

Robust and Rhetorical Action: Explaining NATO's Long Commitment to the Bucharest Decision

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
In
Planning, Governance, and Globalization

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September 18, 2023
Arlington, Virginia

Keywords: NATO Enlargement, Ukraine, Georgia, Russia, Robust Action, Rhetorical Action

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ABSTRACT

Why, despite the territorial fragmentation and unresolved conflicts in both countries, does NATO maintain a public commitment to a 2008 decision promising the future membership of Ukraine and Georgia? It can be argued that the “Bucharest decision” has prompted the very attack that NATO membership was meant to prevent. Russia has invaded both states to, among other things, prevent their likely incorporation in NATO. What causes publicly articulated military alliance policy aspirations to endure when they induce such geopolitical conflict, and geopolitical transformation, that it undermines their purpose?

This dissertation takes these puzzles as its object of inquiry. The focus of the study is Ukraine and Georgia's partial integration into NATO from 2007 to 2020. This research uses the concepts of robust action and rhetorical action to examine the two countries' growing partnerships with the alliance during this period. It defines robust action as a series of ambiguous moves to achieve tactical goals while maintaining long term flexibility. Rhetorical action is defined as the strategic use of arguments to serve an agent's interests. By using a narrative analysis method, the study draws from a body of NATO official texts and speeches and a set of original interviews to illustrate the public and private narratives used by political and military officials to help them make sense of NATO's engagement with Ukraine and Georgia.

Existing literature on NATO expansion has not addressed how the alliance has adapted the process of integrating aspirant countries short of membership. Moreover, the literature on robust action has not focused on how international security organizations like NATO can use ambiguous actions to tackle complex challenges and maintain flexibility.

The study argues that NATO's engagement with Ukraine and Georgia since Bucharest constitutes a robust action strategy. Through a combination of rhetorical and material support, NATO has simultaneously been able to maintain the appearance of a commitment to the two countries, show Western resolve and solidarity in opposing Russia and sustaining the United States' preferred vision of Europe's security order, all while denying Ukraine and Georgia “full membership” in the alliance. Ukraine, Georgia, and their allies in NATO have used rhetorical action, arguments based on the self-defined liberal values and norms of the Euro-Atlantic community that NATO represents on the one hand, and the historical precedent of an open door policy toward membership, on the other, to rhetorically entrap NATO into staying committed.

The study shows how multilateral commitments are more layered than the traditional membership/no membership choice and how NATO has successfully maintained such a commitment through both rhetoric and action while avoiding a direct war with Russia. It concludes however that NATO's commitment is untenable for a military alliance based on defense and deterrence. This has implications for the future of NATO expansion and the overall trajectory of the alliance.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The possibility of further expanding NATO to Ukraine and Georgia has been among the alliance's greatest challenges since the 2008 Bucharest summit decision, which promised the future membership of the two countries. Many accounts tend to focus on the original motivation behind the decision rather than NATO's practice of maintaining a commitment to such a decision in the light of the unresolved conflicts and territorial fragmentation of both states. This study, by contrast, examines the rhetoric and action in the making of the two countries' deepening partnerships with NATO since Bucharest.

This research examines how through a set of ambiguous rhetoric and action NATO has been able to maintain the appearance of a commitment to Ukraine and Georgia, project Western resolve against Russian opposition, and sustain the United States' preferred vision of the European security order, all while denying the two countries membership in the alliance. Moreover, the advocates for Ukraine and Georgia use arguments based on NATO's identity, values, and the precedent of prior expansions to convince the alliance into staying committed to their eventual membership.

The study shows how NATO has devised a formula for integrating aspirant members, short of "full membership." It is useful because it shows how, in practice, multilateral commitments are more layered than they are traditionally understood. While NATO has been able to successfully maintain this commitment through both rhetoric and action, such a commitment clashes with important qualities of adaptability and flexibility to changing strategic realities, crucial to the endurance of a military alliance over the long term.

Acknowledgments

Every traveler ought to repay their debts and I have accumulated many during this journey. I begin by acknowledging my dissertation committee, led by my chair, Dr. Gerard Toal. My first interaction with Dr. Toal was in a 2009 course called “Global Change and Local Impacts,” where we studied the multiple interpretations of the August 2008 war. I am thankful for his interest in my scholarly development over many years. His patience and encouragement to see this project to the finish have been most appreciated. I offer my gratitude to Drs. Giselle Datz and Chad Levinson for their thoughtful insights and willingness to serve on my committee. Finally, I thank Dr. Seth Johnston, a fellow U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel, for being the external committee member. Seth brought a scholar-practitioner perspective to this study of NATO.

I also thank Drs. Ariel Ahram and Joel Peters at Virginia Tech for their role in my academic development. My colleagues in the masters and doctoral programs at Tech provided much-needed support and motivation along the way. Drs. Nareg Seferian, George Greanias, and Jim Davitch have been especially helpful in encouraging me to persist over the last few miles of the journey.

A year long research fellowship at the Rand Corporation in 2019-20 allowed me time and space to develop my thoughts and refine the research. I am grateful for the professionalism and fellowship of Drs. Matt Lewis, Sam Charap, Bill Marcellino, Steve Dalzell, and Chris Paul. Dr. Lewis selflessly served as a proctor for my remote PhD exam. Our fellowship assistant, Tina Cotromanes, always greeted me with a warm smile and kind words. Thank you.

At the National Intelligence University, I thank Drs. Dan Burghart, Sam Baroni, and David Belt for their support in my development. Dr. Burghart was my master’s thesis advisor in 2012-13 and helped hone my fascination with the post-Soviet region.

This scholarly journey lasted over the course of four Army reassignments, from Washington, to England, to Los Angeles, to the Pentagon. I am grateful for the support and teamwork of my Army brothers and sisters in arms through it all, including Colonels Mark Cloutier, Beth Behn, Ryan Morgan, and Sean Kelly; Lieutenant Colonels Christy Lickliger, Octavia Davis, Adam Scher, Dan Andrews, Chris Sweitzer, Law Schmidle, and Jason Siler. Jason’s wife, Micala, was tragically killed in Kyiv in 2020 while he was assigned to the Defense Attache Office there. I partially dedicate this work to her memory. Lieutenant General Erik Peterson has graciously allowed me some time away from the Pentagon over the last year and a half to push this project over the mountaintop. I am grateful for his kindness.

I owe a heavy debt of gratitude to my family for enduring me as I have worked through the project. Thanks to my parents and sister for their interest and curiosity in my work. Thank you to my wife, Jeannie, who has been my best friend and most trusted confidant. Her patience and grace are unmatched. Jeannie has stepped up bravely countless times while I have been buried in this study. Finally, I thank our children, Layla and Cam, whose playfulness and energy have enriched our lives greatly. I dedicate the dissertation to them.

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Abbreviations

ANP - Annual National Program

ATP - Annual Target Plan

BRD - Federal Republic of Germany

CAP - Comprehensive Assistance Package

CEE - Central and Eastern Europe

CSTO - Collective Security Treaty Organization

CT - counterterrorism

DCFTA - Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement

EFP - Enhanced Forward Presence

EOP - Enhanced Opportunities Partner

EU - European Union

FYROM - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

G7 - Group of Seven countries

GDRP - Georgia Defense Readiness Program

GTEP - Georgia Train and Equip Program

GSSOP - Georgia Sustainment and Stability Operations Program

IPAP - Individual Partnership Action Plan

ISAF - International Security Assistance Force

MAP - Membership Action Plan

NAC - North Atlantic Council

NACC - North Atlantic Cooperation Council
NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGC - NATO-Georgia Commission
NIDC - NATO Information and Documentation Center
NLO - NATO Liaison Office
NSPA - NATO Support and Procurement Agency
NRC - NATO-Russia Council
NRF - NATO Response Force
NUC - NATO-Ukraine Commission
OSCE - Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PfP - Partnership for Peace
PJC - Permanent Joint Council
RAP - Readiness Action Plan
RSM - Resolute Support Mission
SHAPE - Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe
SNGP - Substantial NATO-Georgia Package
TAN - Transnational Advocacy Network
VJTF - Very High Readiness Joint Task Force
WEU - Western European Union

Chapter 1 - Introduction

“Liberal great powers regularly dress up their hard-nosed behavior with liberal rhetoric. They talk like liberals and act like realists. Should they adopt liberal policies that are at odds with realist logic, they invariably come to regret it.”

–John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (2018)

At the April 2008 Bucharest summit, the North Atlantic Council (NAC), NATO’s supreme decision making body, declared that Ukraine and Georgia would become members of the alliance at an undefined point in the future. However, the two countries were denied a practical pathway to membership via a Membership Action Plan (MAP), the standard bureaucratic mechanism to transform candidates into allies. The MAP refusal exposed the divisions within NATO, since membership decisions are based on consensus. A U.S.-led camp, backed by several newer allies which joined since the end of the Cold War, argued that expanding the alliance would advance the mission of creating a Europe “whole, free, and at peace,” while a Franco-German-led side favored a more cautious approach, taking heed of repeated warnings by Russian officials that further expansion posed a serious threat to Russia’s national security. Nonetheless, in the intervening years the allies, led by the United States and the major European powers, have provided the two countries advice, funding, arms, and training while forgoing MAPs. At the same time, NATO has kept a public, rhetorical commitment to their eventual membership.

1.1 Research Puzzle

The problem with the “Bucharest decision,” however, is that it may have prompted the very attack that NATO membership was designed to prevent. Russia vehemently opposes NATO

expansionism, particularly to Ukraine and Georgia, and has invaded both states to, among other things, prevent their likely accession. By examining the cases of Ukraine and Georgia's partial, protracted integration into NATO, this study seeks to understand what causes publicly articulated military alliance policy aspirations to endure when they induce such geopolitical conflict, and geopolitical transformation, that it undermines their purpose?

NATO's expansion to former Warsaw Pact territories and Soviet republics, once adversaries, has been among the most visible and controversial aspects of its post-Cold War transformation. It has expanded from 16 to 31 members, and several other states such as Ukraine and Georgia aspire to join. In its own 1995 *Study on NATO Enlargement*, the allies claimed the policy would enhance security for all in the "Euro-Atlantic area," a huge expanse covering the territory of all OSCE member states, by promoting democratic reforms and fostering cooperation (NATO, 1995). The study went on to stress that a larger NATO would make "dividing lines" in Europe obsolete and "would threaten no-one," including Russia (Ibid.). However, the policy has brought NATO into direct confrontation with Russia—the opposite of the intended effect.

Evolving and conflicting views on security and values make further NATO expansion—or enlargement—a contested issue. This is due to two related factors: disagreement within NATO over the wisdom of the policy in the face of Russia's violent and manifest hostility as well as a fundamental shift in the dynamics of the European security environment since the August 2008 Russia-Georgia War. That war created a geopolitical contest between Russia and the West, which ruptured with Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and fomentation of war in eastern Ukraine. In February 2022, a full scale Russian invasion of Ukraine dramatically escalated the crisis, which has been the largest outbreak of war in Europe since the Second World War. Russia's power and assertiveness, as shown by its willingness to use military force

to protect its perceived interests, has exposed the flaws in further NATO expansion to weak states with unresolved territorial issues and deeply located in Russia's periphery. In military terms, it is difficult to comprehend how NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia enhances the security of the United States, which is the de facto leader of the alliance and historically the main driver of its expansion.

While NATO likely wants to be seen as mastering the changes in the security environment around it through cool rationalism, the longstanding "open door" policy toward Ukraine and Georgia suggests something different at play: that geopolitics is instead driven by factors such as ambitions, emotions, and fear. This study addresses the question: what explains NATO's enduring public commitment to incorporating Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance? This question is derived from a deep dissatisfaction with the official narrative of NATO enlargement, which maintains that expanding the alliance is vital for enabling democracy and spreading peace and stability in Europe. However, the unresolved conflicts, internal territorial divisions, and democratic shortfalls in both Ukraine and Georgia make them poor candidates for membership and security liabilities to the current NATO allies, especially the United States, which would incur extraordinary risk by extending its nuclear umbrella to the two countries. At present, some practitioners behind the scenes as well as members of the strategic community now consider the Bucharest decision foolish. One interviewee, a U.S. military officer at SHAPE, claimed it was the "biggest mistake" NATO has ever made.¹ Ivo Daalder, the former U.S. ambassador to the alliance, called it NATO's "cardinal sin," as it created false hopes, exposed a rift within NATO, and deliberately crossed Russia's so-called red lines (Erlanger, 2021).

¹ Interview W, U.S. Army field grade officer at NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 15 July 2020.

This dissertation takes the puzzle of NATO's long commitment to Ukraine and Georgia as its object of inquiry. It draws inspiration from a wide range of International Relations (IR), alliance politics, and sociology literature to explore the process of integrating the two countries into NATO structures in the years since the 2008 Bucharest decision. Existing literature has not adequately addressed how NATO has adapted the expansion process to the evolving security environment, how through integrating Ukraine and Georgia it has been able to exercise independence and autonomy in opposition to Russia, and how it has understood both of these countries in the subsequent years after Bucharest.

1.2 Argument and Framework

The study argues that NATO's engagement with Ukraine and Georgia constitutes robust action, a set of ambiguous moves focused on accomplishing short-term goals while preserving flexibility in making long-term moves in opposition to Russia's attempts to constrain NATO's decision making. NATO wants to appear committed to Ukraine and Georgia's eventual membership to avoid the perceived reputational damage of giving in to Russia and renegeing on the Bucharest decision. Through a combination of rhetorical and material support—both words and deeds—NATO has demonstrated a commitment to bringing the two countries closer to the alliance, yet not by offering membership via the normal MAP process.

The study situates the robust action concept within a constructivist framework. This enables us to appreciate how NATO can work to try to uphold its reputation for reliability in one game while cultivating other identities at the same time. For example, demonstrating commitment to Ukraine and Georgia can show NATO's resolve in the face of Russian opposition. This action helps to foster an identity as a credible military alliance who stands up for its friends while also an image of an open community of like minded states.

Moreover, this study argues that NATO's commitment makes sense when we consider the power of rhetorical action, the strategic employment of arguments based on the shared liberal democratic norms and identities of the Euro-Atlantic community that NATO claims to represent. As informal members of this imagined community, Ukraine and Georgia have skillfully used NATO's self-defined identity and purpose against it to serve their interests. They have portrayed themselves as fundamental parts of "the West" and Europe whose commitment to democracy and loyalty to alliance values and missions warrants their inclusion in NATO. Aided by advocates within the alliance and a transnational advocacy network, the arguments play to the increasingly dominant narrative in the West of NATO as a civilizational project of democracy promotion and protection against a revanchist Russia. Rhetorical action recognizes the central role of aspirant state preferences—national security and civilizational belongingness—in keeping up NATO's commitment to Bucharest. Whether this reading of Ukraine and Georgia's identity is a true driver of the phenomena, or simply a rationale used to justify their integration and avoid being seen as yielding to Russian pressure, is hard to tell.

