



# NATO Defense College



# Vox Collegii

*The voice of the College*

The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) and Gulf Security: A perspective from the region  
*Ashraf Mohammed Kishk*

The Ukrainian Question: Genesis, Structural Problems and Possible Solutions  
*Gregorio Baggiani*

The July NATO Summit in Brussels  
*Giovanni Parigi*

Russia's Su-57 compared to US/EU Military Aircraft: A threat to Europe and NATO?  
*Michael Eric Lambert*

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## #WEARENATO



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## The Ukrainian Question: Genesis, Structural Problems and Possible Solutions

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*The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and must not be attributed to the NATO Defense College or to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.*

### 1.1 The Structural Causes of the Ukrainian Crisis

The conflict in Ukraine is probably the biggest political disorder since the end of the Cold War in 1991, which saw the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. This allowed NATO and the European Union to expand and draw nearer to Russian borders, creating, from the Russian point of view, a problem of asymmetry or non-inclusiveness in terms of the Russian Federation's economic interests and security. Of course, every state is perfectly legally - though not geopolitically - entitled to join any economic or security organization it considers useful or necessary; it is absolutely legitimate in law, even when it effectively creates an imbalance in security and power relations between states that do not belong to the same economic, political and security organizations. The feelings of insecurity perceived by some former Soviet states, like the Baltic States, with regard to the Russian Federation, and the anti-Russian instincts of a good part of the US establishment, have also contributed to this. After the Ukrainian crisis, the world order will no longer be the same.

The crisis proper began in November 2013, with the refusal by then President Viktor Yanukovich to ratify the agreement with Europe, for reasons of personal advantage, but also because it contained clauses that were too onerous for Ukraine, and because the Russian offer was better. In February 2014, this led to spontaneous protests, not only against the Yanukovich government's decision not to sign the agreement with the European Union, but above all against the extreme corruption of his government. Making the situation worse for the Ukrainian authorities was the hostility from some of the most important countries in the area, such as Poland and, in particular, Germany. The latter, a fundamental economic partner for Russia, not only took on an important role as mediator, but entered into conflict with the leaders of the Kremlin, despite the SPD's traditional attitude of compromise towards Russia, and the strong economic ties between the two countries, traditionally represented by the German manufacturing industry (Ostausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft).

Another crucial factor was the role of the United States, whose main geopolitical aim has always been to prevent Russian hegemony at the continental level, especially if combined with Russian technology and the potential creation of a continental economic space in synergy with China. Also significant is the latent dispute between Germany and the United States regarding the building of gas pipelines between Germany and Russia, in particular the now well-known "Nord Stream." Therefore, obstructing a potential economic and energy space is one of the main strategic aims of the United States, which looks unfavourably at Europe's energy dependence on Russia, with the political risks it inevitably implies.

### 1.2 Ukraine in NATO: Advantages, Perspectives and Problems for the West

The question of the real interests, especially US interests, involved in the strategic projection of NATO in Ukraine will, especially after the 2019 elections, represent one of the elements in the heated debate between the organization's members (in particular between western and eastern states, the latter being more interested in Ukraine as a stable buffer state between Eastern Europe and Russia) when it



Joint press point by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko  
[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_161573.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_161573.htm?selectedLocale=en)

comes to deciding about the country actually joining NATO. This is also because, should Ukraine become a NATO member, and the highly likely possibility of friction between Ukraine and Russia, NATO would be forced to intervene in accordance with Article 5, which provides for collective defence when a member state suffers a military aggression, or an aggression that qualifies as a military attack. This is extremely important, because "Hybrid War," which implies a combined use of military tools, information warfare, energy blackmail, and so on, is currently being carried out by the Russian Federation and is aimed precisely at destabilizing the country to obtain important political results without any formal declaration of war or legally recognizable use of the military instrument, following the well-known "Gerasimov Doctrine" (from the name of the current Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia). Joining NATO, would also give an appearance of normality and democracy to a country on the verge of economic collapse, with all the consequences on nearby countries who would need to contain the collapse and preserve, at least in part, its social fabric.

