



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The US contribution to the security of NATO's eastern flank: from the Madrid summit to Vilnius

Milevski, L.

Citation

Milevski, L. (2022). The US contribution to the security of NATO's eastern flank: from the Madrid summit to Vilnius. *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, 41(1), 18-21. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4246632>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4246632>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The US Contribution to the Security of NATO's Eastern Flank:

From the Madrid Summit to Vilnius

Lukas Milevski



The United States is the leading member of NATO, with the greatest defense budget, the greatest military power, and the greatest willingness to use it. Its contribution to the security of NATO's eastern flank is paramount; without it, military anemia could threaten the eastern flank. Much of the multidimensional US contribution – its intra-alliance diplomacy – will remain inevitably hidden behind diplomatic secrecy and closed doors, only to be revealed in later decades. This leaves the direct deployment of US military capabilities as the most apparent, even if not necessarily the most important, US contribution to the security and defense of NATO's eastern flank.

This broadly-based US support for the security of NATO's eastern flank cannot be divorced from the contextual relationship of the US with Russia. The pre-2022 history of this relationship demonstrates an interesting pattern: each two-term administration begins on a high note in its relationship with Russia before experiencing a major crisis toward the end of

the second term. The Clinton administration, which had broadly friendly relations with Russia, nearly clashed with it over Kosovo as a result of Russia's 1999 Pristina Airport stunt. The Bush administration saw Russia as a crucial partner in the war on terror, only for the 2008 Russo-Georgian War to sour relations. Obama sought a reset with Russia, but Russia invaded neighboring Ukraine in 2014. The Trump administration sought to repair relations, but made little headway before being replaced by the Biden administration, which bucked the typical pattern of seeing or seeking cooperation and reset immediately in favor of continuing confrontational policies.

NATO enlargement in 1999 (prior to the Kosovo War) and again in 2004, which constituted the first major US-driven developments for the security of NATO's new eastern flank, took place mostly at times of good relations with Russia. Yet these were exceptions, as most, if not all, major subsequent developments were galvanized

Lukas Milevski

is an assistant professor at Leiden University, where he teaches strategy on the MA International Relations and BA International Studies programs. He is a Baltic Sea Fellow in the Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He has published two books with Oxford University Press, *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (2016) and *The West's East: Contemporary Baltic Defense in Strategic Perspective* (2018).



📷 Pennsylvania Army National Guard soldiers in Pabrade, Lithuania. The Soldiers were deployed to Lithuania in support of Defender Europe 22 and NATO exercise Flaming Thunder (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Zane Craig)



NATO enlargement in 1999 (prior to the Kosovo War) and again in 2004, which constituted the first major US-driven developments for the security of NATO's new eastern flank, took place mostly at times of good relations with Russia. Yet these were exceptions, as most, if not all, major subsequent developments were galvanized by crises in US–Russia relations.

by crises in US–Russia relations. The Russo-Georgian War led to the development of defense plans for the Baltic States, which had for years been considered unnecessary; similarly, the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine led to the eventual creation of multinational, battalion-sized NATO battle groups in 2016. The United States is likely to have played a publicly unrecognized leading role in these processes even though it only contributed materially to the battle group in Poland. Indeed, the United States has been the single largest developer of and contributor to the security of NATO's eastern flank over recent decades, particularly prior to Russia's present invasion of Ukraine, while Western Europe still sought non-confrontational relations with Russia.

Responding as it did to the renewed Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO's Madrid Summit followed this pattern as the

alliance agreed to take steps to bolster its eastern flank against the Russian threat. This includes setting up four more enhanced forward presence battle groups in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary, to most of which the United States contributes. US post-Madrid contributions to the eastern flank also encompassed plans to set up a permanent forward headquarters for the US V Corps at Camp Kosciuszko in Poland, to deploy an additional rotational Brigade Combat Team deployed to Romania (besides the contribution to the battle group there), to increase smaller-scale rotational deployments across the entire eastern flank, and to deploy more forces throughout Europe, including two squadrons of F-35s to the United Kingdom and an additional two destroyers to Spain. This is part of a wider NATO effort to improve its military readiness to face plausible threats all around its perimeter, including forward-deployed equipment by other NATO states to the eastern flank as well as ambitions to increase the NATO Response Force from 40,000 to 300,000 troops.