I approach the research question from a narrative analysis perspective, which is an approach within the broader methodology of discourse analysis. Explaining policy practices such as the process of NATO expansion requires a discourse-centric approach to understand how particular interpretations come into being and shape policy debates. Focusing on narratives makes sense considering that they are the primary cognitive framework through which people tie the various elements of a policy challenge together into a coherent story (Marcellino et al., 2021). The research data for the study is drawn from 61 NATO official texts released in 2007-2020 and 43 original, semi-structured interviews of NATO international staff members, allied

military officers and civil servants, current and former diplomats, and Ukrainian and Georgian government officials.

1.3 Contributions

The contributions of this dissertation are both practical and theoretical. The study offers two main contributions to the study of international security organizations. First, Ukraine and Georgia's partial, protracted integration shows how NATO has adapted the expansion process to both internal and external challenges. Internally, while the allies have not been able to reach consensus on inviting the two countries to join NATO, the commitment to the Bucharest decision officially endures. Externally, the alliance has developed novel ways of integrating Ukraine and Georgia outside of the MAP process while avoiding a direct war with Russia.

Both cases show how multilateral commitments are more layered than they seem. NATO expansion is not merely a "game" with only two outcomes: membership or no membership. As NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg himself pointed out in October 2021, "...we need to establish that there is a lot in between nothing and full membership" (NATO, 2021). In practice, both Ukraine and Georgia hold a fungible partnership status with NATO, highlighted by numerous bilateral political frameworks, tailored defense capacity-building packages, public statements by NATO officials rife with "special relationship" language, and partial military interoperability with NATO forces. While this has brought about a sort of quasi-membership, both countries have been denied the thing they really want—a security guarantee. In showing NATO's creativity by stealthily integrating the two countries, the study builds on the literature on NATO adaptation.

The second contribution is a theoretical one. This study contributes to the literature on robust action by showing how NATO has demonstrated commitment to Ukraine and Georgia through both rhetorical and material support. Existing literature has yet to examine how the concept of robust action can be used to describe NATO's behavior. The original literature on robust action dealt in the field of sociology (Leifer, 1991; Padgett and Ansell, 1993). More recent contributions have addressed how organizations can follow robust action strategies to address complex challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015; Porter et al., 2020; Diniz et al., 2023). This study is more in line with the latter while it is novel in its focus on an international security organization such as NATO. The study illustrates the robust action by drawing on the public statements of NATO officials and NATO institutional structures, the private opinions of practitioners involved in implementing Ukraine and Georgia's integration, and the numerous partnership initiatives NATO has developed to enable and sustain the integration.

1.4 Dissertation Roadmap

The dissertation comprises 13 chapters. Following this introduction, a chapter on theory and methods reviews the existing literature, outlines the argument and key concepts, justifies case selection, and explains the methods guiding the research. Afterwards, a chapter on the geopolitical and historical context of possible NATO expansion to Georgia and Ukraine sets the stage for the empirical analysis. The next nine chapters are the heart of the study. The first chapter focuses on rhetorical action, the argumentative strategy used by Ukraine, Georgia, and their advocates within NATO, which mirrors the arguments used in earlier expansion rounds. The next four chapters examine NATO's narrative of Georgia in 2007-2020, separated by the occasion of the August 2008 war to see how and whether the crisis affected the discourse on NATO expansionism. The subsequent four chapters focus on Ukraine's integration with NATO

over the same timeframe, using Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 as the crucial reference point. This structure is meant to illustrate how the Georgia case has impacted the Ukraine case and vice versa. The thirteenth and final chapter concludes the study and summarizes the key findings.

Chapter 2 - Theory and Argument

2.1 Introduction

This study develops a theory of the causes of NATO's publicly stated commitment to future membership for Georgia and Ukraine, drawing inspiration from a broad range of scholarly literature within International Relations (IR), alliance politics, and sociology. While there are aspects of the existing arguments that offer insights into what drove NATO's initial desire to expand the alliance to the two countries, they are disconnected pieces to a larger puzzle. None of the explanations are wholly satisfactory on their own in explaining why NATO stays publicly committed to the policy.

2.2 Alliance Formation and NATO

Alliances are traditionally defined as a formal or informal cooperative security relationship between two or more states, whose defining feature is a commitment to mutual military support against an external actor under specific circumstances (Walt, 1987). This relatively narrow definition has historically been adequate, with alliances formed for only short periods and against defined military threats (Liska, 1962). The loss of such a threat generally leads to their dissolution (Warren, 2010). The U.S.-led alliance system that has developed since the Second World War challenges this definition. The most prominent alliance, NATO, has endured since 1949 and has developed robust institutional structures including a permanent administrative bureaucracy and an integrated multinational military command (Wallander, 2000). In fact, NATO ranks among the largest international institutions, with 1,000 civilians

working within the “international staff” in Brussels (Dijkstra, 2016). The presence and endurance of such structures means the NATO alliance constitutes more than an intergovernmental policy agreement between states. Its deep institutionalization has enabled NATO’s transformation and adaptation to the post-Cold War era, argues Johnston (2017).

NATO has also generated wide-ranging cooperation with partners as varied as Australia, Brazil, Japan, and Russia. Through their own distinct structured partnerships with NATO, both Ukraine and Georgia have achieved what amounts to a “consolation membership,” accruing many of its perceived benefits—such as audiences with NATO officials, invitations to NAC summits, and special access to training and exercises—but without the crucial national security guarantee (Ivanov, 2017).

2.3 IR Approaches Toward Alliance Expansion

The alliance literature suggests that several causal factors influence alliance expansion. Each of the three leading IR theoretical approaches of neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism offer differing explanations as to why NATO expands. While each can adequately address the desire of Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO, they have difficulty fully explaining NATO’s motivation to offer membership.

2.31 Neorealism

Neorealism emphasizes material factors and proposes that expansion takes place if it is both a necessary and efficient means for both aspiring members and current allies to balance superior power or threats (Walt, 1987; Waltz, 1979). While neorealism can explain Ukraine and Georgia’s desire for NATO membership, it does not adequately address the interest of NATO as

a whole. From both power and threat balancing viewpoints, NATO lacks the need to balance Russian power due to its vast overall advantage in resources and capabilities. Indeed, by 2021 NATO constituted 30 member states, one billion people, and half the world's economic might (Stoltenberg, 2021). Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia no longer has the offensive military capabilities that credibly threaten to conquer Europe (Cookson, 2020). There also exists differing threat perceptions within NATO (Béraud-Sudreau & Giegerich, 2018). While many “frontline allies” of the former Soviet bloc consider Russia the gravest threat to their national security, that view has not been shared by all allies. Southern European allies have considered terrorism and immigration from North Africa and the Middle East more pressing issues. Nonetheless, there has been an official coalescence around perceiving Russia as acutely threatening to NATO since invading Ukraine in 2022 (NATO, 2022).

As for Ukraine and Georgia, the least puzzling aspect of possible alliance expansion is their motivation to join NATO. Both states seek the national security guarantee provided by article five of the Washington Treaty, NATO's founding charter, which commits each ally to respond to an armed attack against one of them, to include by using military force (NATO, 1949). Since Russia has already attacked the two countries, their desire to join NATO to obtain a security guarantee is both justified and unsurprising. Ultimately, this guarantee is underwritten by U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, specifically the threat of retaliation in response to an attack against an ally. Protection under the U.S. nuclear umbrella is not extended to non-NATO members. Presumably, such a threat would deter Russia from attacking Ukraine or Georgia in the future. The pursuit of NATO membership by the two countries thus constitutes alignment, or “balancing,” with the superpower against the prevailing perceived threat.

2.32 Neoliberal Institutionalism

Neoliberal institutionalism claims states align out of self-interest, to gain rewards such as cooperation, predictability, increased transparency, and accumulated economies of scale. This enables states to invest less individually while increasing their overall security by pooling resources (Keohane, 1984). Institutionalists argue that the main causal factor influencing alliance endurance is the degree to which it becomes institutionalized or “sticky,” such that allies regard it as continuing to serve their perceived interests (Wallander, 2000). From this view, an alliance expands if both existing and prospective allies expect net absolute benefits from expansion.

Neoliberal institutionalism can also account for Georgia and Ukraine’s desire to join NATO, yet it fails to explain NATO’s motivation. On one hand, the aspirants would benefit greatly from NATO membership. This involves protection under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, a reduced probability of being attacked, shared military resources, and representation in the civilian and military bureaucracies (Hellman and Wolf, 1993). As allies, both states would therefore enjoy a measure of external security they likely could not provide on their own. By contrast, the current NATO members would incur costs from the move, this becoming most significantly manifest in a fear of entrapment (Snyder, 1997). In both cases, NATO would risk being drawn into unresolved conflicts and territorial disputes in which the alliance does not share, or only partly shares, an interest with Georgia or Ukraine. Under such circumstances, extending security guarantees to states which Russia has already attacked may risk committing NATO to a future war with a nuclear-armed state. As members, it is likely that both states would consume a disproportionate amount of NATO’s “common goods” of conventional defense and U.S. nuclear deterrence, putting other allies at a possible disadvantage (Schimmelfennig, 1998).

2.33 Constructivism

Constructivism highlights the power of discourse, such as the influence of shared culture and identity, in explaining alliance expansion. Constructivists contend that while NATO had been founded primarily as a military alliance, its deep institutionalization helped establish an enduring Western democratic security community, which enabled its transformation after the Cold War (Williams & Neumann, 2000). Such a community is defined by three traits: 1) shared identities, values, and meanings; 2) many-sided and direct relations; and 3) a reciprocity that expresses long-term interest and altruism (Adler and Barnett, 1998). As the main institution of transatlantic cooperation, NATO was the focus of Karl Deutsch's (1957) original formulation of a security community, and has been central to further refinements of the concept (Risse-Kappen, 1996).

For constructivism, alliance expansion occurs if the current allies believe new allies would enhance the "collective identity" (Wendt, 1999) of the security community that NATO represents. Constructivists understand expansion as a process of "international socialization" whereby NATO establishes itself as a "teacher" of the community's stated norms and values: individual freedoms, civil liberties, democratic political participation, private property, and market economies (Gheciu, 2005; Schimmelfennig, 1998). Aspiring members—or "learners"—seek to internalize these norms and values in their domestic politics, and pursue identification with, and recognition by "the West," as signified by admission to NATO (Behnke, 2013). NATO's membership decisions are thus principally about affirming and validating a candidate's desire for cultural and civilizational belonging to the West and not based on the criteria of instrumental rationality (Schimmelfennig, 1998, 2016).

Like the other IR approaches, constructivism can explain Georgia and Ukraine's desire to join NATO but has difficulty fully accounting for NATO's interest in expansion. As the "institutional embodiment" of the West, obtaining NATO membership confers on westernizing states an identity—and thus an assumption of an elevated status and legitimacy—that they likely could not achieve as outsiders. Yet, if expanding the alliance were really about affirming an aspirant's place within a Western democratic security community, the illiberal turns in the domestic politics of Georgia and Ukraine undercuts NATO's stated values-based logic for expansion (Blank, 2017; de Waal, 2021). Nonetheless, an advantage of a constructivist approach is that it sees knowledge as historically and culturally located. This justifies nesting the realist and liberal perspectives within a broader constructivist framework, since alliance choices are inevitably informed through the conceptual schemas provided by history, culture, and local systems of meaning.

2.4 Other Explanations for Expansion

Besides the prevailing IR perspectives, there are other approaches toward understanding the causes of NATO's public commitment to Georgia and Ukraine. These theories can be divided into the international, domestic, and organizational levels of analysis.

2.41 Power Maximization

The expansion of NATO is sometimes treated as an exercise in U.S. power maximization. According to this claim, an enduring U.S. foreign policy consensus drives NATO enlargement to sustain the United States' post-Cold War dominance by preventing the emergence of other great powers and alternative security structures (Posen, 2007). The United States is the largest member of NATO financially, militarily, and demographically and has long been the main advocate of

expansion within NATO (Goldgeier and Shifrinson, 2020). According to Morrow (1991), NATO is a classic example of an “asymmetric alliance,” whereby a group of minor powers exchanges autonomy for security provided by a hegemonic power. International institutions such as NATO can function as instruments through which powerful states pursue their perceived national interests (Mearsheimer, 1995; Waltz, 2000). The United States thus uses NATO expansion to extend its military power and political influence in a manner consistent with its professed interests and values, including norm proliferation and conformity (Garey, 2020).

However, if power maximization were the major driver of alliance expansion, one would expect NATO enlargement to stop when the costs to U.S. power exceeded the benefits (Shifrinson, 2020). Admitting Georgia and Ukraine into NATO inevitably increases the risks of the United States having to honor security guarantees in a future military conflict against Russia under likely unfavorable conditions.

2.42 Domestic Politics

A domestic politics explanation understands NATO expansion as a function of the interests of Western democratic governments. Absent a direct existential threat, these interests will be strongly influenced by domestic political imperatives as governments treat foreign policy as subordinate to the goal of remaining in power (Pohl, 2016). Western societies expect their governments to shape an international order that is conducive to the power structure of a state, to its leading institutional players and their interests and myths. Liberal democracies are more inclined to form alliances due to a mutual perception of peacefulness since their domestic decision making is governed by democratic norms (Risse-Kappen, 1996).

This explanation is plausible, as there exists broad public support for expansion across NATO member states. Political leaders thus use NATO for a domestic purpose, framing expansion as a democracy promotion tool while downplaying the military and security obligations involved (Goldgeier, 1999; Shifrinson, 2020). Yet, it takes a particular set of international conditions to make the connection between foreign policy choices and NATO expansion domestically palatable in the first place. The expansion as domestic politics claim tends to discount the prevailing public commonplaces and historically formed perceptions of national identity and the international environment.

2.43 Organizational Inertia

An organizational level of analysis sees NATO expansion as an outcome of organizational inertia and the difficulties of accepting change that are common for all large bureaucracies. This theory understands alliance expansion as a vital institutional attribute of post-Cold War NATO. States tend to stick with existing institutions since they have made costly investments in developing them, are perceived to have proven benefits, and because better alternatives are uncertain (Keohane, 1984; McCalla, 1996). With the successful expansions in 1999 and 2004, NATO made clear to aspirants that there would be subsequent rounds. Obtaining NATO membership is thus a significant incentive for Georgia and Ukraine to carry out political and military reforms to NATO's standards.