### 1.3 Russian Interests in Ukraine

What then are Moscow's interests? First, Moscow is interested in Ukraine not moving towards NATO, an improbable scenario until a few months ago because the majority of the country seemed against the idea (and NATO too seemed divided). Moscow is extremely hostile to any reference to this because, by definition, it considers NATO as a problematic antagonist. One final worrying aspect from Moscow's point of view is the political and economic presence of the European Union in Ukraine, and the snowball effect that a gradual penetration of

the EU's democratic rules may have on the authoritarian Russian political model. There was a further hardening of its autocratic character after the Moscow demonstrations of December 2011 that followed the presidential elections. The main problem for Ukraine is the difficult, even irreconcilable membership of two economic and political entities like the European Union and the Eurasian Union, which because of its geographic position and size, the Kremlin considered crucial to the success of the Eurasian project.

The other important strategic project for Putin is one that is not necessarily easy to achieve, due to the obvious opposition from Ukraine and most of the international community: the control of the Ukrainian coast from Sevastopol to Transnistria, which would allow Russia to control the northern shores and hence all trade there, most importantly the energy trade. The recent construction of the Kerch Strait Bridge allows Russia to connect to Crimea directly, and at the same time to seriously damage the Ukrainian fishing sector and the extraction of fossil fuels on the continental shelf and the Economic Exclusive Zone under Ukrainian jurisdiction, according to international law. It is evident, however, that the control of Ukrainian ports, in particular Odessa, would allow NATO to control the energy routes from the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus and the Middle East. Controlling the port of Odessa would be particularly significant for NATO for the control of the Black Sea to contrast the numbers of Russian strategic forces deployed in Crimea, even with the restrictions to passage set by the 1936 Montreux Convention, but above all to control Erdogan's Turkey, which in recent years has shown reserve and even hostility towards NATO, and is no longer considered by the West as a totally reliable country, though it is still a full member of the organization. Though the Turkish military has always upheld the secular status of

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<https://www.flickr.com/photos/ministryofdefenceua/34591996133>

the state, the purges that took place after the coup may have changed its ideological attitude towards Western institutions, including NATO. It is obvious, therefore, that Ukraine plays a primary strategic role in the projection of NATO towards the Caspian Sea and the Middle East, and most importantly in the containment of the Russian Federation in an highly strategic area like the Black Sea.

#### 1.4 The Problem of Ukrainian Integration into the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian Blocs

One of the central issues in the Ukrainian conundrum pertains to the Eurasian space, and whether or not Ukraine should place itself in a Euro-Atlantic context or within a Eurasian model of integration, exemplified by the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), CSTO (the Collective Security Treaty Organization that oversees security-related issues between Russia and Central Asia, especially with regard to anti-terrorist activities) and the Eurasian Union itself. Russia decided to build a Eurasian economic space in which to exercise its leadership, and also because of the existing technological compatibility between former Soviet states. In substance, for Russia the Eurasian integration project is a way of safeguarding Russian low-technology exports that wouldn't find outlets in the more technologically advanced markets of Western Europe and the United States.

It is also important to note the substantial differences between the US and the Russian concepts of economy. The former is based essentially on the ability of the country's private companies to conquer markets without relying too much on political institutions, whilst Russian state capitalism operates in synergy with the state, to penetrate the markets of the post-Soviet area. In other words, in the Russian perspective politics and economics work together, whilst the US sees private business interests as separate from the interests of the government. An example of this is the construction by American companies of gas pipelines in the post-Soviet area not approved by the US government. Hence, Russia's attempt to create a marketplace and institutions which are independent from the West and from the Euro-Atlantic area. The aim of the United States, and in part of the European Union, is therefore to preserve its own political and economic model and its international power against those models that may threaten it, in particular the Chinese, who in perspective represent the most fearsome antagonists of US supremacy and more generally of the Euro-Atlantic bloc. Consider, for example, the Chinese "Silk Road Initiative", a project for economic integration linking the Eurasian and African continents, led by the Chinese in direct challenge to the US, which has military bases all over the world, advanced technology and strong financial institutions. Indeed, despite strong internal resistance, the IMF should, over the next few years, pilot through a reform of the political and economic systems, making Ukraine more independent from international



loans, which are granted less and less because of “Ukrainian fatigue.”

