NATO was originally created as a counterweight to the might of the Soviet Union after World War II. The deep yet fractious roots that enabled the alliance to prosper have also presented challenges to its leadership and management. More than an organization, NATO is best envisioned as an overarching structure made up of individual, autonomous parts, each with different thought processes, competencies and imperatives. NATO adapted to survive beyond the Cold War but its continued existence remains under threat.

Analysis

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was conceived and designed as an intergovernmental military alliance, based on the principle of collective defense. At its inception four years after the end of World War II, NATO was primarily seen as a deterrent against Soviet aggression in Western Europe, keeping vulnerable states in a Western orbit and checking the rise of Eurasian power.

As a core contributor, the U.S. military footprint in Europe was vast, stretching to hundreds of bases.
and facilities, hundreds of thousands of personnel and massive quantities of materiel. Because the European front was broad but limited in depth, a forward defensive posture was adopted, resulting in NATO troops amassed along the length of the Iron Curtain.

Military planners realized that they could not stop a dedicated Russian assault into Western Europe and that NATO forces would only be able to delay, inflicting losses as they withdrew. The intent was to buy enough time to establish a secure logistical bridge that would allow the full deployment of U.S. military power to blunt and then push back the Russian advance. For decades, both sides of the Iron Curtain attempted to maintain relative military power in parallel (though this ebbed and flowed over time), waiting for the shot that would turn Central Europe into a sprawling armored battlefield.

**Shifting Scales**

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed the threat around which the organization had been formed. As the alliance struggled to redefine its strategic focus, three broad trends emerged.

The first was a steady decline in defense spending by NATO countries. In 1990, all member nations (with the exception of Spain and Luxembourg) committed 2 percent of their gross domestic product to defense, a NATO prerequisite. By 2012, only four countries still maintained defense spending above the required level. By virtue of being the largest and wealthiest contributor to NATO, the United States has increasingly picked up the shortfall. In 1990, U.S. defense spending relative to NATO (as a percentage of total NATO members' defense spending) was 61 percent. By 2012, this figure had risen to 72 percent.

The second trend, related to shrinking defense budgets, has been the general downsizing of military forces. This has affected not only NATO but the Eastern bloc as well, especially following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is important to note that a reduction in force size has been counterbalanced by increases in firepower and potency, making modern units more powerful than their similarly sized predecessors. Many countries have also transitioned from a conscription-based model to a professional, volunteer force that is naturally smaller.

Third, by exploiting the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, NATO was able to reach out to the former communist and Soviet states, several of which were incorporated into the alliance, expanding the organization's borders to the edge of Russia proper. As a consequence, Russia lost much of the natural geographic buffer that had historically protected the Soviet core.

**A Model of Expansion**
NATO has more than doubled in size over its lifetime, expanding from a core group of 12 countries to its current 28 members. There have been six main phases of expansion, three occurring during the Cold War and three after.

Turkey and Greece were the first new members, brought into the alliance in 1952 to cement the prevailing NATO strategy of containment. West Germany's integration in 1955 contributed to the formation of the Warsaw Pact, a Soviet-led counterbalance to NATO that incorporated eight communist states across Central and Eastern Europe. Spain's 1982 induction into the alliance helped further consolidate Western Europe.

The final three stages of NATO's expansion occurred in 1999, 2004 and 2009, bringing former communist countries into play and adding considerable depth to NATO's northern sector. This growth enabled the organization to develop a much more flexible and responsive strategy than the previous forward defense concept allowed. The move toward a more versatile NATO structure, cutbacks in defense spending and the perception of Russia as less dangerous factored heavily into the development of a rotational deployment framework for NATO members. The massive, permanent concentrations of force that typified the Cold War slowly began to dissolve.

The Struggle for Alliance

The expansion of NATO was not without its consequences. Because the alliance requires unanimous consent to approve any action, increased membership also raises the risk of divergent interests, heightening the possibility of a NATO constituent vetoing a proposal. By getting so close to Russia's borders, NATO succeeded in agitating Moscow, which views the proximity of the alliance as a genuine threat. As a result, Russia has worked continuously to undermine any Western neighbor.

A resurgent Russia is enough to make Eastern Europe nervous — even the NATO members. If anything, their perception of the threat is greater because they are closest to Russia and have the least overall protection. Potential threats are varied and numerous, from airspace incursions by Russian aircraft, to the deployment of theater ballistic missiles in nearby locales, to cultural subversion and economic coercion. Western Europe, in comparison, enjoys strategic depth and greater economic security while at the same time possessing the bulk of the remaining NATO infrastructure and combat power.

The disparity between established NATO power players and newer, smaller members created two distinct camps: "security providers" and "security consumers." The most recent additions to the
alliance, states that formerly existed in the Soviet periphery, are generally regarded as consumers. Their contribution to NATO in terms of serious combat power is negligible. What they provide is strategic depth, even if they lack the capability to have a serious effect on any Russian forces seeking to exploit it. This is where the tension within NATO has exposed itself since the end of the Cold War and the loss of a singular, existential threat. NATO’s various geographic regions have divergent interests and differing perceptions of the new threat. This disparity, overlaid with a decision-making structure that usually requires unanimity, resulted in strategic stagnation.

- Part 2: The Alliance’s Current State of Play
- Part 3: The Future of the Alliance

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