However, there is no evidence that the NATO bureaucracy has had a major role in continuing expansion or has pressed forward with incorporating the two countries into the alliance over and above what the allies prefer (Schimmelfennig, 2016). Alliance expansion has not been a top-down policy of the NATO bureaucracy but has depended crucially on individual

state's perceived interests and accompanied by disagreements among them. NATO's role as an institution can thus be described as instrumental. It is a persistent set of formal and informal rules and norms that enables and shapes cooperation among the allies (Keohane, 1989).

In summary, the existing arguments that are used to explain NATO's public commitment to membership for Ukraine and Georgia are incomplete, and leave certain crucial mechanisms explaining why the open door endures undocumented and obscure. At the international level, each of the major IR theoretical approaches can account for the two countries' desire to join the alliance but they fail to fully explain NATO's motivation. A U.S. power maximization thesis cannot account for the entrapment risks and anticipated costs to U.S. power from having to honor security guarantees in a conflict with Russia over Ukraine or Georgia. A domestic politics explanation tends to overlook the impact of enduring self-perceptions of national identity, which delimit the foreign policy choices of states. Finally, an organizational behavior proposition downplays U.S. bargaining power within NATO as well as the cultural positionality from which policy makers advocating membership for Georgia and Ukraine acted.

2.5 Expansion to Ukraine and Georgia

There are several recent contributions to the literature on NATO expansion which can help to shed light on why the alliance's public commitment to incorporating Ukraine and Georgia has endured since the 2008 Bucharest decision.

Using a constructivist framework, Andrei Tsygankov (2013) argues that NATO expanded because the United States could not overcome the historically-rooted perception of viewing Russia as fundamentally threatening to U.S. interests and values. The end of the Cold War not only failed to alter such a perception but also allowed the United States, as the global hegemon,

to act on perceived fears of Russia in an unconstrained manner. Tsygankov says this “ethnophobic perception” of Russia explains the U.S. decision to expand NATO by inviting Russia’s neighbors to join the alliance while excluding Russia from the process. Russia’s aggressive actions toward Ukraine and Georgia have played into perpetuating and strengthening the prevailing view of Russia as dangerous and threatening.

Tsygankov considers the Russian side in a subsequent contribution. He argues that Russia’s fear of NATO resulted from the historical experience of perceiving the alliance, and the West in general, as potentially threatening (Tsygankov, 2018). NATO’s expanded functions and geographic scope in the post-Cold War era—from several “out of area” military interventions, to ballistic missile defense development, to successive rounds of enlargement eastward, all while marginalizing Russia from participating in shaping the European security architecture—have played into reviving such a perception. From this experience, Tsygankov says Russia has learnt that the only way to stop Western encroachment into Russia’s perceived sphere of influence is to clearly signal “red lines” and to act decisively to defend Russian national interests as it has done in Ukraine and Georgia.

Tracey German (2017) argues that potential expansion to include Ukraine and Georgia has undermined NATO’s stated logic in incorporating new members—to extend a zone of peace and stability—while inciting confrontation with Russia. She says there exists a fundamental tension between NATO’s declared objectives for expanding and the security-seeking motivations of those who have sought to join NATO on the one hand, and Russia’s desire to preserve influence in post-Soviet states, on the other.

John Mearsheimer (2018) argues that “liberal hegemony,” the foreign policy pursued by the United States since the Cold War ended and defined by spreading democracy across the

globe, explains NATO's refusal to give up on bringing Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance. The logic holds that creating a world of liberal democracies is thought to be a formula for achieving international peace. Unipolarity can conceal the flaws of liberal hegemony, Mearsheimer contends, which become exposed when the strategic environment changes into a state of competition. A liberal great power such as the United States might genuinely believe that its policy is benign, even noble, while another great power like Russia, operating under balance-of-power principles, might view the same policy as threatening.

Mary Sarotte (2019) considers the role of aspirant states in influencing the expansion process. Although she does not focus on Ukraine and Georgia, her argument is still relevant for their NATO integration. She argues the active campaigning of the central European state leaders to Clinton administration officials in the early 1990s was what tipped the balance in favor of an expanded NATO offering "full membership" to former-communist states. Her account recognizes the power of civilizational rhetoric, fear, and personal affective ties. In just one example, Czech President Vaclav Havel appealed forcefully to President Clinton himself, claiming that NATO membership would show that his country was "part of Europe." Polish President Lech Walsea was apparently blunter with Clinton: "We are all afraid of Russia...If Russia again adopts an aggressive foreign policy, that aggression will be directed toward Ukraine and Poland" (Ibid.).

Joshua Shiffrin (2020) argues that NATO expansion emerged as a centerpiece of post-Cold War U.S. strategy due to a "perfect storm" of international and domestic conditions. Unipolarity provided the key necessary condition and was abetted by a liberal foreign policy establishment that came to understand expansion as a vehicle to spread democracy, stability, and peace. Shiffrin contends the "enlargement consensus" has endured due to substantial domestic

support, linked to greater U.S. influence in Europe, and taken as a sign of U.S. leadership and credibility. According to Shiffrinson, U.S. policy makers have led the charge to keep NATO's door officially open for Ukraine and Georgia in order to assert U.S. prerogatives and to be seen as opposing Russian pressure.

Finally, Julie Garey (2020) takes a U.S.-centric approach to NATO's survival after the Cold War. She argues that the United States often advances its foreign policy agenda through NATO due to the perceived legitimizing and utilitarian benefits of multilateral engagement. NATO is widely seen as a successful military alliance as no NATO ally has ever been attacked by another state. The alliance structure allows members to pool resources, thus increasing security while reducing costs. Garey's account shows how NATO can serve as a vehicle of U.S. power projection as well as norm proliferation, including democracy and capitalism.

This study builds on this recent literature in the following ways. It takes from Tsygankov (2013, 2018) an appreciation for the cultural interpretation of danger, specifically a historically-rooted perception of Russia as fundamentally threatening to "the West." From Mearsheimer (2018), it acknowledges how a strategy of liberal hegemony manifested in the U.S.-led policy of expanding NATO's territory eastward can be a source of trouble for a military alliance that is supposed to be based on collective defense. It takes from Shiffrinson (2020) an understanding of the enduring power of an "enlargement consensus" in U.S. foreign policy making since the end of the Cold War as a result of a confluence of domestic and international factors. Similarly, from Garey (2020), the study acknowledges how NATO expansion is an expression of the U.S. foreign policy agenda, but also recognizes how the European allies can be a check on unconstrained U.S. power. Jason Dittmer (2017, 95) has captured the state of play, observing that "at NATO headquarters all the member states' flags fly at the same height, but this is not a true

reflection of the power relations within the organization, in which the United States generally occupies a privileged role.”

With these recent contributions in mind, this study seeks to thicken the explanation as to why NATO remains publicly committed to incorporating Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance, one that accounts for the cultural embeddedness of geopolitics, the array of actors grappling with the issue as it has evolved and mutated, and how discourse helps produce narratives that condition and enable policy practices. To that end, this study offers a critical geopolitical analysis of NATO’s enduring open door policy. Critical geopolitics is an approach within IR and political geography characterized by criticism of a conventional conception of geopolitics by using the concept of discourse (Toal, 2017). Its central premise is that geography is a social and historical discourse which is always entwined with questions of politics and ideology (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). Critical geopolitics takes inspiration from the core propositions of constructivism, emphasizing the interpreted nature of social reality, the role of state power structures in shaping the discursive field of debate over geopolitical cultures, and the open-endedness of identity.

2.6 Concepts

In taking a critical geopolitical approach, this dissertation employs a number of concepts to help explain and interpret NATO’s long open door policy toward bringing Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance outside of the normal MAP process.

2.61 Commitment

“Commitment” refers to the act of pledging oneself to a course of action. Thomas Schelling (2006, 1) defines commitment as:

...becoming committed, bound, or obligated to some course of action or inaction or to some constraint on future action. It is relinquishing some options, eliminating some choices, surrendering some control over one’s future behavior. And it is doing so deliberately, with a purpose. The purpose is to influence someone else’s choices. Commitment does so by affecting that other’s expectations of the committed one’s behavior.

Commitment often pertains to making and keeping promises. A promise, according to Schelling (Ibid., 11), is the creation of a perceived obligation to do or bring about what is promised. This definition is similar to that of a “threat,” but what distinguishes a promise, as an obligation, is this: what is promised must appear to the one whom the promise is made as being in the latter’s interest (Ibid.). The Bucharest decision fits with this definition of promise as Ukraine and Georgia stand to benefit in multiple ways by attaining NATO membership. On one hand, there is the practical benefit of having the article five security guarantee to safeguard national security, as well as the formal recognition by, and identification with, “the West,” on the other.

Some promises can be “speech acts” in the words of Searle (1969). For example, “I do” in a marriage ceremony is not merely the answer to a question, but an utterance that changes the legal and social status of a person and their relation to the other person who also says “I do.” Designating Ukraine and Georgia as future members of the alliance, as the NAC had at

Bucharest and many times thereafter, is a performative speech act because it does something to the two countries, namely signifying a collective stamp of approval of the NATO allies.

There are multiple ways an actor can commit to a promise. One way is reputationally, in which one takes a public position on a certain course of action. A verbal promise, either overt or implicit, can put one's honor and self-respect on the line—as well as one's reputation for keeping promises, says Schelling (2006, 10).

The notion of reputation as an influential component of international relations is a matter of scholarly debate. Some scholars such as Mercer (1996) and Copeland (1997) argue that altering reputations is difficult in the eyes of a state's friends and enemies because these reputations are embedded in the identities states have already given each other. Press (2005) found that past behaviors of commitment and credibility may not factor into policymakers' decisions during a present crisis. Other scholars have a different view. Gibler (2008) argues that reputations have important consequences for state behavior, specifically alliance choices. He claims that states that have honored their commitments in the past are more likely to find alliance partners in the future. Similarly, Crescenzi et al. (2012) argue that a state's reputation for upholding one's agreements significantly improves the likelihood of membership in alliances. Conversely, having a reputation for violating commitments is an important predictor of that state's (in)ability to attract allies. Mindful of this debate, this study takes the position that perceptions of "positive" or "negative" reputations are a matter of interpretation. In line with the constructivist underpinnings of this study, identities are fluid, subject to change and contestation, and the result of intersubjective understandings. Nonetheless, many interviewees believed that reputations matter, claiming that NATO's reputation for reliability and credibility in the eyes of Ukraine and Georgia was worth fighting for. Irrespective of the validity of this claim, it was

apparent that upholding NATO's perceived positive reputation did in fact factor into the decision process of policy makers.

In order for a promise to be effective it must be credible. Credibility refers to the belief of the actor to whom the promise is made that what is promised will be carried out (Schelling, 2006, 3). Moreover, some promises are conditional, meaning that it is contingent on something the promised one must perform or bring about (Ibid., 13). Indeed, Ukraine and Georgia's eventual accession depends in part on their abilities to internalize NATO's political and military standards, as determined by the current allies.

Before proceeding, I mention the notion of "decisionism," associated with the thought of Carl Schmitt, only to lay it aside. Decisionism is a theory of sovereignty that points to an authority that is not established by, or justified on the basis of, law, but is rather established on a pre-legal, pre-rational, and absolute basis (Bessner and Guilhot, 2018). Decisionism does not focus on the content of a decision but the fact it was a decision made by a proper, decisive authority. This study is about examining what causes a *commitment to a decision*, namely the Bucharest decision, rather than the decision itself. For this reason, decisionism is not used as a conceptual framework.

2.62 Rhetorical Action

Rhetorical action is the strategic use of discourse to persuade. It is discourse based on ideas shared within a community environment and intended to persuade an audience to succumb to an agent's interests (Schimmelfennig, 2003). This definition rests on a constructivist conception of NATO as the military arm of an international community of Western liberal democratic states—the "Euro-Atlantic community" (Schimmelfennig, 1998). NATO defines its

collective identity not merely by geographic location but principally by Western-defined liberal norms and values. As NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg has said in an address to the U.S. Congress in 2019, attributing the line to President Eisenhower, NATO's first supreme allied commander, "we are concerned not only with the protection of territory...but with the defense of a way of life" (Stoltenberg, 2019). NATO is designed to defend and expand the Euro-Atlantic community and to uphold and disseminate its norms and values. NATO endures because the community persists, and it enlarges in concert with the expansion of such a community (Schimmelfennig, 2016).

In analyzing EU eastern enlargement after the Cold War, Frank Schimmelfennig (2001) introduced the concept "rhetorical action" to establish the causal link between an initial policy choice of partnership with the former communist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) states, based on mainly pragmatic EU member state preferences, on the one hand, and an eventual policy outcome of expanded membership, based on the collective identity and social norms of the European community of liberal democratic states, on the other.

Within a community environment such as the EU, member states were concerned about their reputation as reliable members and about the legitimacy of their preferences and behavior. Literature on alliance formation indicated that a state's reputation for honoring its past alliance commitments was an important predictor of that state's ability to attract alliance partners in the future (Crescenzi et al., 2012). Conversely, renegeing on a commitment was perceived to damage a state's reputation for reliability because it risked the dismissal of a future commitment as merely "cheap talk." This weakened deterrence, as intentions of resolve could no longer be credibly conveyed to potential challengers (Gibler, 2008).

The community members who could justify their preferences on the grounds of the EU community's power of an assumption of legitimacy were able to shame their opponents into norm-conforming behavior and produced a collective outcome that would otherwise have resulted in preferencing restraint, as in mere partnership with CEE states, not "full membership." Schimmelfennig (2001) found that within the EU environment, the "drivers" of enlargement justified their argument by invoking the community's traditional pan-European orientation and its liberal constitutive values and norms and shamed the "brakemen" into acquiescing. This was because the opponents of enlargement became rhetorically entrapped. They could neither oppose nor threaten to veto enlargement in public without damaging their credibility as community members. Once caught in the community trap, members were thus forced to honor identity- and value-based commitments to protect their reputations.

