “The communists know the Republican record,” he proclaimed in a Harlem speech, “even if the Republicans hope that the rest of us do not ... The communists want us to get out of Europe and Asia ... They know that they cannot get what they want as long as the Democratic Party controls [the presidency].”¹¹ Whatever the merits of Truman's claim that the communists preferred a Republican victory, his reelection secured a more direct American commitment to the security of Europe. On 4 April 1949, the Western Union nations signed the North Atlantic Treaty with the United States, Canada, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland, signaling a broad effort to achieve peace and security through institutional integration. NATO's first supreme commander was Gen. Dwight Eisenhower; his election to the presidency in 1952 quelled the isolationist influence in America for some time and established an extraordinary bipartisan American

consensus on the near sanctity of American commitment to NATO for the next four generations.¹²

Seventy-Five Years of Success

From 1949 to 1991, the Cold War remained cold in Europe because NATO maintained a credible deterrent to Soviet conventional and nuclear attacks. Credibility came from several factors. First, the United States stationed large numbers of troops on the continent, linking U.S. and European security interests. Thus, alliance members aggregated conventional capabilities to confront a potential Soviet attack. Second, the strategy of flexible response credibly integrated conventional and nuclear deterrence.¹³ The strategy of flexible response reinforced conventional forces with tactical and strategic nuclear weapons, which provided political leaders with a more comprehensive range of options in conflict. This strategy eliminated, in theory, the unpalatable dilemma of capitulation to the Soviets or strategic nuclear exchange. The success of this strategy stemmed from the cohesion created by the U.S. commitment to NATO.

Given that alliance cohesion is a critical capability, the Kremlin devoted much time and effort during the Cold War to propaganda activities meant to divide the Western Alliance. As early as April 1949, less than a month after NATO's founding, the Soviets published an article in the *New York Times* claiming the new organization was offensive, undermined the United Nations, excluded the Soviet Union, and categorically eroded commitments made at Potsdam.¹⁴ Stalin's famous "Peace Note on Germany" in 1952, calling for the reunification of Germany as neutral, attempted to present the USSR as peaceful and the United States as the source of the Cold War confrontation.¹⁵ Henry Kissinger noted that the tactic failed because Western leaders understood that negotiations ran the "risk of a collapse of all that had been built in the Atlantic Alliance."¹⁶ In 1955, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) joined NATO with equal status and became one of its most influential members. In the late 1960s, German Chancellor Willy Brandt embraced *Ostpolitik* (Eastern Policy) with the German Democratic Republic in the East, which implied normalizing relations with the Soviets. Still, despite some political pressure to do so, Brandt did not allow his policies to undermine West German security commitments to

NATO.¹⁷ He understood well that the alliance was the security institution that provided the necessary peace and security that enabled overarching European integration.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the unity of NATO in the Cold War occurred during the early 1980s after the Soviets deployed SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles in the late 1970s. The decision to deploy these missiles was viewed as a betrayal of Kissinger's détente policy and caused much debate in the West on how to respond. Ronald Reagan won the presidency in 1980 with an assertive policy of confronting the Soviets. He committed to deploying Pershing II missiles to Germany to counter the SS-20 threat and bolster the alliance's flexible response options. This support caused outrage in certain political blocs inside the FRG. To attack this fissure, the Soviets used organizations such as the World Peace Council (WPC), a communist front organization, to portray U.S. policy as recklessly escalatory. According to declassified CIA reports, the Soviets used the WPC to "generate political pressure at the national level [in Europe] to oblige non-communist governments to support or, at a minimum, to acquiesce before Soviet demands and preconditions."¹⁸ The activities of the WPC had some effect on the FRG within the German Social Democratic Party. Eventually, WPC activities contributed to the establishment of the German Green Party, a splinter from the German Social Democratic Party. The Green Party was anti-NATO, against U.S. participation in European security, and a strong proponent of normalizing relations with the Kremlin.¹⁹ Reagan succeeded in getting the Pershing IIs deployed despite political pressure from these groups. Ultimately, these deployments led to opening dialogue with the Soviets, resulting in the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty.²⁰ This treaty removed both the Pershing II and SS-20s from Europe. Thus, NATO's solidarity in the face of Soviet pressure changed the security environment and led to a successful conclusion to the long Cold War. It also forced the alliance to adapt to new international realities.

