The Nations of NATO brings together an all-star team of NATO scholars to assess the state of the alliance on the eve of the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Prominent questions, which have perhaps been over-explored regarding NATO’s cohesion and continued relevance in the post-Cold War era inspired, informed, and shaped the book’s thirteen chapters.

The challenges are well known. In the three decades since the end of the Cold War, NATO has been confronted with a rapidly changing security environment to which the alliance adapted with varying degrees of success.¹ Debates about NATO’s relevance and cohesion accompanied these adaptations. Reservations remain over whether a military alliance that was created to face the very specific challenge brought by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact is also the best instrument to tackle new and complex issues ranging from international terrorism, to migration, and to cybersecurity. With the unifying Soviet threat gone, the allies’ priorities started to diverge. The expansion of the alliance to over thirty members only heightened a strategic cacophony that brought NATO close to a semi-permanent identity crisis.² The allies on the eastern flank—former Warsaw Pact members and the Baltic states—remained hyper-focused on the latent Russian threat even when Western European governments pursued partnership and cooperation with Russia in order to foster peace and handsome trade and economic returns.

The push away from collective defense towards crisis management through out-of-area operations in former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Libya also often caused distress and tension among the allies. Furthermore, widespread disagreement over defense spending levels and burden sharing that accompanied NATO during the Cold War lingered after its end. The acrimonious debate only worsened as rising geopolitical tension following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 seemingly called for renewed focus on defense spending. Important allies, particularly Germany and Canada, proved reluctant to acquiesce since they lacked domestic


support for large defense budgets. More recently, the United States’ strategic shift towards China called into question Washington’s true commitment to the defense of Europe to which France responded with calls to further the EU’s defense integration in an ambitious push for European “strategic autonomy.” NATO’s cohesion hit an all-time low during the Trump administration. While the US president called the alliance “obsolete,” French President Emmanuel Macron settled for a perhaps milder “braindead.”

Ironically, the book provides a great example of the volatility of perceptions of NATO. Clearly influenced by the traumas that the Trump administration inflicted upon the alliance, the authors highlight the diverging agendas among the allies regarding China, defense spending, strategic autonomy, and the primacy of collective defense over other tasks, including crisis management in the Southern flank’s periphery. Yet today, as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, enthusiastic comments about renewed NATO unity overshadow by far the pessimistic tones of 2017–2021. How quickly (and how far) that pendulum has swung!

*The Nations of NATO* offers two main contributions. First, it is a very useful compendium of intra-NATO relations as of 2022 that should find space on every NATO scholar’s library. It provides a concise but exhaustive map of the main features and issues fueling and plaguing the alliance as it exited the contentious Trump presidency. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the book provides a very compelling intellectual categorization of the allies (i.e., “the nations of NATO”) according to their relationship to the alliance’s complex and ever-expanding agenda.

In the volume’s introduction and first chapter, Thierry Tardy suggests three typologies of allies that he identifies as: (1) “Non-NATO-aligned with a broad security agenda,” a group composed of the United States, France, and Turkey; (2) “NATO-aligned with a Russian-centric security agenda,” a group composed of the three Baltic States, Norway, Poland, and Romania; and (3) “NATO-aligned with a non-Russian-centric security agenda,” which includes the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Spain.

The security agenda of countries in the first group is much larger than NATO’s and they do not necessarily see the alliance as an exclusive forum to address international security issues. In this context, for instance, France sees the EU as a serious alternative forum, and even preaches further EU military integration to reach some form of strategic autonomy from the United States. France also acts autonomously in the Mediterranean or through coalitions outside of NATO to pursue its interests in the region. Similarly, the

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United States has “pivoted” to the Indo-Pacific and pursued unilateral and multilateral policies outside of NATO while also attempting to re-direct the alliance’s attention toward China.  

For historical and geographic reasons, countries in the second category are entirely focused on the existential threat posed by Russia to their borders and see alignment with NATO and the United States as the only avenue to ensure their security. These countries wish for NATO to remain as true as possible to its original mandate to provide military security to central Europe against Russia through collective defense and US extended deterrence. These countries’ agendas were continuously centered on the Russian threat and see their concerns vindicated by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s actions in 2014, 2016, and 2022. These countries meet, and often exceed, the two percent defense spending target. They also often align with NATO’s task and geographic interest expansion but mostly to foster cohesion and signal alignment to the United States to ensure Washington’s continued commitments in Europe.

