

# Euro-Atlantic responses to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

## - Ed Arnold, Research Fellow for European Security, Royal United Services Institute

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine, our speaker Ed Arnold said, would have far bigger and longer-lasting strategic consequences than the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The latter was a one-day event that had resulted in 20 years of conflict ranging from Afghanistan to Iraq. The Ukraine invasion would change European security more than any other event in the 30 years since the end of the Cold War.

He said he would focus first on the responses of NATO, the EU and individual member states, and then he would weigh up the consequences.

Changes in European security were under way before the Russian intervention, including EU moves to build a greater defence capacity, and NATO's reinforcement of forces on its eastern borders. Ukraine had already speeded up such changes.

The US-led NATO withdrawal from Kabul in 2021 had caused many Europeans to question the strength of US commitment to Europe. But NATO's response to Ukraine had shown a high degree of unity, largely thanks to clear US leadership. That included the vigorous diplomatic activity of the US Secretary of State, and the swift decision by Washington to share its intelligence on the imminence of the Russian invasion, even as France and Germany were seeking to negotiate with Moscow.

Arnold warned, however, that the impressive display of Euro-Atlantic unity might be masking underlying tensions which would re-emerge if the Ukraine conflict became a prolonged war of attrition. It was relatively easy to reach agreed decisions on sanctions against Russia in the summer, but it might be more difficult to maintain a common front to embargo oil and gas supplies as winter approached.

He contrasted the reaction in 2022 with that in 2014 at the time of Russia's takeover of Crimea, which should have been a "wake-up call" for the NATO allies, but some had failed to heed it.

The second key to NATO's response had been the successful Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion in the first few days, when the Ukrainians held on, "which we didn't expect". It was reinforced by Volodymyr Zelensky's dramatic appearance at the Munich Security Conference at huge personal risk, to appeal for allied support.

Most important, however, was the fact that Russia's aggression in Ukraine was precisely what NATO had been designed for: "This is NATO's crisis," he said. "NATO was built to deter Russian aggression in Europe."

The reaction to Crimea in 2014 had been a significant increase in the alliance's presence in the Baltic region. Now that was being extended down to the Black Sea, and the number of NATO battle groups had been doubled from four to eight. A new strategic concept was currently being drafted and would be approved at the NATO summit in Madrid in June. Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary-general, had agreed to stay in post for an extra year.

In contrast to the swift NATO response, the EU had started quite slowly, Arnold said, and had struggled to find a voice. In January Putin insisted he would only deal with the US. But as soon as sanctions became the main focus of western response, the EU really got into gear, and took "a generational leap" to become a defence and security actor. The EU has drawn up a so-called Strategic Compass to make itself "a stronger and more capable security provider". It is an action plan, and "the language is pretty good," Arnold said. "But it is still only a plan". The next step will be for a NATO-EU joint declaration before the end of the year.

As far as individual member states are concerned, the invasion of Ukraine has brought a lot of change. It has revived the US reputation as a prime European security actor. They have spent a lot of money to support Ukraine, at surprising speed, especially with logistics capability, humanitarian and economic support and increasingly military support. They will continue to provide this level of support to enable Ukraine to blunt the Russian offensive in the Donbas region.

In Europe, the UK is seeking to show how it intends to develop as a European security actor post-Brexit. It was swift to provide military equipment, in particular the NLAW shoulder-mounted anti-tank system, which has proved remarkably effective against static Russian tanks stuck in jams on the Ukrainian roads.

The German response has been a transformation of its traditional hesitation on defence matters, with the Chancellor Scholz proposing to pump €100bn into new defence procurement fund, and to rapidly meet its NATO commitment of spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence – all rushed through the Bundestag in an emergency debate. "This is not merely a procedural change," said Arnold. "It is a lot of money. You have to understand what you are going to spend it on. And it is a big cultural change." Moreover, it came on top of the decision to halt the opening of the NordStream2 gas pipeline from Russia, after years of prevarication, raising the prospect of severe energy shortages for German industry.

As for France, President Macron attempted to keep open talks with Putin longer than any other EU member, but failed to prevent the invasion, and took it personally. But he has also been a strong supporter of the EU financial and economic support for Ukraine, including finance for defence spending.

Poland and the Baltic republics – the EU member states that have long been most concerned about Russian aggression – are likely to wield increasing influence in decision-making as their fears have been shown to be justified.

Finland and Sweden are now both expected to abandon their traditional neutral posture, and apply for NATO membership in the light of the Russian invasion. Not only will that move

bolster NATO's defences on its northern flank, but it will also reinforce NATO participation in another body of key strategic importance to Moscow – the Arctic Council. How will Russia respond?

Indeed, the overriding question for the European allies is how to deal with Russia if and when there is some sort of settlement in Ukraine. Will it be Putin's Russia, or what comes after Putin? Some sort of engagement will be needed on regional issues all the way from the Arctic to the Black Sea. Russian mercenaries are also present in areas of European interest in Africa, such as Mali and the rest of the Sahel, undermining the French and EU military missions there.

Urgent practical questions need to be resolved to bolster Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invaders: how to get troops from the west to the east? Perhaps most urgent of all was the question of how to resupply the Ukrainian forces with ammunition?

The speaker said that the depletion of supplies, equipment and troops of the Russian forces had been dramatic – far more than had been expected. The Russians had been tactically inept. The Ukrainians had been tactically far more effective. The Russians had lost significant amounts of armoured vehicles, supply trucks, and “huge numbers” of soldiers. They had been easy targets for ambush by more mobile Ukrainian forces. Troops normally stationed in the Arctic had been redeployed in Ukraine. But Putin stopped short in his speech on May 9 from announcing any general mobilisation, which would have put Russia on a formal war footing. Although the Russian military was expected to be able to take control of Ukraine and hold it with 200,000 men, it had proved incapable of doing so.

Asked whether Brexit had affected the UK contribution to the defence of Ukraine, the speaker said that the UK had provided lots of good quality equipment and training, but that was not a strategy. “They need to define what success looks like. What is the UK seeking to get out of the current situation?” It was up to the Ukrainians to define the circumstances of any settlement, not for the UK or any other NATO or EU countries to set pre-conditions. “They are fighting for survival.”

As far as UK-EU relations were concerned, there was a limit to what the UK could achieve without an “instrumental relationship” with the EU. The EU wanted a wide-ranging defence and security co-operation agreement with the UK, but the UK government was hesitant.

Asked about the danger of Russia escalating to the use of tactical nuclear weapons, he said there was a long way to go before any such escalation. Traditional Soviet nuclear doctrine was that nuclear weapons would be reached only at the 14<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> escalation. “We are only at the third or fourth now.”

Chemical weapons might have logically been used in Mariupol, but Moscow hesitated when the US published their intelligence that they were contemplating such a move.

He said that if Ukraine had been supplied from the start with the weapon systems now being delivered by the NATO allies, “that could have stopped the war earlier”.