NATO's New Strategic Concept is Facing the Ukraine Crisis

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A huge military buildup near the Russian-Ukrainian border, bellicose statements from Russian President Vladimir Putin, tons of offensive weaponry (including main battle tanks, infantry combat vehicles, and Iskander short-range ballistic missile systems) make for a tense situation that raises the risk of conflict between the two countries to an unprecedented and dangerous level.

The protests and street movements that began when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign an association agreement with the E.U. in 2013 led to a change of power and the forced departure of the pro-Russian former president from Ukraine. Aware of the security threat that Ukraine's democratization and close ties to the E.U. presented for his country, Russian President Vladimir Putin knew that he had to decisively and devised a plan to annex the Crimean Peninsula that involved moving in from the area where the Russian navy's Black Sea Fleet (one of four major fleets responsible for protecting Russian interests in the Black Sea) is based. The U.S., NATO, and the E.U. reacted sharply to the planned annexation, prompting Putin to back pro-Russian separatist movements operating in the Donbas region of Ukraine, put his plans to annex Crimea on hold, and wait for the separatists to consolidate power.

The Ukrainian army was unsuccessful against pro-Russian separatist militias. As the fighting raged on, Ukraine and the pro-Russian separatists hammered out a 12-point ceasefire agreement (sometimes referred to as Minsk I) in September 2014. The deal quickly fell apart after both sides violated its terms and condition. About six months later, in February 2015, the warring parties agreed to a 13-point deal (often referred to as Minsk II or the Minsk Protocols) crafted by representatives from Russia, Ukraine, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the pro-Russian separatists. Shortly thereafter, the U.N. Security Council ratified the agreement in Resolution 2202.

The Minsk Protocols are still in force, but none of the articles in the agreement have been implemented adequately. Russia continues to advocate for implementing the Minsk Protocols, while the Kyiv government wants to change or abrogate the protocols. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2202, however, has made it difficult for Ukraine to move forward on this issue.

Why is the crisis in Ukraine and Russia escalating so much now, given that a possible conflict with Ukraine would harm Russia's interests in terms of the possibility of the cancellation of the Minsk Agreement? NATO and the E.U., both of which have been trying to prevent Russia's expansion in Eastern Europe and curb Russia's geostrategic area of influence while also maintaining the delicate balance in their ties with Russia, are sure to face significant challenges if the conflict in Ukraine escalates. The E.U.'s defense and security policies in light of the Ukraine-Russia conflict will be guided by the Strategic Compass, a common European strategy for addressing complex security threats that is scheduled for ratification in March. After the U.K. officially left the E.U. on January 31, 2020, however, France wanted to create a security framework independent of NATO.

NATO's approach to the Ukraine-Russia conflict likely will be guided by the alliance's 2010 Strategic Concept: Active Engagement, Modern Defence, a document that clearly and resolutely states NATO's values and strategic objectives for the next decade. Described in the document are the alliance's three core tasks: collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security. Execution of each task is intended to enable the alliance to respond politically and militarily in an evolving security environment. The document also emphasizes NATO solidarity, the importance of transatlantic consultation and the need to engage in a continuous process of reform.

In a view to the future, NATO Leaders asked Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in December 2019 to lead an initiative that came to be known as NATO 2030 and has been described in a June 2021 fact sheet as "a forward-looking reflection to make NATO stronger and fit for the future." Over a year's time, Stoltenberg gathered input from NATO's member countries, an independent group of experts, civil society, young people, parliamentarians, and the private sector. The input enabled Stoltenberg to develop concrete proposals for the NATO 2030 agenda, which NATO leaders approved when they met on June 14, 2021.

The NATO 2030 agenda calls on NATO allies to maintain political harmony and cohesion; reaffirm their commitment to NATO as a critical institution for the defense of the Euro-Atlantic region; reaffirm that the North Atlantic Council NATO is the principal advisory body on political and military matters; further strengthen NATO's role; work with the E.U. to revitalize NATO-E.U. relations at the highest level and establish cooperation in all areas; affirm that while unanimity is the basis of consensus and should remain a cornerstone of the alliance, efforts must be made to allow NATO to make and implement decisions promptly; and continue to implement unanimous decisions, while taking steps to mitigate the unanimity principle for decisions that require rapid reaction.

Though not specifically espoused in its 2030 agenda, NATO continues to believe that radical changes on the world stage over the next 10 years will lead to significant uncertainty about the rule-based international system. To combat this uncertainty, NATO leaders have said, disagreements among member countries on fundamental issues must be resolved through consensus and the political and military roles of NATO must be strengthened. For NATO to become a stabilizing global security organization in an environment of uncertainty, E.U. countries and the U.S. must agree again on democratic values and a rules-based international system under the umbrella of NATO. To this end, NATO's political structure and its decision-making mechanism must be reshaped, even if the principle of unanimity is maintained.

The NATO 2030 agenda is commendable in its attempt to strengthen the alliance on the world stage; however, what the U.S. needs most is for NATO to maintain its global power position and fight the threat of aggressive action by China. The urgent task ahead for the U.S. is to persuade NATO to update the 2010 Strategic Concept in line with U.S. priorities. At the same time, the U.S. needs to convince the E.U. that building its defense and security architecture under the name of strategic autonomy is unwise because it will weaken, rather than strengthen, NATO.

Ukraine crisis provides an opportunity for the U.S. to highlight the Russian threat in Eastern Europe and the E.U.'s vulnerability to that threat, given the E.U.'s proximity to Ukraine. Strategic autonomy for the E.U. is a distant project at this stage. Putin is aware of that the EU needs the U.S. and is building his course of action accordingly to get as many concessions as possible from NATO—concessions that include withdrawal of NATO forces from Russia's western borders, cancellation of plans to allow Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO, completion of Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Russia sees completion of the pipeline as a way to control the flow of an energy source that Europe needs and thus strengthen its dominance over the continent.

Ukraine's fulfillment of the Minsk Protocols was Russia's main expectation of provoking a conflict with Ukraine and NATO by extension. If Ukraine does make the concessions outlined in the Minsk Protocols—especially a demand that the Donbass region be granted autonomy—then a change of power in Ukraine is possible, given the strong nationalist feelings among the populace. Whether Russia would engage in an all-out war with Ukraine remains to be seen, but Ukraine still pays a heavy price. The opportunity for Ukraine to join NATO has all but vanished.

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