Alliance formation is a product of the social, political, and security realities of the times. The creation of NATO was rooted in the threat posed when the Soviet Union exploited postwar economic circumstances with leftist political agitation backed by a robust military presence in Eastern Europe. However, Mikhail

Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* initiatives created new realities that created questions about the Western Alliance's future. As Michael Howard presciently wrote in 1983, the utility of an alliance must not focus on "only whether the existing solutions are still valid for the problems that evoked them, but whether the problems themselves remain unchanged, and whether attitudes stereotyped in the late 1940s will still be relevant half a century later."²¹ Throughout the 1990s, NATO member countries determined that the political character of the Soviet Union may have changed, but the nature of security challenges remained constant. In this fluid security environment, the Western Alliance proved remarkably adept at adapting its structure to new realities.

The Soviet Union's demise from 1990 to 1991 did not change the fact that the nature of European security remained unchanged in three fundamental ways. First, in the Balkans, an ethnoreligious conflict raged as Yugoslavia came apart at the seams and threatened to spread to other parts of the continent. The outcome demonstrated that European peace and security did not only hinge on NATO-Russia relations. Second, European leaders witnessed the benefits of decreased interstate rivalry from "institutional binding" through political organization. While indeed a security organization, NATO was also a political organization that facilitated interstate cooperation and contributed to an unprecedented period of peace and security in Europe. Nobody wanted to go back to the days of European power politics. Finally, while the Soviet Union dissolved as a state, the Russian Federation remained a formidable presence that could threaten smaller countries in the East. It is no accident that President Lech Wałęsa of Poland, Václav Havel of the Czech Republic, and Árpád Göncz of Hungary met with U.S. President Bill Clinton in early 1993, begging admission to NATO to protect their newfound freedom and independence.²² Their respective histories predated the Soviet Union and underscored the innate expansionist tendencies of the Kremlin. These security realities influenced how NATO adapted after the Cold War.

Intending to reorient its focus from the Soviets to a more politically focused agenda, NATO reformed itself while maintaining an ability to respond militarily to emerging security crises. President George H. W. Bush

and Secretary-General Manfred Wörner started this process as early as 1989, lowering conventional and nuclear force levels while reducing the number of exercises and alerts.²³ In 1990, the NATO Military Committee announced that the Warsaw Pact was no longer a threat and restructured its military forces toward a less threatening multinational orientation. These military reforms, intended to assuage Russian fears of NATO, were reinforced with substantial political reforms that went even further and signaled NATO's new perspective vis-à-vis Russia.

At the 1991 Rome Summit, for example, the Western Alliance announced the creation of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council to facilitate East-West dialogue. The January 1994 Brussels Summit announced the creation of the Partnership for Peace and opened the alliance for deep cooperation with Russia and other Eastern European countries. The Russians only halfheartedly participated in Partnership for Peace because, as Russian ambassador Andrei Kozyrev expressed in 1994, the initiative was acceptable for "small poodles" but insufficient for "an elephant like Russia."²⁴

Some of NATO's changes were controversial. For instance, NATO's *Strategic Concept* evolved during the 1990s to incorporate the "Euro-Atlantic area" and "areas on the periphery" of the alliance.²⁵ Since the alliance expanded with fifteen new members in 1990, the so-called "out of area" jurisdiction vastly increased NATO's operational area and facilitated its commitment to supporting America in Afghanistan. However, it is the Kremlin's recent military adventurism, not NATO strategy or policy, that legitimized the continuation of NATO.

Writing in 1999 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of NATO, historian Michael Howard characterized the organization as "an unhappy successful marriage," and the analogy was undoubtedly appropriate.²⁶ As is the case with any family, feuds periodically erupted on how the members of the Western Alliance should interact on issues such as the proper level of defense outlays of each member's nuclear deterrence strategies and the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. French President Charles de Gaulle separated the French military from NATO's Integrated Command Structure in 1966 over disagreements related to command and control. Still, France never stopped participating in NATO exercises, and full reintegration into the Integrated Command Structure was reestablished in 2004.²⁷ The

ability to work through such disagreements is rooted in the West's singular commitment to demonstrate a credible defense against external attack.