### 1.5 Open Political and Strategic Problems and Possible Solutions

With regard to a possible definitive settlement of the Ukrainian question, some Russian concerns may be recognized by Western negotiators. These include Russia’s vital security interests or the legitimate economic concerns of Putin’s regime. The trade agreements between the EU and Ukraine, granting preferential commercial status to Ukraine, de facto penalize economic relations between Russia and Ukraine. The presence of Russian military forces and infrastructure in the Black Sea and in territorial waters under Russian control represents, instead, a serious strategic threat and can in no way be considered legitimate by the West, but is explicitly offensive in military and strategic terms, aimed at acquiring a strategic advantage through the creation of a territorial corridor on the northern coasts of the Black Sea.

In short, some Russian political and economic interests can be considered legitimate, whilst others have a purely offensive valence. What then are the possible solutions to the conflict in Ukraine? The main problem is the difficult coexistence of the European Union and the Eurasian Union (with Russia) within the same state. This difficulty could, however, be overcome with a little political will from both sides. How? The degree of autonomy demanded and conceded by the Kiev government



[https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag\\_of\\_Ukraine.svg](https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Ukraine.svg)

in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Lugansk will be a central issue in the peace negotiations. What role will President Poroshenko play in the peace process after the 2019 elections? Obviously, he will try to be reelected, because in Ukraine only political power can guarantee the revenue

deriving from oligopolies and monopolies, whilst in more advanced countries economic power is generally detached from political power.

The solution to the whole range of political problems related to the Ukrainian question may find a provisional solution after the 2019 elections, which are likely to result in a swerve of the current regime towards more radical political positions. It remains to be seen, however, whether an efficient authentically reformist political class will really be voted in.

### Conclusions

Many parts of the Ukrainian crisis seem to be quite difficult to solve. What is certain, however, is that Europe’s period of peace is over, as is the political model based on the mainly Anglo-American idea that economic interdependence and international law can guarantee harmonious “post-national” cohabitation between states. Instead, we are seeing a return to a post-Westphalian age, one of violent confrontation and conflict between differing visions of the world and contrasting geopolitical interests, as exemplified today by Russia-US relations. Only strong political will on both sides could steer relations between the two countries back to greater constructiveness based on common objectives, such as, for example, common rules on international trade, a common fight - despite political divergences - against international terrorism, and so on. With regard to adapting the army to NATO standards, Ukraine has undoubtedly improved its fighting capabilities, thanks also to the army’s experience in the field in eastern Ukraine, thus improving the country’s chances of joining the Atlantic Alliance in 5 to 10 years.

With regard to the progress on state reforms, Ukraine’s perspectives appear to be decisively less favourable to NATO membership, even in the medium term. In a few years’ time, when the decision is taken, there will be a heated debate between those in favour and those against. The former include Sweden, Poland, Romania (which strongly fears Russian supremacy in the Black Sea), the Baltic States, the United States and Canada, which has a considerable Ukrainian community from the diaspora of western Ukraine, and which in recent years has been visibly in favour of the Ukrainian cause.

Those who will presumably oppose Ukraine’s membership include Italy and Spain, and perhaps Germany, France and some Eastern European states such as Bulgaria, Hungary (currently very active in slowing down the process of Ukrainian NATO membership, and substantially helping Russia to delay as much as possible Ukraine’s access to NATO), the Czech Republic and Slovakia, interested for historical and cultural reasons, as well as for economic reasons in not excessively damaging their relations with Moscow. Because NATO decisions are taken by consensus, the question of Ukrainian membership will not be easy to solve despite the weight of the United States within the Alliance and the strong political will of the more anti-Russian Eastern European states. Italy has important interests in the extraction activities of Russian companies on the Crimean coast. US sanctions could interrupt or damage mining activities by Italian energy companies like Eni or Saipem. For this reason, Italy has a fundamental and evident interest in contributing, within the limits of its political and economic possibilities (Italy is not part of the “Normandy Format” or of the Minsk agreements), together with its European and US allies and Russia, to a definitive solution of the Ukrainian conflict.



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