Countries in the third category also largely align with NATO and the United States, but, until 2022 place less emphasis on Russia (until 2022) in their defense policy making. Apart from the UK, these countries rarely meet the two percent defense spending target, some for lack of economic prowess, others for lack of domestic support, and others yet because they do not see collective defense as NATO’s primary task. Countries like Spain and Italy are frustrated at NATO’s lack of interest in the Southern flank and Mediterranean region. Canada would like to see greater attention to normative aspects of NATO’s mandate, such as the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. Germany, and, to a lesser extent Italy, aim to strengthen the EU’s security function, but unlike France this is less to achieve EU autonomy from NATO than to build up the European pillar in NATO.

The structure of the book follows this categorization. Three sections analyze the countries included in each category in great detail. The authors utilize these broad categorizations as an analytical tool to assess the continued relevance of and cohesion within NATO.

Summing up the consensus amongst the authors, Tardy concludes that the alliance is largely considered by its own members to remain relevant even in face of new challenges (36). But Tardy also point out that “what makes the Alliance relevant to Poland or to the Baltic States is not necessarily what makes it relevant for Italy, France, or the United Kingdom” (30). Depending on the different typologies, group of countries will perceive the alliance’s relevance insofar as it meets their immediate narrow security needs. Conversely, relevance may wither if the alliance moved away or neglected certain threats that are considered paramount by a specific set of countries. The problem for NATO is how to reconcile those agendas that seem in direct contradiction. This is particularly true when it comes to NATO’s geographic focus. The United States is focused on China, the Baltics and Poland on Russia, while France is focused on European autonomy and the Mediterranean.

Divergences regarding the prioritization of tasks in the Eastern flank, in the Mediterranean, in the broader Middle East and North Africa region, or in the Indo-Pacific are equally likely to undermine cohesion (34-36). Additional issues bound to threaten unity include Turkey's ambivalent position vis-à-vis Russia as well as vis-à-vis Greece and France in the Eastern Mediterranean. Diverging values between Western allies and Turkey, and to some extent Bulgaria and Hungary, may cause further rifts, despite Tardy’s conclusion that values are

not all too relevant “even in relations to Turkey” (27). Finally, the intense debate over burden-sharing between the United States and major laggards like Germany and Canada may return to plague NATO should the war in Ukraine subside, or Trump win the 2024 elections.

In sum, the authors conclude that while NATO remains relevant and cohesion was—ironically enough—strongly aided by Putin’s aggressive stance since at least 2014, as Tardy summarizes, the authors also “paint a picture of an Alliance that is not as successful and as adaptable as the official narrative might suggest” (36).

The most important issue that The Nations of NATO unfortunately did not get a chance to address is how the invasion of Ukraine may have changed this picture. Most essays were researched and written before the invasion took place. Tardy’s introductory chapter suggests that “there is no doubt that the war in Ukraine has strengthened both the relevance and the cohesion of the Alliance (36).” This is true. Not only has the alliance demonstrated unprecedented unity with regard to Ukraine, but NATO has also been the key operational vehicle both for coordinating military assistance to Kyiv and for bolstering the alliance’s deterrence and defense. Far from being braindead, NATO today seems alive and kicking. Yet, when it comes to NATO, such straightforward judgements are often quickly contradicted by the complex reality of thirty nations trying to coordinate their security agendas. For instance, the German government has recently pledged an unprecedented increase in defense spending. “From now on, we will invest more than two percent of the GDP into our defense year after year,” Chancellor Olaf Scholz said following the invasion of Ukraine. He renewed this promise after the recent NATO summit in Vilnius. This U-turn on defense spending was a crucial turning point as for many years, Germany was criticized by NATO partners, especially the United States, for not sticking to NATO’s requirement on defense spending. In his own words Scholz defined this a Zeitwende, a sea-change in Germany’s security policy. Yet, it remains unclear how far Germany is willing to go. The pledge to meet the two percent target annually was deleted at short notice from a new draft law and the government instead committed to meet the two percent target on average over a five-year period. Canada, another large nation that has not met its goals in defense spending, communicated behind closed doors that it will never meet the military alliance’s defense-spending target despite the war. Against this backdrop, despite a short rally-around-the-flag moment and loud promises of increased defense spending, it is clear that laggards will continue to lag and burden-sharing will remain on NATO’s agenda as a potential cohesion disruptor for years to come.