NATO is a defensive organization that relies on collective security to deter aggression.²⁸ The charter's famous Article 5 enshrines the concept "that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all."²⁹ For the Western Alliance to adequately deter, as Thomas Schelling noted, it must make the potential adversary "believe the threat" of collective response to aggression.³⁰ Thus, the credibility of response closely connects to the commitment of every alliance member to consistently signal commitment through public pronouncements, exercises, forward stationing of troops, and, when necessary, combat operations.³¹ Throughout its seventy-five-year existence, the Western Alliance successfully signaled its commitment, maintained a credible deterrence posture, and contained the Soviet Union. The support to the United States after the 9/11 attacks was arguably the strongest signal of commitment in its history.

Less than twenty-four hours after the deadly 9/11 attacks on the United States, the Western Alliance invoked Article 5 for the first and only time in its history and committed to America's defense. During its twenty-year commitment to Afghanistan, NATO member states from Europe lost 1,144 troops killed in action. They committed over \$49 billion in security investments, mainly from the UK and Germany.³² To be sure, Allied participation came with domestic political controversy and national caveats, but the investment in blood and treasure is indisputable.³³ The failure in Afghanistan had many fathers, but an absence of NATO support was not one of them. In many ways, NATO's ability to adapt to changing times enabled its extended support in Afghanistan.

NATO's Future: Beyond the Dnieper

Through its unlawful, unnecessary, and misguided foreign policy since 2008, the Kremlin has validated every concern of those who advocated for NATO's continuation in the 1990s and expansion in the following decades. During this time, Russia illegally occupied Georgian territory, annexed the Crimean Peninsula, invaded Ukraine, and, by extension, threatened Western Europe. These actions reinvigorated NATO's purpose

as an organization whose *raison d'être* is the defense of Western democracies from Russian aggression. Finland and Sweden walked a middle line in East-West rivalry throughout their respective histories. Still, even they have abandoned neutrality in favor of NATO's peace and security assurances in reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Their invasion prompted Western Europe to unite in providing bilateral assistance to Ukraine to defend its territorial sovereignty. The Baltic countries offered U.S.-made Javelin antitank weapons to Ukrainian military forces. After the invasion, military aid increased exponentially with the provision of Next Generation Light Anti-tank Weapons from Luxembourg; Bayraktar TB-2 drones from Türkiye; tanks from the Czech Republic; and, after a time but quite significantly, High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems from the United States.³⁴ This robust support played a significant role in Ukraine's ability to reverse Russia's advance on Kyiv, at least for the first two years of the war.³⁵ The aid has not been one-sided; Ukraine has been generous in sharing military lessons learned from the conflict with NATO even as it fights for its national existence. NATO recently published a compendium of lessons for its military forces to implement immediately to enhance deterrence of further Russian aggression. Mobile training teams from the National Defence University of Ukraine visited professional military education institutions in Europe and the United States to pass on battlefield lessons rapidly.³⁶

As of September 2023, the United States has invested \$46.6 billion of humanitarian, financial, and military aid to help Ukraine maintain its sovereignty, and the EU has pledged over €400 million for Ukraine's defense.³⁷ Although the exact numbers are uncertain, U.S. officials estimate that approximately seventy thousand Ukrainian soldiers have been killed or wounded since Russia invaded.³⁸ Ukraine's willingness to fight and die for independence has opened the way for NATO membership.

In the July 2023 Vilnius Summit, NATO reaffirmed its 2008 commitment to bring Ukraine into the Western Alliance.³⁹ Opening the door to Ukraine merely acknowledges that sovereign countries have a right to determine their security arrangements. However, Ukraine's entry into NATO and its survival as an independent nation are not foregone conclusions.

Russia is engaged in a pervasive and effective information operations campaign to undermine Western support for Ukraine. Its efforts have slowed the flow of aid and created operational advantages for Russian military forces.

For seventy-five years, NATO has bound Europe

Putin to steal Ukraine's independence and put at risk the freedom of all of Europe? The implications will reverberate around the world.