Schimmelfennig (2003) later argued that rhetorical action also explained the enlargement process of NATO, whereby the governments of the CEE states appealed to the self-defined liberal norms and values of the Euro-Atlantic community. It was the central argumentative strategy of the aspiring members to cast themselves as part of Western civilization, to stress the fragility of the "democratic" achievements in their countries, and to show that NATO's norms and values as well as historical precedent obliged the NATO allies to stabilize democracy in the CEE region, and to that end, grant them membership in NATO. He pointed back to the EU case study to account for the alternative proposition that NATO enlargement was caused by the confluence of U.S. preferences and normative entrepreneurship within the alliance. In the EU, the drivers of enlargement lacked the bargaining power to overcome the opposition of the anti-enlargement coalition (Schimmelfennig, 2001). By using identity-based rhetorical arguments,

however, the drivers “silenced” the reluctant members and persuaded them to accept enlargement.

2.63 Robust Action

In competitive situations, actors can follow a “robust action” strategy of taking “noncommittal” actions that keep future lines of action open where opponents are trying to narrow them (Padgett and Powell, 2012). Eric Leifer (1991) found that what separated chess masters from novices was an ability to devise moves that advanced a particular strategy while retaining the ability to improvise based on the moves of an opponent, until the time was right to consolidate gains or win the game. Building on this insight, Eccles and Nohria (1992) applied robust action to management theory. Following Leifer, they defined robust action as “action that accomplishes short-term objectives while preserving long-term flexibility” (p. 11). They offered “seven principles of robust action” (pp. 41-44) which can empower a manager’s ability to adapt to evolving circumstances: acting without certitude, constantly preserving flexibility, being politically savvy, having a keen sense of timing, judging the situation at hand, using rhetoric effectively, and working multiple agendas at once. Ferraro et al. (2015) contend that “grand challenges”—large, unresolved problems which are seemingly intractable, resisting easy fixes, such as climate change—can be tackled pragmatically through a robust action strategy.

Padgett and Ansell’s (1993) analysis of Cosimo de’ Medici has been the most widely cited reference to Leifer’s pioneering work (Ferraro et al., 2015). They used the term robust action to describe Cosimo’s enigmatic style of control over Florentine state centralization in the Italian Renaissance. Their account emphasized “multivocality,” meaning that single actions can be interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives simultaneously, that single actions can be

moves in many games at once, and that public and private motivations cannot be parsed (Padgett & Ansell, 1993, p. 1263).

The point of multivocal action is to preserve “discretionary options across unforeseeable futures in the face of hostile attempts by others to narrow those options” (Ibid.). Crucial for maintaining discretion is to appear to not pursue any specific objectives. Robust action, however, is not just a matter of acting ambiguously, as other actors tend to be astute enough to see through behavioral facades down to the level of presumed self-interested desires. To act credibly in a multivocal fashion, an actor’s attributed interests must themselves remain opaque. Padgett and Ansell (1993) concluded that robust action by the Medici family was credible precisely because of the contradictory character of their base of support across the sprawling Florentine economic, political, and social networks.

Actors can also nurture multivocality other than through mere utterances. Ferraro et al. (2015) point out that robust action is not limited to discourse, but can involve a variety of inscriptions, in the form of texts and artifacts, that have different interpretations for a number of audiences. This study draws attention to the material side of robust action in Ukraine and Georgia’s drawn-out integration into NATO, specifically how the meaning of such “artifacts” like the MAP mechanism are transformed over time.

For this study, I invoke Padgett and Ansell’s (1993) conception of robust action to explain NATO behavior due to its emphasis on the structural dimension of multivocality. Single actions by NATO, whether through rhetorical or material support, can be understood coherently by many audiences at once. This affords NATO a measure of

flexible opportunism, maintaining discretionary options in future moves in the face of Russia's violent opposition to bringing Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance.

2.64 Interoperability

“Interoperability” refers to the ability of different military entities, whether multiple nationalities or armed services (ground, naval, and air forces), to work together toward a common goal, involving both embodied and technological dimensions as necessary. According to NATO, interoperability:

allows forces, units, or systems to operate together. It requires them to share common doctrine and procedures, each other's infrastructure and bases, and to be able to communicate with each other (NATO, 2006).

Pernin et al. (2020) identifies three possible overarching objectives for pursuing multinational interoperability with allies and partners: increasing collective operational capabilities, reducing individual resourcing demands by increasing burden-sharing, and shaping the strategic environment by tangibly demonstrating commitment. The latter objective explicitly deals with the material side of a robust action strategy comprising both rhetoric and action. By operating together on the ground, multinational forces such as NATO can provide a more credible signal of intent, reassure partners of continued support, and further build legitimacy in operations (Ibid.).

Dittmer (2017) uses assemblage theory, the constant coming together of individual components to construct a coherent whole, to argue that material objects and practices in fact shape the outcomes of diplomacy and foreign policy making. He showed how since the Second World War a group of national militaries have been turned into a coherent multinational force through the interoperability and standardization of procedures and materiel within NATO.

“Standardization” refers to the common and repeated use of rules, guidelines, or characteristics for activities, aimed at achieving a maximum degree of order in a given situation (NATO, 2011). Basic English and French language proficiency and the common caliber bullet are examples of standardization within NATO.

Dittmer (2017) argues that the end of the Cold War initiated a rethinking of interoperability from strictly inside the alliance to include outside entities. This took place in concert with NATO’s expanded territorial reach and functional roles beyond collective defense. Moreover, beyond simply improving the capabilities of the NATO members to fight together, Dittmer says interoperability serves as an attractor for other states, such as aspiring members, as well as a potential lever to use against them (Ibid.). Indeed, NATO often cites the need for more interoperability to justify delaying Ukraine and Georgia’s membership bids. This means that interoperability can be wielded as a political tool to influence behavior, asserts Wallander (2000).

Barry (2012) addresses U.S.-NATO relations in operational terms, focusing on interoperability. He asserts that NATO is beneficial to the United States because it provides an overwhelming advantage in overseas engagements, ranging from language skills and cultural knowledge to the number of troops deployed, to political and diplomatic benefits. The United States devoted a number of resources for standardizing operations within NATO, dubbed “the NATO way,” and ideas about interoperability established the basis for current U.S. military doctrine. Barry asserts that it is these advantages that not only prove the NATO relationship beneficial for the United States, but also show how the alliance as a whole can adapt to the contemporary strategic environment and persist under U.S. leadership (Ibid.).

This study conceptualizes the pursuit of interoperability as central to a robust action strategy comprising both rhetorical and material support. NATO fosters interoperability with Ukrainian and Georgian armed forces through participation in everything from military training to NATO's expeditionary missions.

2.7 Argument

This study conceptualizes the NAC's April 2008 Bucharest summit decision that Ukraine and Georgia will become NATO members as a commitment which has obligated NATO to take this course of action to preserve its perceived positive reputation and against its own strategic interests as a military alliance based on collective defense and deterrence. As the leader of NATO, the United States is committed to incorporating the two countries into the alliance because it is committed to the mission of consolidating Western civilization under U.S. leadership by spreading democracy. From the U.S. and NATO perspective, security considerations have never been at the root of possible expansion to Ukraine and Georgia. However, Russia's aggressive actions toward the two countries, and the broader development of NATO-Russia military tensions, have forced the United States and NATO to confront the real challenges of extending deterrence and allocating resources to defend Ukraine and Georgia if they were to join the alliance.

NATO's engagement with Ukraine and Georgia since Bucharest constitutes a robust action strategy. Through a combination of rhetorical and material support, NATO has simultaneously been able to maintain the appearance of a commitment to the two countries, show Western resolve and solidarity in opposing Russia and sustaining the United States' preferred vision of Europe's security order, all while delaying bringing Ukraine and Georgia into the

alliance as “full members.” Thus, there are multiple games at play in this situation. Informed by the work of Krebs and Jackson (2007), the study does not take a position on whether or not the robust action by NATO is intentional. Instead, it focuses on what NATO says, in what contexts, and to what audiences.

Crucially, NATO retains the ability to slow down or speed up Ukraine and Georgia’s integration. It has adapted the membership criteria and the process to suit its interests. NATO has devised a number of partnership initiatives and structures instead of issuing the two countries MAPs, which is what they really want, as it is seen as the key to unlocking the membership door, but on which there exists no alliance consensus. This study uses the term “consolation prizes,” defined herein as a small prize given to a competitor who has lost, to describe the things NATO has given Ukraine and Georgia in lieu of MAPs. While their membership remains an open question, it seems improbable that either country will join NATO any time soon, given their current territorial disintegration and the state of the security environment.

This study departs from the traditional definition of robust action as a strategy of taking “noncommittal action” to preserve flexibility in making future moves (Padgett and Powell, 2012). The term “noncommittal” does not accurately represent NATO’s interaction with Ukraine and Georgia since 2008. Since Bucharest, both Ukraine and Georgia have been given special defense-capacity building packages; integrated into Western weapons procurement networks; offered expanded opportunities for military education, training, and exercises; and accorded extraordinary access to NATO officials through joint frameworks for political dialogue and consultation. Moreover, numerous NATO member states, such as the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, have made similar bilateral and multilateral moves, outside of the NATO framework, which have de facto contributed to further integrating the two

countries into the alliance. Over the past 15 years, NATO has invested a huge amount of time, people, and resources in stealthily integrating Ukraine and Georgia outside of the conventional MAP process. Taken together, all these moves do constitute a form of commitment by NATO—though not necessarily a commitment to membership for the two countries.

This study uses the term “ambiguous action” to refer to NATO’s robust action toward Ukraine and Georgia. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ambiguous as “having different possible meanings; open to more than one interpretation” (OED, 2023). This term accurately describes NATO’s engagement with both countries, which has been understood in at least two ways. The first is how Ukraine, Georgia, and their allies within NATO want it to be seen, as in signifying a concrete commitment to following through on the Bucharest decision. The second way recognizes the difficulties in realizing Bucharest and sees the political reforms, military modernization, and interoperability with NATO forces as beneficial to Ukraine and Georgia whether or not they become alliance members. NATO’s action is ambiguous enough that it may be able to uphold a reputation for reliability and resoluteness within different networks. Showing a tangible commitment to Ukraine and Georgia within the NATO partnership game may have a positive impact on boosting NATO’s image as a decisive military actor. It also served to bolster the self-image of the institution among its members, reinforcing the conceit that it was an honor bound institution that was “good on its word” and “kept its promises,” even though these qualities clashed with important qualities of flexibility and adaptability to changing circumstances for a strategic military alliance.

Pursuing military interoperability is an important part of the robust action strategy. It has been one of the main ways NATO has shown material support to Ukraine and Georgia. By including the two countries’ militaries in everything from acquisition, to training exercises, to

actual alliance missions, NATO has been able to shape the political cognition of elites and military personnel by enmeshing them in the affective field of NATO's interoperability.

Ukraine, Georgia, and their advocates within NATO have successfully used rhetorical action, arguments based on the self-defined liberal values and norms of the Euro-Atlantic community that NATO represents on the one hand, and the historical precedent of a permissive, open door policy toward membership, on the other, to rhetorically entrap NATO into maintaining an official commitment to the Bucharest decision. The proponents of Ukraine and Georgia's NATO membership have used NATO's identity as well as the values it has long espoused—free choice, national self-determination, and state sovereignty—against it to serve their own interests.

There are three discursive claims within the argumentative strategy used to justify Ukraine and Georgia's membership in the alliance. First, the two countries are presented as essential parts of Europe and "the West." Second, their nascent democratization is under threat by an external, illiberal force—Russia. Finally, the liberal democratic community-building narrative which the alliance projects—that NATO is a voluntary organization and that states are free to choose their security arrangements, as well as the precedent of past expansions—oblige the allies to stay committed to the Bucharest decision. In this manner, the arguments are identical to those used by the countries which joined NATO in the other expansions, both before and after Bucharest.

2.8 Case Selection

The cases of Georgia and Ukraine's prolonged integration with NATO are not unique simply because they have been in membership limbo for many years or that their partnership

reveals somewhat of a spectrum of association. Current allies like Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia were also in the membership pipeline for a long time. Moreover, NATO's partnerships of many sorts with states as varied as Russia, Colombia, Iraq, and Japan show plenty of spectrum too. Yet, in no other cases did a country hostile to NATO use military force to invade aspirant members to prevent their incorporation into the alliance. It is this outlier character of the cases which warrants their selection for further analysis (Van Evera, 1997). Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to lump Georgia and Ukraine's pathways together.

Despite obvious cultural and historical parallels attributed to the common setting within the post-Soviet geopolitical field, there are important differences between the two cases. In both countries, the uneven levels of popular support for NATO membership, differences in the governments' geopolitical alignment preferences, and varying twists and turns in the bilateral relationships with Russia promise to thicken the comparative analysis of the study. Highlighting these variables can help illustrate the ways in which the Georgia case affects the Ukraine case and vice versa.

From a personal and practical standpoint, these are cases with which I am familiar and have developed an academic interest. While posted on military orders to the United Kingdom, I was deployed to Georgia in 2017 and 2018 and to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE—NATO's military headquarters) in 2018 to support U.S. and NATO operations. Fieldwork in those places provided invaluable insights. An Army research fellowship with the Rand Corporation in 2019-2020 as well as living and working in the Washington, DC area on-and-off since 2009 has enabled me to develop a network of practitioners and intellectuals who have helped inform the study. In both cases, I have enjoyed certain privileges—such as direct or indirect access to senior U.S. and foreign military officers and civil servants and current and

former diplomats—due to my being a career active-duty United States Army officer. Such embeddedness within U.S. geopolitical culture unavoidably brings a measure of bias, both conscious and unconscious. However, I have strived to maintain a scholarly distance from such a culture.

2.9 Method - Narrative Analysis

The research method for the study involves a narrative analytical framework focusing on the themes, continuities, and changes in the enlargement discourse of NATO about Georgia and Ukraine from 2007 to 2020. Narrative analysis is an approach within the broader methodology of discourse analysis, which examines the argumentative structure in documents and other written or spoken statements as well as the practices through which these utterances are made (Hajer, 2006; Ó Tuathail, 2002).

While scholars offer various definitions for the term, narratives are here defined as written and verbal organizational frameworks tying the different elements of a policy challenge together into a coherent story which enable people to make sense and give meaning to the world and our actions within it (Squire et al., 2014). Narratives can confer a measure of coherence on our messy reality (Krebs, 2015). Narratives become “strategic” when political actors attempt to use them to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Narratives evoke emotions, shared identity, and are tailored to specific audiences.

Explaining policy practices such as the NATO enlargement process requires a discourse analytical approach to understand how particular understandings come into being and shape policy decision-making. The explanatory process of the discourse analytical approach to the

study of public policy is inherently interpretive. From this view, the play of institutional politics is situated within a competition over differing understandings of social reality. Empirical considerations come into play, but only as they are woven into the various narrative constructions in the policy discourse (Fischer, 2003).

