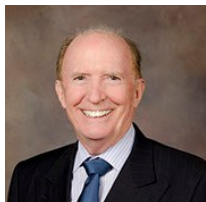


22 March 2022

A Crisis of Credibility: the United States, NATO, and Ukraine



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This week, an emergency [NATO summit](#) will convene in Brussels to deal with Russia's aggression in Ukraine. It is clearly designed to reinforce allied unity in opposition to Vladimir Putin's war – to put spine into any allied slackers, especially on sanctions against Russia. It should help coordinate the supply of arms to Ukraine, working out the terms and conditions: what and who and how, as well as what *not* to do lest Putin decides, because of these actions, to escalate the conflict even further. Russia has already warned Poland by bombing near its frontier; and Poland has pulled back from its offer to supply fighter aircraft directly to Ukraine. Most important, the summit needs to show Putin that he cannot split the Alliance politically, even by looking to NATO outliers, notably Viktor Orban's Hungary or Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey.

But something with even greater significance for the longer term needs to be on the agenda, even if only in secret session or in small groups: to start the effort to rebuild NATO's credibility as an alliance and America's as its leader. Make no mistake: their credibility has taken a hard knock from Putin's decision to invade, and awareness of that weakening of credibility is so far being obscured only by the stiff fight being put up by Ukraine's military forces, its people, and its amazing president, Volodymyr Zelensky. He is implicitly defying Putin to do his worst, and the Ukrainian nation and people will continue to resist. If nothing else, there is the national memory of Stalin's starvation of nearly 4 million Ukrainians in the early 1930s, [the Holodomor](#).

Damage to US and NATO credibility over the matter of Ukraine can trace its history at least as far back as the 2008 Bucharest summit, when [President G.W. Bush proposed](#) that Ukraine (and Georgia) be enrolled in Membership Action Plans (MAPs), the next-to-last step before becoming allies. This was a decisive move beyond the 1997 [NATO-Ukraine Charter](#) and consultative Council, which provided no security guarantees. Most allies resisted, including because they were not prepared to take the risk of pushing NATO right up to Russia and straddling the traditional invasion route into the heart of Europe – in both directions and with long memories. How would Russia respond to such a step?

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But the European allies also recognised that, although moving Ukraine and Georgia toward NATO membership had to be ruled out, the US president could not be sent home empty-handed. So the [summit declared](#) that both countries “will become members” of the alliance. Those words were designed to put off consideration of NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia to the indefinite future (“never,” in the eyes of many European allies.) But in their haste, NATO’s leaders obviously did not understand the full import of that statement. It signaled that the two countries were geopolitically so important to the West that they would definitely be brought into the alliance, whatever Russia thought: in plain English, it was thus the actual moment of commitment.

Soon thereafter, Georgia’s president, Mikheil Saakashvili, tested the proposition by using military force to try reclaiming occupied parts of [South Ossetia](#), only to be defeated by Russian forces. Not a single NATO ally sent troops to defend Georgia. *Finis*, for any practical purposes, to “will become members” of NATO.

Yet instead of putting the commitment into George Orwell’s Memory Hole, NATO has repeated the formulation at every summit and ministerial meeting, and, until just before Putin’s 2022 invasion, [top leaders of the Biden administration](#) were still harping on NATO’s “open door” to Ukraine’s membership, even though it is a fantasy. This last observation is based on two interrelated facts. First, NATO takes all decisions by consensus – a unit veto; and second, many allies have already made clear that would never be willing, in response to aggression against Ukraine (on Russia’s border), to invoke Article 5 of the [NATO Treaty](#): that “...an armed attack against one or more [ally]....shall be considered an attack against them all...” Thus Ukraine will never be admitted to NATO.

Nothing can justify what Putin has been doing, including what are clearly war crimes. And it is necessary, not just for Ukraine but also for the future of European security, that Russia not prevail and that any settlement of the conflict, even short-term, must include withdrawal of all Russian forces from Ukraine. Indeed, the “will become members” statement, repeated over and over, created a political and moral commitment to Ukraine (and to Georgia), raising legitimate expectations but with no honest intention of fulfilling them, while providing no deterrence of possible (now actual) Russian aggression: for these two countries the worst of all worlds.

By extension, the failure of NATO, especially its leader, the United States, at least so far to honor the full meaning of the “will become members” pledge is creating a deep crisis of credibility for both NATO and the US. This is not to argue that the United States should have risked major escalation by Biden’s not declaring at the outset of Russia’s current invasion of Ukraine that the US would not become directly involved militarily. (He had valid reasons: both because the American people want no new wars where the United States is not itself attacked; and Biden could see that most allies would take time to step up to the mark, even on imposing sanctions, much less on providing military aid to Ukraine.)

But even with these plausible arguments, thoughtful European leaders are beginning to ponder whether the US Article 5 commitment to the security of NATO countries remains sacrosanct. Reflecting on the war in Ukraine, even though it is not formally a member of NATO, would the United States really go to war for a European ally if the US itself were not under attack?

Doubts fostered by President Donald Trump, because of his erratic behavior toward European security and relations with Russia, were supposedly redeemed by Biden's becoming US president. But now doubts are reemerging. They have several sources. Most pertinent: if Putin were to get away with crushing Ukraine, would the [three Baltic states](#) feel safe if he moved militarily in their direction? Everyone knows that they are militarily indefensible, like [West Berlin](#) in the Cold War. But the "correlation of forces" and shared risks of escalation do not this time provide a basis for deterring the Russians as the Soviet Union was deterred then. Second, if Ukraine from 2008 onward was judged to be sufficiently important strategically to "will become" a member of NATO, what does that say for countries which, while having formal NATO membership, have less strategic value? On the Eastern edges of NATO, only Poland has first-line strategic importance.

The European allies are dependent on the role of the United States in dealing with any challenge from Russia: this has been clear since the late 1940s. That mostly explains why the European allies [invoked NATO's Article 5](#) for the United States the day after 9/11 (Washington didn't ask for it); and why they sent troops to Afghanistan: primarily so that the United States would not be heavily distracted from its critical role in dealing with Russia.

No one in the Alliance has yet wondered out loud whether the US commitment to NATO security is any longer sufficiently credible. But the analysis already exists, based on America's failing to understand the geopolitical folly of pressing for a MAP for Ukraine (and Georgia) in 2008 and still being committed to the "open door" right up to the eve of this year's war. European doubts about US credibility have also stemmed from US emphasis on a "pivot" to Asia, the muddled withdrawal from Afghanistan last year (though withdrawing itself gained approval), and what has seemed to many Europeans to be a lower American priority for several years for relations with Europe, including in security terms.

Restoring US (and hence NATO) credibility to the level it must have is a tall order. (US credibility in Europe is also important for East Asian allies and partners.) It has to begin at the Brussels NATO summit, beyond actions against Russia's invasion that focus on radical increases in military support to Ukraine, plus steps to bolster security of exposed NATO members and an end to misleading Kyiv that Ukraine will be able to join NATO. The alliance, and particularly the United States, must also recognize, if only *sotto voce* for now, how serious the credibility problem has become and the need for it to rise to the top of the long-term US and NATO foreign policy agenda.

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