It is difficult to overstate NATO's success over the past seventy-five years, or how critical American support has been to that success. Just over a century ago, the European

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and the United States together against aggressors from Moscow to the Hindu Kush. The alliance now faces its most difficult challenge since 9/11. To defeat irredentism in Europe again, the West must remain firm in its principles of democracy, peace, and security. Ukraine is the frontline in that battle. Meanwhile, while NATO membership is Ukraine's best hope for a prosperous future, the fate of Europe and the world also hinges on the fate of Ukraine.⁴⁰ Ukraine's demise would signal to other dictators that the established order is ineffective and legitimize other revanchist regimes. The repercussions would resound far beyond NATO's boundaries.⁴¹

If the West fully commits to providing Ukraine with needed military capabilities, it can enable the country's success in its war for independence.⁴² Vladimir Putin's theory of victory is a war of attrition, but he knows that Russia's industrial base cannot keep pace with a united Western Alliance backing Ukraine. Thus, Putin has identified Western political will as a critical capability, and Russia's ongoing influence campaign targets this political will.⁴³

The next NATO Summit, scheduled for July 2024 in Washington, D.C., will be closely followed by an American presidential election that will be determined in part by the candidates' competing visions for continued American leadership of NATO. These two events will have enormous ramifications for whether NATO is still around to celebrate its centenary in 2049. Will the West stand firm on the principles of democratic integration that enabled NATO's success for generations, preventing the world wars that scarred the continent in the first half of the twentieth century, or will it allow

balance of power became unbalanced because of the rising power of a unified Germany. An interlocking set of alliances designed to contain that power created a delicate balance that toppled into the First World War, the deadliest in world history, killing more than twenty million directly and another twenty million as a result of the great flu that originated in Camp Funston, Kansas, and spread rapidly through populations weakened by war.

America joined that war late, but the latent power of the new world led to Germany's defeat, saving an exhausted France and an England that could no longer provide an offshore balancer to keep the peace in Europe. In the wake of the "War to End All Wars"—since no one could imagine ever doing that again—America decided that it was safe behind its oceans and could afford to ignore the rising tide of fascism on two continents. On 7 December 1941, the folly of an "America First" strategy was exposed on the worst day America experienced for the next sixty years.

America's unflinching commitment to NATO prevented World War III, saving millions of lives. It was the founding security concept for the greatest period of peace and prosperity the world has ever seen. After the horrors of the First and Second World Wars, which killed more than one hundred million people in a little more than a generation, the absence of great power war for the next four generations has been a boon that few could have predicted but from which all peoples worldwide have benefited.

Pulling the plug on NATO when Putin's regime has demonstrated a willingness to lose tens of thousands of soldiers in a mad attempt to restore the Russian empire is beyond folly; it is madness. Without American support,

NATO would collapse. The assumption that European peace and security can endure without NATO is as naïve as the idea that the world would live in harmony after the Great War and generates many dangerous questions. Could Western Europe continue to cooperate on a common security vision without NATO? Recent negotiations between France and Germany suggest that such an agreement is not guaranteed.⁴⁴ In the absence of NATO, who would provide nuclear deterrence against Russia? Would the absence of NATO force smaller countries toward nuclear proliferation to defend against Russia's ambition? Poland is eager to participate in NATO's nuclear sharing program, and the absence of NATO might force the country to pursue nuclear weapons independently.⁴⁵ Under significant pressure from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia, Ukraine voluntarily gave up nuclear weapons in 1994 and undoubtedly regrets the decision. The Putin regime will not stop at Kyiv, and the Kremlin's next move is likely an attack on the Suwalki Gap to create a land bridge to Kaliningrad like ongoing efforts to hold

the one it has established to Crimea; that would mean war with NATO.

A Europe "united and free" is not the birthright of any generation; like democracy itself, it must be created and preserved at enormous cost. The great promise of NATO is that a united and free Europe could be maintained without the blood that was spilled in that effort a century ago. Now, as it celebrates seventy-five years of shared work that has built a better present than its founders could have dreamed of, NATO faces its greatest challenge as its most important partner debates again whether it will devote American treasure and armed force to the pursuit of peace; it is no exaggeration to state that the lives of millions hang in the balance.

Happy seventy-fifth birthday, NATO, and good luck. You're going to need it. ■

This article represents the views of the authors and not those of the Army War College, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

Notes

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