The study takes a Foucauldian approach to discourse as a set of capabilities and practices that systematically produce the objects of which they speak. Foucault (1980) believed that it is discourse, not the subject, which produces knowledge, including creating the roles—“subject positions”—that actors can step into. It is through discourse that meanings are produced, identities are constituted, social relations are established, and policy choices are made more or less likely (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007). This is an approach which focuses on broad ideological issues as they relate to power, dominance, and knowledge. It describes the overarching narratives that shape our experience of the world. This top-down vantage point makes Foucauldian discourse analysis inherently political in orientation (Sam, 2019). It is a method that begins with defining a problem—as in whether the prospect of NATO expansion to Georgia and Ukraine prompts the very instability that it was meant to prevent—and is designed to critique and question the legitimacy of prevailing assumptions and power structures as related to the problem.

The research method involves the “meso-level” argumentative approach within discourse analysis, which focuses on the day-to-day working of discourse in public policy debate (Ó Tuathail, 2002). This approach understands political leaders and foreign policy officials as professionally skilled rhetoricians whose job is to construct arguments which resonate with popular common sense and to create social consensus through persuasion, thus enabling policy decision-making and action. Such arguments are facilitated by employing metaphors and storylines, which “work” to produce powerful political interventions (Hajer, 2006). Through a

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critical geopolitical lens, this means drawing attention to “practical geopolitics,” which refers to the rhetoric used in the practice of policymaking. The public manifestations of this rhetoric, as in official documents and speeches, are the raw materials of practical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail, 2006).

2.10 Methodological Issues

The analysis of an actor as layered and nuanced as NATO, whose identity can be understood simultaneously as a military alliance, international institution, and a security community, involves certain methodological challenges. The first of such is representation, as in whose preferences constitute “member state preferences.” Representation would not be a problem if the individual NATO member state governments held the same preference on a policy issue. Sometimes they do not. Lasting disagreement exists within NATO over offering Georgia and Ukraine a practical path to membership. If there was alliance consensus on a MAP for the two countries, then it would materialize in a formal declaration. Indeed, what is left out of official texts is often as revealing as what is said in public.

Second, repetition is a defining feature of NATO’s discourse. NATO’s self-defined rules of the enlargement process require membership decisions be based on the “unanimous agreement” of the allies (NATO, 1949). We are thus on solid ground to assume that what appears in publicly available NATO documents represents the collective will of the member states, or, as one observer puts it, the “lowest common denominator” shared over a policy issue (Zyla, 2011, p. 670). Whether or not it is intentional, the consistency in NATO’s discourse can give an impression of political cohesion and stability.

Finally, to refer to NATO's enlargement discourse might be understood as casting the alliance in the role of an "author" which ontologically precedes the discursive practices under examination. In this reading, NATO would be established prior to and independent of discourse. NATO would remain identical with itself, while its narrative of Georgia and Ukraine "adapts" to developments within the security environment. To a certain extent, this is the conventional understanding we use when reading NATO documents, press releases, and speeches. The alliance usually represents itself as an anthropomorphized entity with purposes and strategies assigned to it. From a scholarly point of view, however, this is inadequate. Research needs to have critical distance on the effects of political spin control inherent to official texts and public documents.

This does not mean we cannot consider NATO as an author. In line with the discourse theoretical underpinnings of the study, we should understand "author" in a Foucauldian sense, which is to say, as a phenomenon within discourse itself. As Foucault (1991) contended, the author of a text was produced through intersubjective knowledge, the purpose of which was to construct a central authority from which the texts were assumed to derive. By problematizing author/authority, we can read "NATO" as constituted by the very texts that are commonly read as expressions of that authority. "NATO's discourse" is thus inevitably also the "discourse on NATO," constructing and reiterating what it presents as pre-given and stable (Behnke, 2013).

For this study, "NATO" refers to the NAC, which is the supreme decision-making body of the alliance, comprising the heads of state and government of each member state.

2.11 Data Collection

The research data for the study is drawn from three sources. First, 61 publicly available official texts of the NAC, NATO secretary-generals, the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC), and the NATO-Ukraine Commission (NUC) are the primary source materials for analyzing the enlargement narratives of Georgia and Ukraine. The documents are available through NATO's online archive. The NGC and NUC are the special bilateral frameworks responsible for directing the cooperative activities between the allies and each partner country, respectively. They can meet at various levels of government and often in conjunction with NATO summits for the heads of state and government of the member countries.

Secretary-general speeches and statements are important because the position holds special diplomatic and communicative powers. As the permanent chair of the NAC, organizer of NATO summits, and spokesperson of the alliance, secretary-generals are uniquely enabled to set the agenda, build consensus, and broker compromises. Recent scholarship highlights the crucial role of this position in NATO's adaptation and endurance. Schuette (2021) examined how the current secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg used personal diplomacy and institutional assets like the administrative bureaucracy to successfully ward off the "hegemonic contestation" of President Trump. Likewise, Johnston (2017) demonstrated how NATO's institutional actors, those officials representing NATO itself and not any single member state, have played consequential roles in fostering adaptation to both internal and external challenges.

The justification for emphasizing official texts rests on NATO's self-imposed requirement for unanimous consent on major policy decisions, such as whether to invite a country to join the alliance. When a "NATO decision" is announced, it therefore signifies the collective will of the allies (NATO, 2020). This means that the specific wording of a text often

reflects a compromise with a power struggle behind it. For this reason the agreed-upon language matters greatly, though the allies may disagree how to interpret it and sometimes purposely leave it vague, says Yost (2014).

Second, 43 original interviews complement the narrative analysis of official texts by offering a “private” transcript of the beliefs held by practitioners. There were three distinct groups of interviewees for this study: current NATO international staff and international military staff members, current and former diplomats and defense officials from NATO member states, and current and former Ukrainian and Georgian diplomats and military officers.

Compared to other international organizations, NATO has a huge administrative bureaucracy. The international staff and international military staff comprise civilian and military officials who are seconded to NATO headquarters from their national governments, typically for a period of at least two years. They are responsible for various functions such as policy planning, public diplomacy, and policy analysis. Crucially, these officials are charged with advancing the interests of NATO as a whole and not their national agendas.

Diplomats and defense officials from NATO member states serve as the “eyes and ears” of the respective national governments on the ground, responsible for implementing state foreign policies and cultivating bilateral relations with Ukraine and Georgia.

Finally, Ukrainian and Georgian officials offer an outsider perspective of NATO. They are principally interested in promoting their countries with NATO and the individual allies and understandably have an agenda to push.

Incorporating interview responses in the analysis counterbalances the predictable and expected rosy spin of NATO’s own public documents, though some practitioners may be

consciously or unconsciously echoing such official narratives. Within NATO, there are varying degrees of confidentiality. Minutes from committee meetings, meetings between representatives of various allies, and one-on-one discussions are all private, and can be parsed into formal and informal meetings and discussions, based on the level of familiarity, trust, and rapport, as a former U.S. defense attaché at NATO illuminated.² Nonetheless, interview content appears in the study without personal attribution to protect source identity, which allowed interviewees to speak freely without fear of reputational and professional costs.

Lastly, secondary academic and non-academic literature describing the political developments, events, and policy debates provide insight into the backstage of the NATO enlargement process. They are relevant as they are public expressions of ongoing discursive debates over Ukraine and Georgia's integration into NATO.

The timeframe for the main empirical part of the study is January 2007 to December 2020. The first date is little more than a year before the April 2008 Bucharest summit, which allows for tracing the origin and development of narratives prior to the NAC's announcement of Georgia and Ukraine's future membership. The date December 2020 coincides with the end of the Trump presidency, which allows for including evidence of how NATO fended off Trump's calls for closer relations with Russia while adapting to his demands for greater transatlantic burden sharing.

² Interview AA, former U.S. attaché at NATO, Washington, DC, 29 April 2021.

Chapter 3 - Historical and Geopolitical Context

3.1 Introduction

The expansion of NATO has been among the most contentious parts of its transformation since the end of the Cold War, having caused great debates and disagreements within the policy and scholarly communities, between Russia and the West, and among the member states themselves. Even before the question of possible membership for Georgia and Ukraine exposed the lack of alliance consensus on pushing further into post-Soviet territory, NATO had already expanded in 1999 and 2004. This added ten former members of the Soviet bloc, including the Baltic States, bringing NATO territory to the borders of the Russian Federation.³

This chapter reviews the origin and history of NATO expansion to frame the question of what drives the official commitment to future membership for Georgia and Ukraine. In the review, several points stand out. First, the United States had enormous influence over the initial decision of whether, how, and when to expand NATO. While membership decisions required the unanimous agreement of the allies, U.S. support for the membership bids of the CEE and post-Soviet states seemed the decisive factor in driving the earlier expansions. The 2008 decision to not invite Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO despite strong U.S. backing broke with the precedent. Both before and after Bucharest, U.S. strategic relations with both countries developed roughly in parallel with the NATO partnerships, demonstrating the leading role of the United States in their de facto integration into the alliance.

³ The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became NATO members in July 1999; Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Romania joined in July 2004.

Second, NATO's own post-Cold War identity reconstruction from a military alliance to a democratic security community laid the rhetorical groundwork for defining expansion as about promoting and protecting democracy. The leaders of the former communist territories picked up on this and manipulated NATO's identity claim to overcome the initial opposition to commit to expansion. If expansion were the straightforward extension of a community of Western democracies, as NATO advocated, then the allies could not credibly deny membership to democratizing states aspiring to join Western institutions without harming their own reputations as community members.

Lastly, the way in which the expansion process unfolded by the late 1990s encouraged the perception that subsequent expansion would continue, to include those aspirants which convinced the allies of their conformity with NATO's norms and values. This manifested in offering "full membership" to a limited number of countries, despite Russian opposition and regardless of their geography. Eventually, this would have devastating consequences for Georgia and Ukraine once Russia regained the ability and self-confidence to take decisive action to stop their likely accession.

3.2 The NATO Expansion Debate

The initial debates over the pros and cons of NATO expansion have enduring relevance for the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. Throughout the 1990s, much of the debate focused on the risk of prompting a new confrontation with Russia versus the perceived benefits of extending democracy and free markets to the former members of the Soviet bloc (Gaddis, 1998; Glaser, 1993; Keohane & Martin, 1995; Mearsheimer, 1995). Advocates argued expanding NATO would enable the transitions to democracy and capitalism, prevent a security vacuum in the CEE

region, and foster a pan-European security community (Asmus et al., 1993; Flanagan, 1992; Lukes, 1999). Supporters frequently asserted that a larger NATO would benefit all in Europe, including Russia, since it was merely a defensive alliance (Wolff, 2015). Others held that expanding NATO was instrumental for extending U.S. power and influence in Europe, while also central to a policy of neo-containment toward Russia (Mearsheimer, 2018). Asmus et al. (1993) staked the continued survival of the alliance on its ability to expand to new territories and take on more roles and missions, predicting that “NATO will go out of area or out of business” (p. 31). In some instances, expansion proponents requested the advocacy of transnational coalitions to help overcome domestic obstacles in the process of trying to expand the alliance. Keck and Sikkink (1998) conceptualized such actors as “transnational advocacy networks” (TAN).”

Critics, however, countered that such a move required NATO’s current members to defend a group of fragile states of questionable strategic value, would needlessly antagonize Russia and harden its resistance to further nuclear disarmament, and in any case was not as important for spreading democracy and capitalism as the EU (Brown, 1995; Reiter, 2001; Waltz, 2000). Besides, NATO was no longer necessary for Europe’s security after the Cold War since the Soviet threat against which it had been originally formed had disappeared (Hellman & Wolf, 1993; Waltz, 1993). David Haglund (1999) examined the perceived motives for enlargement and argued that unlike the expansions of 1952 and 1955, which were driven by a desire to contain the Soviet Union, the post-Cold War expansion was stimulated more by a determination to extend a democratic security community. Terriff et al. (2002, p. 714) warned of the risks of expanding “by default” and urged NATO to consider how to temper the process lest it create serious consequences for NATO and European security. Their assessment reflected Kamp (1998, p.

173), who argued that without a clear framework for expansion, NATO would become “entrapped” in a series of incoherent moves eastward, motivated by a desire to assert its “open door” policy to exert autonomy, despite harming relations with Russia.

Nearly three decades on, and multiple rounds of expansion later, the contours of this debate remain intact today. Supporters see NATO’s further expansion as indispensable to consolidating the so-called liberal international order under U.S. leadership and countering an increasingly revanchist Russia, while skeptics reckon it undermines Euro-Atlantic security and exposes countries such as Georgia and Ukraine to sustained coercion and pressure from Russia (German, 2017; Kupchan, 2019; Mearsheimer, 2018; Ruger, 2019).

3.3 Origin and History

The decision to enlarge NATO was reached by 1994 after a gradual process which marginalized any alternative to “full membership” expansion with a security guarantee as provided by article five. In the early post-Cold War years the survival of NATO after the collapse of the Soviet Union was not assumed, as alliances historically broke up once the external threat they were formed against disappeared. A 2010 study counted 63 major military alliances over the previous five centuries, of which just 10 survived beyond 40 years (Warren, 2010). If NATO did persist, so the logic went, it might need to transform from a military alliance based on collective defense to a collective security organization focused on conflict prevention (Duffield, 1994; Kupchan & Kupchan, 1991).

Already from its inception in 1949 the NATO allies had left open the possibility of future expansion. Article 10 of NATO’s founding charter declared the allies “may, by unanimous consent, invite any other European State...to accede to this Treaty” (NATO, 1949). While this

“open door” approach to admitting new members did manifest during the Cold War—with the additions of Greece, Turkey, West Germany, and Spain—the Soviet collapse left a sole superpower, which afforded the United States the opportunity to shape a world more freely according to its professed interests and values, namely spreading democracy and capitalism (Garey, 2020). U.S. policymakers would come to understand NATO expansion as a prime way to extend U.S. power and influence in Europe (Goldgeier, 1999).

Even before the Cold War ended there were signs that NATO might not only survive but expand. The United States under the George H.W. Bush administration succeeded at keeping a reunified Germany within NATO, which not only formally extended the alliance east but blocked parallel Soviet efforts to use reunification to facilitate the creation of a new pan-European security order that could make NATO obsolete (Shiffrinson, 2016). Meanwhile, the new democratic governments of the Visegrad group⁴ and other CEE states began signaling their desire to “return to Europe” through membership in Western institutions, including NATO (Schimmelfennig, 2001, 2003). Even from the beginning, Western officials did not rule out the possibility of eventually extending membership to the newly independent states (Shiffrinson, 2020).

