

Why NATO Should Erect a Monument to Putin

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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A NATO official once told me that Brussels is practically obligated to build a monument to French General Charles de Gaulle. After all, he said, it was de Gaulle's decision to evict NATO's headquarters from Paris that eventually turned Brussels into the capital of Europe's bureaucracy. That, in turn, provided jobs and income for the residents of Belgium's stagnant capital. Now is the time for NATO to think about building a monument to President Vladimir Putin. After all, it was his decision to annex Crimea and the growing threat of a Russian invasion into southeastern Ukraine that has given NATO functionaries and military personnel plenty of work for what I am afraid might be a very long time to come.

It is no secret that NATO underwent a long identity crisis after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. In short, the main objective of the political and military alliance had been to contain Soviet aggression, but its *raison d'être* disappeared overnight with the Soviet collapse. Deprived of its traditional Soviet adversary, NATO changed its focus away from being a "defensive bloc" in the strict sense of the word and began redrawing borders in the Balkans after an intensive bombing campaign. At the same time, it began admitting new members

from former Soviet allies who viewed NATO not so much a mechanism to provide collective security against a nonexistent threat but as a way to get into the European Union.

Meanwhile, NATO's actual defense capabilities went into decline. Western European countries happily made use of the "peace dividend" after the Soviet collapse by reducing military spending to 1 or 2 percent of gross domestic product. They justified those reductions with new concepts such as "smart defense." The only real military scenario involving NATO forces became the projection of its power beyond the North Atlantic, whether in Afghanistan or Libya. But those operations were not based on the principle of collective self-defense on an equal basis because every member state contributed whatever resources it wanted. As a result, the alliance members' armies forgot how to fight together. I have often heard U.S. military personnel say that the U.S. Army has advanced so far ahead and other NATO members have fallen so far behind that it can no longer interact on the battlefield with most of its fellow members. It seemed that NATO was doomed to eventually become just another institution for coordinating the foreign policy and security positions of its member states.

But then Putin stepped in with his Crimean annexation. Up until recently, it seemed that Russia's incessant complaints against NATO over its missile defense program and its eastward expansion were all worn-out propaganda ploys intended to verbalize Moscow's fears of a possible Orange Revolution at home. But it turns out Putin was completely serious. During his mid-March speech in the Kremlin before signing the Russia-Crimea annexation treaty, he said the Kremlin considered every instance of NATO expansion and aggression was a deliberate attempt to humiliate the great state of Russia.

Then came the violent revolution in Kiev in February that Putin was convinced the West orchestrated. That was the last straw for Putin. Moscow truly believes that its military intervention to seize the territory of another country is a justified and adequate response to NATO's attempts to humiliate, weaken and undermine Russia.

The fact that the largest, nuclear-armed country in Europe believes it has a "natural, sovereign right" to seize territory reincarnates NATO's original mission: to deter aggression from the East.

For now, the Foreign Ministry can mock NATO's response. "Just imagine," they say, "the U.S. has sent two dozen fighter aircraft and 300 soldiers to the Baltic states, and they even deployed a destroyer in the Black Sea. Oh, we are so scared!"

Those modest moves do bear witness to a certain degree of confusion on NATO's part. But more important, they indicate that NATO, which Moscow constantly suspected and indirectly accused of harboring aggressive intentions against it, turns out not to have had any military plans at all in place for the event that relations with Moscow deteriorate.

But these plans will appear very quickly now. Western politicians have already ordered NATO to prepare plans for the military containment of Russia, and they must be finished in time for the alliance's June summit in Wales. Russia will clearly be NATO's main focus for many years to come — just like in the good old days of the Cold War. In all likelihood, NATO will abandon its earlier voluntary commitment made to Russia not to deploy significant forces in countries that joined the alliance after 1991. Instead, heavily mechanized brigades from the U.S. might reappear in Europe, and it may even establish new military bases right on Russia's

western borders. What's more, Washington will no longer abide by its self-imposed limitations, and if Russia ever does withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the U.S. will be forced to strengthen its middle-range missile defense installations in Europe.

After Crimea, with Russia having taken its recklessness and unpredictability to new levels, this is the best time for Western states to develop an effective nuclear deterrent. After recent events in Crimea, it is abundantly clear that a European state's only reliable security guarantee is to possess either its own nuclear weapons or NATO membership.

NATO, for its part, will undoubtedly have to make some tough political decisions in the near future.

First, they will have to take a new look at the current rules for admitting new members. In 1994, NATO established the criteria for membership in the alliance, and one of the most important was that the candidate state must not have open territorial conflicts. Moscow has done its utmost since then to ensure that all three former Soviet republics that might conceivably join the alliance — Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova — became plagued with such conflicts. Russia thought this would help disqualify these countries from becoming NATO members, but NATO, in light of current circumstances, will seriously consider changing its membership rules.

Moscow has always accused Western countries of operating according to the standards of the Cold War. Whether or not that was true before, it definitely true now: a new cold war really is beginning, and NATO will soon be at Russia's doorstep. But that is because the alliance has no other choice. This is the price Russia will pay for Putin's Crimean Anschluss.

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