

Right Now NATO Could Not Win A War With Russia

By Steve Jeremy – Responsible Statecraft, 2025

Are the allied forces helping or hurting the prospects of a sustainable peace? This retired Royal Navy commodore has some thoughts.

In 2024, reflecting a popular Western belief, former Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said: “NATO is the most powerful and successful alliance in history.” Yet just two years earlier in 2022, after a 15-year campaign, NATO was defeated by the Taliban, a rag-tag group of poorly armed insurgents.

How can NATO’s humiliating defeat and Austin’s view be reconciled?

Of course NATO was never the most powerful military alliance in history — that accolade surely goes to the World War II Allies: the U.S., Russia, Britain, and the Commonwealth nations. Nevertheless, after 1945, NATO did its job, did it well, and those of us who served in it were proud to do so.

Since the Berlin Wall’s fall, though, its record has become tarnished. Satisfactory in Kosovo. Humiliated in Afghanistan. Strategic failure looming in Ukraine. Are we really sure NATO is up to the job of defending democratic Europe from a supposedly expansionist Russia in the doomsday scenario of a conventional NATO-Russia war?

The doomsday NATO-Russia war scenario is the defining way to explore this question. “Amateurs talk tactics, professionals study logistics,” and our strategic analysis needs to start all the way back in NATO’s logistics rear areas, then work forward to a future line of battle on the continent of Europe.

First, unlike Russia, no major NATO nation is industrially mobilized for war, as evidenced by the fact that Russia is still out producing NATO on 155mm shells for Ukraine, which, incidentally, gives the lie to the view that Russia is poised to take more of Europe — if we in NATO truly believed this, we *would* all be mobilizing at speed.

More importantly, it is not clear that NATO *could* mobilize at the speed or scale needed to produce the levels of equipment, ammunition, and people to match Russia. And certainly not without a long build up that would signal our intent. This is not just about lost industrial capacity, but also lost financial capacity. Of the largest NATO nations, only Germany has a debt to GDP ratio below 100%.

Second, to have the remotest chance of success in this doomsday scenario of a NATO-Russia war, U.S. forces would need to deploy at scale into continental Europe. Even if the U.S. Army was established at the necessary scale — with a 2023 establishment of 473,000, under one third

of the current Russian Army, it is not — the overwhelming majority of American equipment and logistics would have to travel by sea.

There, they would be vulnerable to Russian submarine-launched torpedoes and mines. As a former underwater warfare specialist, I do not believe that NATO now has the scale of anti-submarine or mine-warfare forces needed to protect Europe's sea lines of communication.

Nor, for that matter, would these forces be able to successfully protect Europe's hydrocarbon imports, in particular oil and LNG so critical to Europe's economic survival. Losses because of our sea supply vulnerability would not only degrade military production, but also bring accelerating economic hardship to NATO citizens, as soaring prices and energy shortages accompanying an outbreak of war rapidly escalated the political pressure to settle.

Third, our airports, sea ports, training, and logistics bases would be exposed to conventional ballistic missile attack, against which we have extremely limited defenses. Indeed, in the case of the Oreshnik missile, no defense.

An Oreshnik missile arriving at Mach 10+ would devastate a NATO arms factory, or naval, army and air force base. As in Ukraine, Russia's ballistic campaign would also target our transport, logistics, and energy infrastructure. In 2003, while I was working for the British MOD's Policy Planning staffs, our post 9/11 threat analysis suggested a successful attack against an LNG terminal, such as Milford Haven, Rotterdam, or Barcelona, would have sub-nuclear consequences. The follow-on economic shock-waves would rapidly ripple across a European continent, now increasingly dependent on LNG.

Fourth, unlike Russia, NATO nations' forces are a heterogenous bunch. My own experience, while leading the offshore training of all European warships at Flag Officer Sea Training in Plymouth, and later working with NATO forces in Afghanistan, was that all NATO forces were exceptionally enthusiastic but had very different levels of technological advancement and trained effectiveness.

Perhaps more contemporarily important, other than a handful of NATO trainers forward deployed in Ukraine, **our forces are trained according to a pre-drone "maneuver doctrine" and have no real-world experience of modern peer-to-peer attritional warfighting.** Whereas the Russian Army has close to three years experience now, and is unarguably the world's most battle-hardened.

Fifth, NATO's decision-making system is cumbersome, hampered by the need to constantly communicate from Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe to national capitals — a complexity made worse each time another nation is admitted.

Worse still, NATO cannot do strategy. Shortly after arriving in Afghanistan in 2007, I was shocked to find that NATO had no campaign strategy. In 2022, notwithstanding numerous Russian warnings about NATO

expansion constituting a red-line, NATO was wholly unprepared, strategically, for the obvious possibility of war breaking out — as evidenced again by our inability to match Russia's 155mm shell production.

Even now, in 2025, NATO's Ukraine strategy is opaque, perhaps best summarized as "double-down and hope."

In summary, NATO is positioning itself as Europe's defender, yet lacks the industrial capacity to sustain peer-to-peer war-fighting, is wholly dependent on U.S. forces for the remotest chance of success, is unable satisfactorily to defend its sea lines of communication against Russian submarine, or its training and industrial infrastructure against strategic ballistic bombardment, is comprised of a diverse mix of un-bloodied conventional forces, and lacks the capacity to think and act strategically.

An easy NATO victory cannot be assumed, and I am afraid that the opposite looks far more likely to me.

So what? Conventionally, we could now work out how to redress the manifest weaknesses revealed. Strategic audits to confirm the capability gaps. Capability analyses to work out how to fill the gaps. Conferences to decide who does what and where costs should fall. Whilst all the time muddling on, hoping that NATO might eventually prevail in Ukraine, notwithstanding all the evidence to the contrary.

But without unanimous agreement of the NATO nations to increase military investment at scale, we would be lucky to solve these capability shortfalls within ten years, let alone five.

Or we could return to consider — at last — the judgement of many Western realists that NATO expansion was the touch-paper for the Russo-Ukraine War. The Russians warned us, time and again, that such expansion constituted a red line. So too did some of our very greatest strategic thinkers, starting with George Kennan in 1996, Henry Kissinger, Jack Matlock, even Bill Burns in his famous 'Nyet means Nyet' diplomatic telegram, and most recently John Mearsheimer with his 2014 forecasts. All ignored.

The truth is that NATO now exists to confront the threats created by its continuing existence. Yet as our scenario shows, NATO does not have the capacity to defeat the primary threat that its continuing existence has created.

So perhaps this is the time to have an honest conversation about the future of NATO, and to ask two questions. How do we return to the sustainable peace in Europe that all sides to the conflict seek? Is NATO the primary obstacle to this sustainable peace?

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