For many in the West, the end of the Cold War was interpreted as a triumph of Western civilization and the affirmation of its assumed superiority. In their seminal chapter, Williams and Neumann (2000) argued that this marked the beginning of a discourse in which NATO drew from its cultural and material sources of power to assert its longstanding identity as primarily a security community of Western liberal democracies, and not a conventional military alliance

⁴ In mid-October 1992, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland formed the Visegrad Group with the aim of accelerating their integration into Western institutions, including NATO.

arrayed against a shared threat. In so doing, NATO was able to offset accusations that it had lost its purpose with the demise of the Soviet Union. The earliest NATO documents of the post-Cold War era reflected NATO's self-identification as a civilizational project both of and for "the West" (Behnke, 2013). NATO worked to present itself as the eminent "agent of change" whose mission was the construction of a new security order (NATO, 1991a). No longer focused on defending territory and the balance of power, NATO assumed primary responsibility for cultivating security and stability through the assumed strength of "our shared faith in democracy, the rights of the individual, and the peaceful resolution of disputes" (NATO, 1990). For NATO, the provision of security no longer involved collective defense, but rather emanated "from the inside out" through spreading the multilateral norms and democratic values which the alliance itself espoused (Pouliot, 2010). These ideas provided a motivating and legitimating vision of a new mission: the consolidation of Western civilization which had been illegitimately torn apart by the Cold War (Williams & Neumann, 2000). NATO proceeded to define "enlargement" as an issue of democracy promotion and protection rather than one of military defense and deterrence. This would make it difficult for the NATO members to oppose the policy without it calling into question their credibility as reliable Euro-Atlantic community members (Schimmelfennig, 2003).

Between 1991 and 1994 the United States led a "ratcheting down" process to secure NATO's future as the centerpiece of the European security architecture (Sarotte, 2019b). The Bush Administration worked to ensure that a U.S.-led structure and not any other institution without the United States at its center would dominate (Hill, 2018). This effort was driven by a concern over Russia's potential resurgence as well as the possibility that European powers such as France could create an all-encompassing structure that might undermine NATO, and thus dilute U.S. influence (Shiffrinson, 2020). For U.S. policymakers, NATO was the clear winner

over the alternatives, as the United States was not a member of the EU and did not dominate the Conference for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (CSCE) (which became the OSCE in 1994) (Goldgeier, 2020). By contrast, the United States was understood as the unquestioned leader of NATO due to its political influence, military supremacy, and economic resources, and could further instrumentalize the alliance to extend its reach. U.S. power at the dawn of the post-Cold War era was such that it could proceed with its approach unfettered by challengers.

The potential for expanding NATO's membership clarified with the development of active campaigning by the Visegrad Group state leaders. This crystallized in the second half of 1991 after a change in policy preferences in favor of joining NATO. Soon after coming to power after the collapse of communist rule, the new democratic governments almost immediately announced their intent to join the European Community (EC) (the European Union from 1993), the Council of Europe (CoE), and the CSCE. "Nothing is more important for Poland than membership in the EC," declared Polish President Lech Walsea in July 1991 (Schimmelfennig, 2003, p. 64). However, the Visegrad group soon concluded that achieving EU membership would take "decades," as it required a difficult adaptation to the legislation that constituted the body of EU law (Asmus, 2002, p. 12). It also became obvious that the CSCE could not protect the fledgling democracies against external threats since it lacked a collective defense component as well as robust institutionalization, unlike NATO (Hill, 2018). The failed coup by Soviet hardliners in 1991 and outbreak of war in Bosnia in 1992 showed that the transitions to democracy and national self-determination across the region would not all be peaceful. In this context, NATO membership became understood as an easier and quicker route to obtain a security guarantee while gaining validation and recognition from one of the West's premier institutions. Thus, the timing and circumstances of the desire to join NATO suggested that it was

of an instrumental kind—to obtain the only available security guarantee to protect against current and future threats (Schimmelfennig, 2003). The same instrumentalism applies to the contemporary cases of Ukraine and Georgia.

However, there was always something other than “security” to the CEE states’ aspirations to join NATO. Behnke (2013) argues that the interest in NATO was presented in public primarily as a matter of (re)gaining cultural and civilizational belonging to “the West”—in other words, a matter of identity—not the instrumental membership in a military alliance to safeguard national security. Membership in the alliance was a status symbol, a way of asserting one’s identity as firmly part of Western civilization, particularly as a time when joining the EU seemed out of reach (Radchenko, 2020).

CEE officials would employ arguments based on the self-defined collective identity, norms, and values of the Euro-Atlantic community that NATO represented and above all NATO’s defining of the CEE space as a West “in the making,” to make a more persuasive case for membership (Behnke, 2013). Already in the first speech of a CEE state leader at NATO, Czech President Vaclav Havel’s address to the NAC in March 1991 asserted that:

An alliance of countries united by a commitment to the ideal of freedom and democracy should not remain permanently closed to neighboring countries which are pursuing the same goals. History has taught us that certain values are indivisible: if they are threatened in one place, they are directly or indirectly threatened everywhere (NATO, 1991b).

Vaclav’s statement exemplified particularly well an argumentative strategy which sought to apply moral and social pressure on the reluctant NATO allies to commit to expansion. At that time, NATO preferred only association with the former Warsaw Pact members—through “liaison programs” such as the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) and later the

Partnership for Peace (PfP)—rather than outright membership (Goldgeier & Shifrinson, 2020; Sloan, 2016). In fact, NATO has developed a number of structures to support cooperation with partner countries. Table 1 depicts Ukraine and Georgia’s participation in some of these initiatives.

The PfP institutionalized a hierarchical relationship between NATO as teacher and CEE states as learners by establishing a framework through which the alliance imparted its values and norms on cooperation partners and evaluated their learning progress (Schimmelfennig, 1998). The status of “partners” however meant the CEE states were not yet full-fledged members of “the West,” but rather outsiders on the inside, as Western-actors-in-training. This temporal differentiation did not satisfy the CEE state leaders, who wanted full article five membership rather than linger “in limbo” between the West and a potentially dangerous Russia. By the end of 1992, the goal of joining NATO was enshrined in the national security strategies of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland (Asmus, 2002).

Table 1. Ukraine and Georgia’s participation in select NATO partnership initiatives.

Structure	Lifespan	Stated Purpose	Year joined
North Atlantic Cooperation Council	1991-1997	Forum for dialogue with former Warsaw Pact countries	Ukraine (1991) Georgia (1992)
Partnership for Peace	1994-present	Intensify political and military cooperation by promoting NATO norms and values	Georgia (1994) Ukraine (1994)
Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council	1997-present	NACC successor; Provides overall political framework between NATO and PfP countries	Georgia (1997) Ukraine (1997)
Intensified Dialogue	1997-present	Intensify political	Ukraine (2005)

		exchange about NATO membership and required political reforms	Georgia (2006)
Membership Action Plan	1999-present	Normal bureaucratic mechanism to assist candidates to accession	Not given
Annual National Program	1999-present	NATO political and technical feedback mechanism to select candidates (normally associated with MAP)	Georgia (2008) Ukraine (2008)
Individual Partnership Action Plan	2002-present	Bring together all political and military cooperation with NATO to support domestic reforms	Georgia (2004) - evolved into ANP in 2008
Partnership Interoperability Initiative (Enhanced Opportunities Partner)	2014-present	Intensify military interoperability with select partner countries	Georgia (2014) Ukraine (2020)

In 1993 the United States under the Clinton Administration decided on a strategy of “democracy enlargement” as the successor to the doctrine of Soviet containment (Lake, 1993). Strong advocates of the strategy included the President himself, who came to embrace NATO expansion, seeing it to anchor the U.S. presence in post-Cold War Europe within a “community of market-based democracies” (Clinton, 1994). This assumption rested on the power of an enduring “Wilsonian conceit” in U.S. geopolitical culture, argues Toal (2017), which associates the proliferation of democratization and capitalism abroad with increased security, influence, and prosperity for the United States, and a more peaceful world. After initially devising the PFP in 1994 to appease the demands of the CEE states while also integrating Russia into the West, the

Clinton Administration pushed toward full membership expansion, an outcome which had bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress.

Opening NATO's door to the former members of the Soviet bloc was not embraced universally. Support for the move was lukewarm at best among some Western European NATO allies. The United Kingdom feared that increasing NATO's membership would dilute its own influence within the alliance (Schimmelfennig, 2003). France viewed expansion as a challenge to developing European autonomy in security affairs independent of the United States (Schake, 1998). Firm support for the move within Western Europe resided mainly among German national security officials, who perceived expansion as addressing both a historical moral responsibility and a geostrategic concern over leaving a security vacuum in the region left by the demise of the Warsaw Pact (Eyal, 1997). Besides the United States, Germany became the most outspoken advocate for the CEE states desiring NATO membership, yet there was no unity preference within the government until 1997 (Schimmelfennig, 2003).

As for Russia, few issues in its relationship with the West have been more difficult than NATO's expansion to the east. While Russia's opposition has fluctuated in intensity, the central premise of its argument has remained consistent: NATO represents a vestige of the Cold War that is ill-suited for the contemporary security environment and its encroachment in the Russian borderlands is a threat to Russian national security (Tsygankov, 2016). From 1992 to 1994 NATO-Russia relations enjoyed a "honeymoon period," as Russia showed a readiness to play the junior partner in the NATO-dominated post-Cold War security order and strove for recognition by the West as an important player in world affairs (Pouliot, 2010). However, once it became clear that NATO would proceed with full membership expansion to Russia's former satellites, over Russia's objections and while being excluded from the process, most Russians came to

understand the move as distinctly anti-Russian (Radchenko, 2020). This perception was reinforced by two factors. First, Russian leaders perceived an imbalance of power between a triumphant United States and a weakened Russia at a time of its own domestic disorder, corruption, and poverty resulting from the Soviet collapse and President Boris Yeltsin's reforms (Tsygankov, 2018). Secondly, there were unique features of Russia's own geopolitical culture—fear of encirclement, paranoia, and an incessant internal debate about whether Russia was part of “the West” (Toal, 2017). While NATO was not necessarily an anti-Russian alliance, its expansion, given the circumstances, contributed greatly to Russia feeling humiliated and betrayed by the West, particularly the United States (Hill, 2018).⁵

While the Clinton Administration was aware of Russian opposition, it believed it could manage the country's national security concerns by adjusting the pace of NATO expansion to suit Yeltsin's domestic political needs and cooperating with Russia in other ways (Goldgeier, 1999). To this end, Clinton agreed to delay concrete steps on expansion until after the 1996 Russian presidential election and establish a new basis for bilateral relations through the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. The latter created the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), a special bilateral consultative body. Wolff (2015) argues this enabled Russia's acquiescence, setting a precedent that Russia may expect to be compensated for giving in to future rounds of expansion. These moves, however, were only meant to make the outcome more palatable in the hope that Russia would eventually accommodate itself to the new reality of an expanded NATO (Goldgeier & Shiffrinson, 2020). Indeed, both the United States and its Western European allies

⁵ For example, President Yeltsin in an oft-quoted statement, lamented that he saw “nothing but humiliation for Russia” if NATO expansion went forward. See the Summary Report on One-on-One Meeting between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin. 1995. National Security Archive online, The George Washington University, Washington DC. Available at <http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//dc.html?doc=4390833-Document-19-Summary-report-on-One-on-One-meeting>.

made clear that expansion would proceed irrespective of Russia's position (Sloan, 2016). In this context, Russian officials felt that the policy failed to take their country's legitimate security interests into account. This feeling was underpinned by the suspicion that the CEE states sought NATO membership as an "insurance policy" against a potentially hostile Russia (German, 2017).⁶

Guided by the vision of an enlarged community of democracies and moved by the narrative of returning to Europe, President Clinton was always "ripe for the message" from CEE state leaders, with whom he developed close emotional ties (Sloan, 2016, pp. 111-112). Still, it took a series of contingent events at the end of 1994 to finally tip the balance toward an activist full membership approach to NATO expansion. Ukraine agreed to transfer its nuclear weapons to Russia in exchange for assurances to uphold its territorial integrity and independence.⁷ The invasion of Chechnya renewed fears among CEE states of Russia's presumed instinctively aggressive nature. The Republican Party decisively won the midterm elections based on a platform that endorsed swifter expansion (Sarotte, 2020). The impact of these events led the Clinton Administration to "cross the Rubicon" in deciding to increase NATO's membership (Asmus, 2002, p. 59). Thereafter, the outline of expansion as it subsequently occurred was in place as U.S. policy coalesced around the decision to swiftly confer "full Article 5 membership" to a small group of countries and with a high likelihood for future moves eastward (Sarotte, 2019b). In the end, the European NATO allies fell in line and in December 1994, the NAC duly

⁶ Walt (1987) argued that states ally with each other to balance against threats, not bandwagon with the most threatening state, because it is intentions, not capabilities that matters most to the assessment of danger. This is a formulation of Waltz's (1979) balance of power theory, which is premised on offensive military capabilities. "Balancing" is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat, while "bandwagoning" means alignment with the source of danger.

⁷ This move undercut a need to have both countries anchored in a robust PFP argues Sarotte (2019b). In the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 Russia pledged to uphold Ukraine's territorial integrity.

issued a statement initiating “a process of examination inside the Alliance to determine how NATO will enlarge, the principles to guide this process and the implications of membership” (NATO, 1994).

3.31 From Promise to Policy

The effect of the continued pressure by CEE state leaders, U.S. enthusiasm for expansion, and limited opportunities for effective opposition from reluctant NATO allies and Russia became evident as the *Study on NATO Enlargement* officially signaled NATO’s intent to make expansion a reality. Released in September 1995, it provided a semblance of unity over a process that lacked alliance consensus about how expansion should be conducted, over what time period, or who should be invited to join (Eyal, 1997). The *Study* synthesized the Clinton Administration’s discussions both within NATO and with the CEE states, emphasizing that the alliance was open to accepting new members and outlining the “principles” that aspirants would have to meet to obtain membership (Goldgeier & Shiffrinson, 2020). Reflecting the optimistic mood of U.S. geopolitical discourse at the time (e.g. Fukuyama, 1989), the *Study* presented a highly idealized construction of NATO’s purpose and role in shaping a “new world order.” Its significance should not be understated as it remains the basic text guiding the enlargement process. As the public-facing expression of unanimous agreement, the *Study* reflects the shared understandings of the allies and the principles that had to be upheld—at least in theory—in any decision over expanding NATO to maintain the appearance of harmony.