Perhaps the United States' most important contribution to NATO's eastern flank security since 24 February has been its material aid to Ukrainian defense. Bolstered by aid from the United States and other NATO members – including many eastern flank countries, who have contributed disproportionately high levels of material aid relative to their GDP – Ukraine



Perhaps the United States' most important contribution to NATO's eastern flank security since 24 February has been its material aid to Ukrainian defense. Bolstered by aid from the United States and other NATO members – including many eastern flank countries, who have contributed disproportionately high levels of material aid relative to their GDP – Ukraine has inflicted substantial losses on the Russian military.

has inflicted substantial losses on the Russian military. These heavy losses include, as of 19 September, 1148 visually confirmed main battle tanks destroyed, damaged, abandoned, or captured, out of a Russian total of approximately 3,400 in the Russian military's Table of Organization and Equipment (besides up to around 10,000 believed to be in storage, although this number is likely to be far too high). The Russian air forces have also taken substantial losses in both rotary and fixed-wing aviation. With the war not yet over,

Russian losses will continue to climb. Russia will need many years to recover from its poorly considered invasion of Ukraine; optimists estimate decades. Although this is first and foremost the achievement of the Ukrainians, they have been supported by NATO, which has thereby also improved the military security of its own far eastern flank.

A notable side-effect of US and other NATO support for Ukraine during the war is demonstration of Western military technology in real war circumstances. This has already led all three Baltic States to seek to procure HIMARS for their own defense, having witnessed in Ukraine their disproportionate value for national defense by way of threatening Russian rear echelon forces and logistical and command infrastructure almost with impunity.

The main threat to this strong US position regarding the security of NATO's eastern flank is the Trump-supporting MAGA wing of the Republican Party, which is vociferously isolationist, usually outright pro-Russian, and seems to have disproportionate influence among the base of the Republican Party through like-minded views spread by Fox News and other pseudo-news outlets. This is an extreme edge of a broader but shallower isolationist, albeit not typically pro-Russian, undercurrent in portions of US politics and the US public which Washington has thus far largely resisted. Fortunately, at present the United States seems unlikely to continue the past pattern of high expectations followed



📷 Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis meets US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken in Washington, D.C. on September 15, 2021 (Photo US Department of State)



A notable side-effect of US and other NATO support for Ukraine during the war is demonstration of Western military technology in real war circumstances. This has already led all three Baltic States to seek to procure HIMARS for their own defense, having witnessed in Ukraine their disproportionate value for national defense by way of threatening Russian rear echelon forces and logistical and command infrastructure almost with impunity.

by end-of-administration confrontation unless the MAGA camp makes a truly substantial political breakthrough – and even then, given their pro-Russian proclivities, they might not undertake the confrontational stage.

The main security threat for NATO's eastern flank is Russia, a threat which at this present time is understood in predominantly military terms. Since the end of the Cold War, despite Russia's consistent feeling of victimhood, neither the West in general nor the United States in particular has ever desired confrontation with Russia – and the eastern flank countries, rightfully never trusting Russia, always only hoped for a normal

neighbor, rather than a reviving and unrepentant imperial aggressor. Major developments in eastern flank security – especially defense – have always emerged after a Russia-instigated confrontation with the West. The developments after the Madrid Summit continue this pattern. Putin's speech of 21 September 2022, threatening nuclear action, hardened the Russian position toward Ukraine and the West and will only contribute to a continuation of the pattern. Yet simultaneously the damage to Russian military power as a result of the war will give NATO increasing amounts of time to prepare and enhance its insurance policy against Russia. ●