

NATO'S EASTERN FLANK AND ITS FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

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Russia's annexation of Crimea and its invasion of eastern Ukraine unified the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and prompted the allies to beef up defenses. But the process of strengthening the alliance's Eastern flank is far from over. To complete it, NATO needs to develop a comprehensive, long-term strategy toward Russia based on unity, deterrence, and resilience. That effort is long overdue.

Much Unfinished Business

- NATO countries are divided in their assessments of the Russia threat, principally whether Russia would invade any of the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—on the front line of the alliance's Eastern flank. NATO has opted for modest rotating deployments to this region, with questionable deterrence value.
- Southern member states believe that NATO is not doing enough to bolster their security in contrast to what it is doing in the East. This weakens the alliance's sense of solidarity and cohesion.
- NATO faces logistical challenges in moving troops, tanks, and equipment across Europe to the Eastern flank.
- The alliance has long recognized that it needs to be resilient at home to prevail in a conflict, but it has not applied that philosophy to cyber vulnerabilities. Whether it be transportation networks, energy grids, or hospitals, member states' infrastructure is vulnerable.
- NATO's relations with Russia are based on the twenty-year-old NATO-Russia Founding Act, which allows for some dialogue in the NATO-Russia Council. But the geostrategic environment has radically changed, making the Founding Act anachronistic. Germany in particular remains unwilling to review the act, and there is silence in the alliance about other options.
- The U.S. dedication to defending NATO's Eastern flank seems unequivocal, but some member states remain nervous about that commitment.

Recommendations for NATO

- **Agree to a Russia strategy.** This includes having a frank and detailed discussion about long-term strategy, reconciling member states' different schools, and addressing the hybrid and cyber security threats.
- **Consider permanently basing troops in the Baltic states and Poland.** The present arrangements are too easy to dismantle. NATO's Eastern flank members need permanent reassurance.
- **Establish a Military Schengen.** Such an agreement would allow troops, aircraft, tanks, trains, and equipment to cross unhindered to the Eastern flank countries.
- **Revise the NATO-Russia Founding Act, or scrap it and present new options.** It may be the only accord between the alliance and Moscow, but that shouldn't mean it must be retained. The Founding Act and the NATO-Russia Council have run their course.

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