

by Harvey B. Feigenbaum rights@agenceglobal.com

In the mid 1990s over lunch with a friend in the State Department, he remarked: “We should have dismantled NATO when we had the chance.” That’s not what happened, and we are currently reaping the consequences of the path not taken.

When the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989 and the atavistic coup in the Soviet Union failed in 1991, NATO lost its mission. The military alliance had been formed to fight the Communist Menace (defence against fascism was never on the agenda). Without Communism, the alliance had no *raison d’être*. Implicitly, of course, the mission was not simply about defence but about maintaining American hegemony, yet this was never said out loud, except by leftist critics in Europe—and eventually by Vladimir Putin.

The stakes for NATO were always high, though they were able to solve the problem posed by the absence of an enemy by ignoring the problem. Instead, NATO expanded. As the movers and shaker told James Goldgeier, who included the idea in his book *Not Whether but When: the Decision to Expand NATO*, when in doubt, “hold a membership drive.”

Even as late as autumn 2013 the mission was unclear. When at a conference I asked NATO analysts who were bemoaning the lack of fervour in Europe for the organization to explain the exact nature of the threat, the response, after some embarrassed silence, was... pirates off the coast of West Africa!

### *Enter the crisis in Ukraine*

Few countries have been so benighted by bad governance as Ukraine. Finally, after decades of diminished living standards and astronomical corruption, demonstrators refused to leave the principal square in the capital until their concerns were answered. Most of the demonstrators surely only wanted less corruption and better government, but the extreme right hijacked their discontent and rode the upheaval into a major role in the transitional government. Not all the transitional government was either neo-fascist or extreme nationalists, but many, like *Svoboda* and *Right Sector*, were.

This gave Vladimir Putin the excuse he needed. Having lost an assured client in former President Yanukovich, Putin began to improvise. His solution was to hive off regions dominated by Russian speakers under the fiction of being the Protector of Russophones. As part of his effort to destabilize a potentially unfriendly government on his western border, he mobilized

## Zombie NATO

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troops and insinuated special forces into the troubled eastern regions of Ukraine.

Russian protection was not unwelcome in many Russophone quarters, especially among working class Ukrainians, pensioners and the unemployed. Those with few prospects in the neoliberal world on offer from the West, saw their chances improving if they could cast their lot with Putin's imperial aspirations.

It seems clear enough that the citizens of Ukraine have few good choices. Most are clear-eyed about the "soft authoritarianism" of Putin (to borrow Russian specialist Peter Reddaway's phrase), but they note that salaries are higher in Russia and in any event, corruption could hardly be worse than what they have already experienced. Western Ukraine sees more promise in the European Union, and for the nascent bourgeoisie that is true. But mindless expansion of NATO put Putin on his guard and Western officials, shortsighted as ever, did nothing to dissuade him from his worries of an encroaching threat.

It may well be that even had NATO not expanded, Putin would have been equally aggressive. And it may well be that Ukraine never had a viable future without a protector, and that the unified country was always an unsustainable anomaly. But the mindless expansion of NATO has made things worse for us in the West, too.

Conditions are different from NATO's halcyon days. The United States squandered the political support for military intervention on two pointless wars in the Muslim world, so the credibility of its willingness to protect its clients is at an all time low.

Worse, the huge expenditures on Cold War style weapons systems could not come at a worse time. It's hard to make an argument for F 35 fighters, let alone tanks and destroyers, to fight terrorism. The spending that America lavishes on weapons systems is only possible because military spending offers a kind of inefficient Keynesian stimulus, and the spending is spread across the numerous Congressional districts whose representatives vote the budget. As they say, the only unstoppable weapon is one that is built in 50 states. An aggressive Putin helps the narrative favoured by Boeing and Lockheed Martin.

But even America has budgetary constraints. Government programs are viewed in Congress as a zero sum game. Every dollar lavished on "defence" is subtracted from money targeted to domestic needs. The situation is similar in Europe. Guess who loses!

Putin's improvisations have given a boost to the supporters of NATO. It rises like a zombie to devour the budgets of social programs. NATO is, alas, set to feast on the living.

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