NATO’s stated goal for expanding was to build an improved security structure across Europe “to provide increased stability and security for all...without creating dividing lines” (NATO, 1995, §1). While the *Study* refers to the purpose of NATO under the Washington Treaty

as collective defense, it makes no mention of this principle as a reason for expansion (Yost, 2014); This further signifies the shift from a military representation of the alliance to a democratic security community (Williams & Neumann, 2000). An enlarged NATO would “threaten no-one,” (NATO, 1995, §4) and merely complement the existing European institutions, namely the EU, OSCE, and WEU, in pursuing the goal of an “undivided Europe” (§16) free from “spheres of influence” (§13). Yet, the allies made clear their refusal to have NATO “subordinated to another European security institution” (§27). For Russia, which had tried to use its own membership in the OSCE to assert that institution’s preeminence over other multilateral actors, the phrase “no new dividing lines” became understood as opposition to NATO’s expansion (Hill, 2018).

While claiming “Russia’s perceptions do matter,” NATO was not willing to allow its concerns to stop expansion (Solana, 1997). “No country outside the Alliance should be given a veto or droit de regard over the process and decisions” (NATO, 1995, §7). Still, the allies acknowledged Russia’s significant role in European affairs, given the prominence of space devoted to “relations with Russia” in a whole section of the *Study*. Considering the “concerns with respect to the enlargement process of the Alliance” raised by Russia, NATO called for a special NATO-Russia relationship to be developed through the dialogue already begun (Ibid., §28). This culminated with the NATO-Russia Founding Act of May 1997, which created the Permanent Joint Council, a special bilateral consultative framework for addressing security concerns. Cultivating Russia was supposed to take place in parallel with expansion, “with the goal of further strengthening stability and security in Europe” (Ibid., §26). At the NATO level, this mirrored the Clinton Administration’s own efforts to integrate Russia into the West while bringing the CEE states into the alliance. However, the simultaneous effort was undercut by

NATO's proposition about the decision-making process of enlargement. The allies' fear of Russia's ability to act as a spoiler was apparent in their contention that Russia would hold no veto over any decision.

The *Study* articulated what NATO expected of both new and prospective members to prepare themselves for membership. While claiming there was “no fixed or rigid list of criteria” (NATO, 1995, §7) to meet as a precondition for an invitation for membership, it was expected that candidates would conform with and internalize the Euro-Atlantic community's norms and values as defined by NATO. These included committing to “democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law” (§70); economic well-being, social justice, and environmental responsibility (§72); civilian control of the military and the resources to contribute to the purpose of collective defense (§72); the peaceful settlement of international disputes (§5); and “good faith efforts to build consensus within the Alliance on all issues” (§70). Importantly, new members must promise to not “close the door” behind it to other countries that want to join (§30). Conformity with such values was articulated as a necessary but not sufficient condition for membership. Ultimately the allies “will decide by consensus” to invite new members on a “case-by-case basis and some nations may attain membership before others” (§7). Concerned that disappointing those left out might discourage “good behavior” (Eyal, 1997, p. 706), NATO made clear “the Alliance remains open to further accessions by countries not among the earliest to be invited to join,” thus reaffirming a general commitment to the “open door” policy while signaling to other aspirants their time would eventually come (NATO, 1995, §80). Enlargement was thus always meant to be a rolling process and not a one-off event. Indeed, as early as September 1993 U.S. policymakers envisioned a sweeping phased expansion of four rounds, which would not be announced publicly (Goldgeier, 2020).

Crucially, the *Study* explicitly required that states which have ethnic disputes, external territorial disputes, or internal jurisdictional disputes settle these issues peacefully in accordance with OSCE principles. “Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance” (NATO, 1995, §6). This of course implicates Georgia and Ukraine’s possible membership, as both states lack full control over their internationally recognized territory. Thus, the idealistic claim by NATO that there was no “rigid list of criteria” to prepare for membership betrayed the practical necessity for the purpose of collective defense of avoiding incorporating new members with existing territorial conflicts. To do otherwise could trigger an article five scenario upon their accession to NATO, as opponents of the two countries’ membership have pointed out (Hamilton, 2016).

3.32 Framing the Accession: The Return to Europe

The principles set forth in the *Study on NATO Enlargement* would guide the process that led to the accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to the alliance in March 1999.⁸ In all three cases, the aspirants and their advocates within NATO presented the candidates for membership as legitimate members of the “family” of European democracies. They defined the rationale of NATO expansion as buttressing the democratic achievements in the region. Finally, they asserted that NATO’s self-ascribed community identity and liberal values and norms obliged the alliance to spread democracy by granting them membership in NATO (Schimmelfennig, 2003).

⁸ The Clinton Administration announced the endorsement of the three candidates in the spring of 1997, before the NATO Madrid Summit in July. While this irritated some allies, they “duly fell into line” with the U.S. position, observes Hill (2018, 135).

The narrative of returning to Europe was the guiding principle of the expansion process, which consistently produced not only the vision of a united and free “Europe” but also the perception that Europe has always been what it is now, which allowed the candidates to also claim they have “always been European” (Ciuta, 2002). Both NATO members and aspirants alike framed the move as the legitimate and necessary “homecoming” of the three states to their rightful place within Western civilization. The accession to NATO was presented as the ultimate affirmation of Western, and particularly “European” identity, and not as the alignment against a perceived source of danger through membership in a military alliance, concludes Behnke (2013).

For the CEE state leaders, their entitlement to join NATO followed logically from what they claimed was their essential Western, liberal identity and their need for the protection of democracy, on the one hand, and NATO’s self-styled identity as the institutional embodiment of “the West” and its historical mission of promoting and protecting democracy, on the other (Schimmelfennig, 2003). According to Hungary’s Ambassador to the United States at the time:

Ever since the adoption of Christianity more than a thousand years ago, the three nations that signed the Washington Treaty in 1999 have followed a Western political, cultural, and religious alignment (Jeszensky, 2019).

In a similar vein, the Polish Foreign Minister, Bronislaw Geremek, proclaimed to U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright that obtaining membership in NATO was “the most important event that has happened to Poland since the onset of Christianity” (Sarotte, 2019a). As for the people of the Czech Republic, joining NATO was presented as a “great vindication for the renewed Czech democracy” and a “recognition that we all share common values and interests” (Kavan, 1999). An interesting instance of transnational networking occurred in the Czech case in 1997-1998, organized by the Czech policymaking apparatus, local reformers, and NATO

representatives, which increased public support for Czech membership (Gheciu, 2005). On the accession, Albright herself declared: “History will record March 12, 1999, as the day the people of Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland strode through NATO’s open door and assumed their rightful place in NATO’s councils” (Albright, 1999).

This was only the beginning of an expansion process which has remained “on autopilot” to the present, as successive U.S. administrations have led NATO in increasing its membership (Burns, 2019, p. 413). This included the Trump administration, which welcomed the accessions of Montenegro and North Macedonia, in 2017 and 2020, respectively, and reaffirmed its support for Georgia and Ukraine’s future membership on several occasions (Shifrinson, 2020). With the state leaders from across the NATO members from the mid-1990s having framed expansion as central to meeting the idealistic goal of a Europe “whole, free, and at peace,” the alliance’s eastward move has had no clear endpoint (Hill, 2018). As President George W. Bush proclaimed in May 2001: “No part of Europe will be excluded because of history or geography” (Bush, 2001). Table 2 shows the progression of NATO’s expansion to the east since the end of the Cold War.

Table 2. NATO’s post-Cold War expansion process

Round	Year	Countries
1	1999	Czech Republic Hungary Poland
2	2004	Bulgaria Estonia Latvia Lithuania Romania Slovakia Slovenia

3	2009	Albania Croatia
4	2017	Montenegro
5	2020	North Macedonia
6	2023	Finland (without MAP)

With calls for membership continuing toward the end of the 1990s from the CEE states excluded from the opening round of expansion, NATO moved to “routinize” the process, creating the MAP in April 1999 to guide candidates toward achieving membership (Goldgeier & Shiffrinson, 2020, p. 297). The idea stemmed from the perception that the promise of membership to the first group of candidates had preceded the completion of the political and military reforms outlined in the 1995 enlargement study (Gheciu, 2005). MAP provided a formal institutional mechanism through which NATO offered “concrete feedback and advice” on a candidate’s “annual national program,” which was the official title for its “progress report” toward joining NATO (NATO, 2000). The specific grammar of MAP further impressed the hierarchical teacher/student relationship between NATO and aspirants. The acronym was intentional, instructing candidates that “if you follow the roadmap, you will get there.”⁹ Initially, NATO granted MAPs to nine states—Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)—and promised to review each country’s progress toward membership by 2002 (Sloan, 2016). Schimmelfennig (2003) found that the lines of argument used by the aspirants and their advocates within NATO were the same as the first round of expansion, which demonstrated the quality and durability of the rhetoric throughout the process. Russia’s protests over the impending “big bang” expansion were

⁹ Interview L, former U.S. National Security Council staff officer, by telephone, 29 June 2020.

dismissed as misunderstanding NATO's stated benign intentions. It was given a rebranded bilateral forum—the NATO-Russia Council—to help swallow the reality (Wolff, 2015).¹⁰ All MAP countries except Albania and FYROM gained membership in 2004.

From there, NATO shifted to consolidating the Balkans region, incorporating Albania and Croatia in April 2009 and Montenegro in June 2017, the latter only after having completed a MAP begun in December 2009. Finally, NATO admitted “North Macedonia” in March 2020 after the latter settled a longstanding dispute with Greece over its name. The accession of Montenegro and North Macedonia, small states with weak militaries and little strategic significance, proved the policy had become a “symbolic act” lamented German (2017, p. 292), indicating the primacy of the political motivation for expansion by asserting an enduring commitment to the “open door” policy. From Russia's point of view, the nature of the threat posed by Ukraine and Georgia's accession was that obtaining a MAP was understood to be the “point of no return.” All countries that had traveled that far down the path had eventually become members (Trenin, 2011, p. 90). At present, only Bosnia and Herzegovina has a MAP, which was granted in 2010, yet not membership.

3.33 Expansion into the post-Soviet Space

The fragile consensus within NATO about future expansion was demonstrated most clearly by the question of possible membership for Georgia and Ukraine, which split open a lingering division between the U.S. and European pillars of the alliance at the April 2008 Bucharest summit. The United States was a strong advocate of inviting the two states to join

¹⁰ The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act established the Permanent Joint Council (PJC). In 2002, a new institutional mechanism, the NATO-Russia Council superseded the PJC. In April 2014 NATO decided to suspend all practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia after the annexation of Crimea.

NATO by granting a MAP, which would have set them on the formal route to membership. However, certain European allies were more reluctant, remaining unconvinced of the candidates' commitment to the reforms laid out in NATO's enlargement study and keen not to antagonize Russia further.

The summit followed a period of rising tensions between Russia and the West. Relations had deteriorated due to several events over the previous year: the U.S. announcement in April 2007 to develop missile defense systems in Eastern Europe, Russia's suspension of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty in December 2007, and the recognition of Kosovo's contested independence from Serbia by the United States and several European countries in February 2008, which Russia adamantly opposed (Ó Tuathail, 2008). From 2006, Russian officials from President Vladimir Putin down had warned that NATO's expansion to Georgia and Ukraine would cross a "red line" as far as its national security was concerned, prompting a dramatic shift in its policy toward the alliance (Toal, 2017). President Putin denounced expansion as "a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust" in his February 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference (Putin, 2007). Russia's problems with the West in 2007-08 mirrored a worsening of relations with the two states. The source of the discord was the attempt by the former satellites to break free from the legacies of dependence and interdependence with a powerful regional hegemon by seeking membership in Western institutions and Russia being intent on retaining a semblance of influence in the post-Soviet space.

The rift within NATO was on full display at the Bucharest summit as the occasion marked the first time a Russian president had attended a NAC summit. The U.S.-led camp was confident in the transformative power of NATO expansion to stabilize democratization in former

communist lands. The United States under the Bush administration trumpeted Georgia and Ukraine's reforms and supported the so-called color revolutions there, in 2003 and 2004 respectively, which brought Westernizing, and particularly pro-U.S., governments to power. Both states figured prominently in the administration's "Freedom Agenda" of promoting democracy across the globe, which was eager for a success story against the backdrop of the Iraq war.¹¹ While the United Kingdom and Canada also supported the U.S. position, the most energetic backers of a MAP were NATO's most recent members from the "New Europe," which constituted the eastern "frontline" of the alliance.¹² These newer allies were the forebearers of Georgia and Ukraine's current quest as they too sought to join NATO after the Soviet collapse to escape past perceived victimhood and safeguard against potential future Russian aggression. For them, further expansion would stabilize the region east of their borders at a price to be paid by the more wealthy and powerful allies.

France and Germany led the opposition camp at Bucharest, which liked the idea of Georgia and Ukraine's future NATO membership but resisted offering a MAP. Indeed, the disagreement between the two sides was "not whether but when" the two countries should be granted a MAP, noted a NATO staff officer in Georgia.¹³ Many other so-called Old Europe NATO members aligned with the Franco-German side, such as Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal. To varying degrees, these countries were somewhat understanding of Russia's stated national security concerns about expansion. Unlike the Baltic States and former Warsaw

¹¹ The essence of the Freedom Agenda was made clear in President Bush's second inaugural address: "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world" (NPR, 2005).

¹² Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld coined the terms "Old Europe" and "New Europe" in 2003 to highlight the opposition of major Western European allies to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, when several Eastern European countries joined the U.S.-led coalition.

¹³ Interview M, NATO international staff officer in Georgia, by telephone, 30 June 2020

Pact territories, they did not perceive Russia as a security threat at the time. This side questioned the long-term sustainability of Georgia and Ukraine’s democratization and worried about the unresolved territorial disputes and the presence of Russian peacekeepers on internationally recognized Georgian soil (Yost, 2014). The other allies were ambivalent about the MAP issue and fell in line with what the “big boys said,” namely the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany.¹⁴

Following a “diplomatic shootout” at Bucharest, which saw Bush administration officials and the President himself vigorously advocate for granting a MAP, the solution that won consensus was to defer the MAP decision but commit to Georgia and Ukraine’s future NATO membership (Asmus, 2010). Though declining to offer a clear route to membership, the NAC nonetheless asserted the two countries “will become members of NATO” at an undefined point in the future (NATO, 2008). While the specific wording was vague—indicating an uneasy compromise with an obvious struggle beneath it—the declaration still signaled the expression of the collective will of the allies. This was an extraordinary decision, as it remains the only instance in which NATO committed to the membership of candidates without also granting a MAP.¹⁵

The Bucharest Declaration decision that Georgia and Ukraine would join NATO convinced Russia that the United States and its European allies did not respect Russia’s national security concerns and that nothing it was doing politically could stop the process of seeming Western encroachment into a region where it asserted “privileged interests.”¹⁶ The consequences

¹⁴ Interview P, U.S. military officer at NATO international military staff, by telephone, 3 July 2020

¹⁵ Finland’s accession in April 2023 broke this precedent, as it did not have a MAP. However, it can be considered an outlier case, with it already having EU membership, which is more difficult to obtain.