Then, there is China and the “pivot” to the Indo-Pacific. While NATO’s 2022 “Strategic Concept” prioritizes the Russian threat while recognizing the mounting challenge posed by China and the need to strengthen security in the Indo-Pacific, the 2022 “National Security Strategy” of the United States indicates that the latter remain focused primarily on China. The war in Ukraine has diverted America’s attention back to Europe,

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15 See for instance the considerations by Celeste Wallander on the threat to the Alliance stemming from the erosion of liberal democracy within the nations of NATO; Celeste Wallander, “NATO’s Enemies Within. How Democratic Decline Could Destroy the Alliance,” Foreign Affairs, 97 (4), July–August, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/natos-enemies-within.


19 Wilke, “Germany U-Turns on Commitment.”

20 Wilke, “Germany U-Turns on Commitment.”

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for the moment. But this may prove temporary. According to Martin Garret and James Goldgeiger, for instance, the war in Russia and the cooperation between China and Russia have made it easier for NATO to condemn China’s behavior and second Washington’s desire to focus on China as a serious threat. Evidence of this is the enhanced dialogue with key partners in the Indo-Pacific—especially with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea. These countries were invited to attend both the NATO Madrid and Vilnius summits in 2022 and 2023.23

Political scientist Jason Davidson, however, recently emphasized how strategic cacophony may return once the crisis recedes. Countries like France and Italy will likely continue to focus on terrorism, migration, and instability in the southern flank as their most salient challenges.24 France, in particular, will oppose any pivot to the Indo-Pacific for fear of involvement in a conflict over Taiwan and its potentially catastrophic economic repercussions for Europe, but also because Macron sees this as an issue for the EU rather than NATO.25 Poland and the Baltics will continue to pay lip service to a turn to China to appease Washington but will be understandably focused on Russia more than ever. China’s ambitions will continue to be the focus of American policymakers. No matter what side of the debate one takes, there is no doubt that differences between the United States and Europe on how to approach China will continue to loom large in determining the future health of transatlantic relations. This argument is well defined by the authors in The Nations of NATO (25).26

Finally, there remain a number of unresolved and interrelated issues concerning values, domestic politics, and NATO expansion. Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey—as well as to a lesser extent Romania—have all played more cautious, even ambivalent roles in responding to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Turkey in particular has tried to take advantage of the situation to advance its political agenda in holding up Sweden’s membership bid, demanding changes to the country’s terrorism laws to make Kurdish immigration more difficult. Turkey’s moves reflect President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s personal desire to carve for himself a larger role vis-a-vis his Western allies as a leader and mediator between the West and the Islamic world.27 Furthermore, several large political parties within countries whose values are more clearly aligned with NATO have expressed disturbing Russian views since the start of the war. These include the Northern League and Five Star Movement in Italy and Marine Le Pen’s nationalist party in France.28 Members of the US Republican Party close to former president Trump have also questioned the extent of American military support to Ukraine behind the banner of “America first.”29 Against this backdrop, I would suggest that the authors’ conclusion, that values are not a prominent threat to NATO cohesion may be overstated (23). Value divergence may in fact become more prominent and more dependent on domestic political processes, most notably on elections.

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In conclusion, while Putin’s actions may have silenced any doubters of NATO’s relevance, the diverging agendas that threaded NATO’s cohesion before the war in Ukraine are unlikely to dissipate. *The Nations of NATO* presents a timely and comprehensive guide to the most important features of NATO’s strategic cacophony. The resolution or these issues—or the lack thereof—will determine the future of NATO to a large extent.

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