¹⁶ In an interview conducted shortly after the August 2008 war, then-President Dmitry Medvedev asserted as a pillar of his foreign policy that Russia would pursue its “privileged interests” in key regions, including in the former Soviet republics. See <http://en.kremlin.ru/event/president/transcripts/48301>.

of the decision culminated in Russia's invasion of Georgia. The short war which followed was the largest outbreak of fighting in Europe since the Kosovo war in 1999. The war devastated Georgia and made it seem a poor candidate for NATO membership. Afterwards, Russia recognized the two pro-Russia breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

After initially condemning Russia's actions toward Georgia, the West pursued an outreach strategy, led by the Obama administration's attempt to "reset" U.S.-Russia relations. While this effort did yield some success,¹⁷ it failed to fix what Russia saw as the structural deficiencies in the development of the European security order since the end of the Cold War—namely, that neither Russia, the major European powers, nor the United States have been successful in defining a place for Russia in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture or integrating it into NATO and the EU (Hill, 2018).

By early 2014, Georgia proved it was not the only ex-Soviet republic where Russia would exploit pre-existing ethnonationalist conflicts and dispute territories along its borders. In March, Russia seized Crimea and then fomented the war in eastern Ukraine between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian government forces (Wilson, 2014). The war was characterized by population displacement and destruction of infrastructure and was soon brought to a stalemate beyond which neither side was willing or capable of moving (Charap and Colton, 2017). While Russia's intervention was not explicitly over Ukraine's accession to NATO, President Putin blamed the threat of future expansion there as the impetus behind the annexation of Crimea (Wolff, 2017). In February 2022, Russia inflamed the situation by launching a renewed invasion

¹⁷ Bilateral cooperation resulted in reaching the New START treaty (April 2010), UNSC measures sanctioning Iran (June 2012, 2013, and 2014), Russia's accession to the WTO (December 2011), and logistics cooperation for the NATO-led war in Afghanistan.

of Ukraine. This has resulted in a large-scale conventional war and with the risk of escalation to nuclear weapons, which has deepened the crisis between Russia and the West. For NATO, the war has finally reinvigorated its collective defense purpose after some powerful Western state leaders such as President Trump had suggested its obsolescence in recent years.

3.4 Conclusion

One might expect Russia's actions toward Georgia and Ukraine to cause a rethink of the underlying rationale of NATO expansion as vital for enabling democracy and preserving peace and stability. The main consequence has instead been to reinforce the assumed positive value of extending the alliance eastward. Russia understands NATO as the main threat to its national security and has shown a willingness to take decisive action to defend its stated interests. The prospect of NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine has proven that Russia will use force to stop their incorporation into the alliance. At present, Russia holds a de facto veto over their accession. However, Russia's invasions provide an object lesson of why Russia's neighbors seek the protection of NATO membership backed by U.S. power.

Reciprocal fears of Russian behavior have driven many newer NATO allies in Eastern Europe to use the alliance to deter Russia. The deep rift between Russia and the West has breathed new life into an expanded alliance, as the commitment of NATO to the 2008 Bucharest Declaration decision has been invoked at virtually every ministerial meeting of NATO, even if little could be done to implement this policy. Probing whether the stated reasons for expansion are the true drivers of the policy or simply rationales used to justify a policy arrived at for other reasons are explored in the subsequent chapters. Judging from some pronouncements, expansion itself appears to have become a symbol of Western resolve in opposing Russia and upholding the

liberal principle that all states have the right to join the alliance of their choosing (e.g. Burns & Lute, 2019). Still, the potential membership for Georgia and Ukraine remains a persistent cause of division within the alliance.

The following main empirical part of the study aims to show that the drivers for Georgia and Ukraine's membership employ the same argumentative strategies as the past candidates to apply moral and social pressure on NATO. Under this strategy, the two countries are presented as fundamental parts of Western civilization, specifically Europe, whose attempts to internalize liberal democracy, and thus conform to NATO's own standards, are threatened by Russia. The proponents of expansion appeal to NATO's liberal democratic community-building narrative, namely that the alliance is a voluntary organization and that the historic precedent of expansion over the post-Cold War era oblige the NATO allies to remain committed to bringing both countries into the alliance. The crucial difference however is that while the newest allies used "rhetorical action" to overcome the *initial opposition* of NATO to commit to expansion, Georgia, Ukraine, and their supporters within the alliance use it to shame NATO into *staying committed* to an enlargement decision already made.

Chapter 4 - Rhetorical Action: Ukraine and Georgia's Sales Pitch to NATO

4.1 Introduction

NATO's April 2008 Bucharest summit decision that Ukraine and Georgia would become alliance members took place within a community environment in which all state actors shared a liberal political culture and subscribed to a permissive membership policy. The enduring power of the basic liberal norm that democratic European states had an unconditional right to join Western institutions was what ultimately determined the outcome. The sense of entitlement among both allies and aspirants was expressed by sweeping statements like "NATO is not an exclusionary alliance" and so "any state that meets the membership requirements should be allowed to join," advocated a U.S. military officer at SHAPE.¹⁸ Through a critical lens, such rationale is deeply flawed, as it dismisses important realities such as geography and the military dimensions of security.

Nonetheless, the problem was not one of interpreting the criteria for legitimate membership. No ally contested the two guiding principles of NATO enlargement: the right of national self-determination and a maximalist interpretation of state sovereignty. NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg invoked these principles in a response to a question about the prospects of Georgia and Ukraine's membership at a public event at Georgetown University in October 2021. "It's up to the individual sovereign nation to decide whether they want to join NATO...no one else," he declared (NATO, 2021).

¹⁸ Interview I, U.S. military officer at NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 17 June 2020.

NATO's statements leading up to Bucharest did in fact give the impression that the allies believed both countries had met the membership requirements. Instead, a commitment to these ideas' practical repercussions was the main issue. The question for Ukraine and Georgia was how to induce NATO to commit to membership. In this situation, the rhetorical action hypothesis posits that the advocates of expansion rely on identity- and norm-based arguments to shame the opponents into compliance with their agenda.

Ukraine, Georgia, and those who supported them within NATO have appealed to the stated democratic values and multilateralist norms of the Euro-Atlantic liberal community that NATO represents. They have argued that NATO's long standing open-door policy of welcoming new members as well as the precedent set by earlier eastward expansions oblige the allies to commit to membership. By appealing to norms and values, expansion advocates realized the importance of seizing the moral high ground. These were a set of homogenizing claims which sought to downplay any of the differences between the candidates, such as perceived strategic location and territorial conditions.

It has been the central argumentative strategy of the aspirants to present themselves as fundamental parts of "the West" and "Europe," to highlight the fragility of their supposed democratic achievements, and to shame the allies by showing their loyalty to NATO. In this manner, Ukraine's and Georgia's sales pitch has imitated the arguments used by the Baltic States and the CEE countries, which Frank Schimmelfennig (2003) observed animated the debates during previous NATO expansion rounds. Any objections to membership were overcome by the power of this rhetorical action. Ukraine and Georgia have taken this same strategy on their own westward journeys. Over many years, they have relied on it to retain NATO's verbal support for their eventual accession.

Ukraine and Georgia have also benefited from the support of a pro-NATO expansion TAN. This coalition comprises reform-minded elites in candidate countries, current and former pro-Atlanticist government officials of the NATO member states, and influential think tanks such as the Washington-based Atlantic Council. In fact, the Atlantic Council hosted new NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen in his first U.S. speech in September 2009, a sign of its sway within the strategic community (Rasmussen, 2009). This TAN lobbies for NATO’s expansion and helps cultivate pro-Atlanticist forces within the member states, Ukraine, and Georgia. Table 3 lays out a summary of the rhetorical action used by Ukraine, Georgia, and their supporters to justify bringing the two countries into the alliance.

Table 3. Rhetorical action strategy used by advocates for Ukraine and Georgia.

Rhetorical frame	Discursive claim
Coming home to Europe	NATO membership is justified as Ukraine and Georgia are fundamental parts of “Europe” and “the West”
Democracy Endangered	NATO membership is needed to protect “democracy” from Russia and its proxies
Loyal Wingmen	NATO membership is justified because Ukraine and Georgia internalized NATO values and contributed to military operations

The argumentative strategy took the form of a strategic narrative that has been aimed at the NATO allies, particularly the United States, who is the alliance’s strongest ally and historically its most vocal advocate for expansion. Poland and the Baltic States have been key supporters as well. As the narrative goes, Ukraine and Georgia were always Western and specifically European, so they naturally embraced democracy after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Russia feared the two countries’ progress and used its malign influence over national

minorities to destroy their territorial integrity and national unity. Ukraine and Georgia have internalized Western values and supported NATO's missions, first in the Balkans, and then in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thus, both are proven security contributors and are worthy of acceptance into NATO to protect their democratic accomplishments. The sales pitch appealed directly to NATO's self-assigned identity as a security community of liberal Western democracies. Crucially, the rhetoric resonated with a central theme of the geopolitical culture of the United States, namely the civilizing mission of democracy promotion across the globe.

The argumentative strategy was followed in many speeches and interviews. Already in his first inauguration address as Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili's speech in January 2004 incorporated all these arguments and became a model for other Georgian officials to follow. Likewise, the new Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko, in his own inauguration speech in January 2005, followed a similar script. I will thus quote at length from the two speeches and complement them with contemporary examples collected from the research interviews. The methodology shows how the rhetoric has endured over time and in different geopolitical contexts.

4.2 Coming home to Europe

In *Civilizing the Enemy*, Patrick Jackson (2006) examined how Konrad Adenauer, the chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) as well as other FRG officials and their advocates within "the West," employed the "rhetorical commonplace" of "Western Civilization" to legitimate Germany's integration into Western security institutions such as NATO after the Second World War. According to Jackson (2006, 28-29), rhetorical commonplaces are bits of discursive material whose meaning is weakly shared by both elites and the public. Such commonplaces are capable of being manipulated in multiple ways and in a variety of contexts to

serve an agent's interests. For Adenaur and the other proponents, their arguments were based on the notion that the BRD belonged firmly within a community of Western countries. Jackson contended that Germany's (re)integration could be satisfactorily explained by a focus on public rhetoric, on the rhetorical commonplaces that were used to render certain policy options legitimate while marginalizing others.

Similar to the arguments of Germany's supporters, Georgia, Ukraine, and their advocates within NATO employ certain commonplaces to legitimize expanding the alliance to include the two countries. In these cases, the discourse of Europeanizing and Westernization cooperate as shared, complementary articulations of civilizational geopolitical discourse.

As a first rhetorical step, the Georgian president sought to define his country as "European" and "democratic" and to throw off its Soviet past to show it was firmly part of the Euro-Atlantic community and, for that reason, worthy of NATO membership.

We are not only old Europeans, we are the very first Europeans, and therefore Georgia holds a special place in European civilization. Georgia should serve as a paragon for democracy where all citizens are equal before the law....
(Saakashvili, 2004).

In this framing, the "natural habitat" of Georgia was within the community of liberal Western democracies that NATO represented. Georgia's "unique history and culture" of embracing democratic values was intrinsically given and enduring, claimed a Georgian diplomat, despite its communist legacy.¹⁹

¹⁹ Interview FF, Georgian diplomat, Washington, DC, 3 September 2021.

Yushchenko's appeal was nearly identical. He claimed, somewhat paradoxically, that his country had "taken an irreversible step towards democracy" and chosen to follow down a "European pathway" and yet was already part of Europe:

Our path to the future is the path taken by United Europe. Our way with a united Europe. Europe and I belong to the same civilization, we share its values (Yushchenko, 2005).

Echoing the president, Ukraine's former Director for Euro-Atlantic integration, a position that Viktor Yanukovich terminated upon becoming president in 2010, argued NATO membership was warranted because "Ukraine shares the same values as the Euro-Atlantic community."²⁰

Like Saakashvili, Yushchenko (2005) invoked historic national achievements to justify the claim of civilizational belonging to the democratic West: "We chose freedom, because tyranny cannot rule over the heirs of the Cossack republic, where the world's first Constitution was written three hundred years ago."

Following NATO's own post-Cold War discourse, Ukraine and Georgia understood the alliance as the institutional embodiment of the West. Despite their identity claims, however, to assert belonging to "Western civilization" and "Europe," either culturally or geographically, were hardly self-evident for either country. The rhetoric drew from the earlier NATO aspirants, who made similar assertions.

The post-Cold War transitions signified their "return to Europe," to a community to which they had historically belonged and from which they had been forcibly cut off from under communist rule. Nonetheless, constructivism helps us understand that regions are political constructs and the definition of the region constituting "Europe" was contested. Opponents of

²⁰ Interview BB, Ukrainian diplomat, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021.

Georgia's membership challenged whether the country was sufficiently "European," recalling the debates over the legitimacy of Turkey's candidacy for NATO membership in the early 1950s (German, 2017). Some have even suggested that Georgia should not have been considered for membership in the first place because it was "not even in Europe" (O'Hanlon, 2017). This reasoning invoked the authority of Article 10 of the Washington Treaty, which specified that membership invitations be offered only to "any other European State..." (NATO, 1949). In fact, locating Georgia "further from Europe" was a common trope among non-Georgian interviewees, for instance pointing out how the great distance from "core" European capitals such as Berlin or Paris supposedly weakened Georgia's arguments.²¹

The construction of physical setting showed an underlying conflict regarding the two countries' respective candidacies. Georgians at once saw their country as culturally part of Europe and yet vulnerable to dangers due to the geographical separation from what was constructed as the heart of the continent. Georgia fashioned itself as an "outpost of Europe," remarked a U.S. defense advisor to the country's defense ministry.²² Berezhnaya and Hein-Kircher (2019) have noted the historical resonance of the myth of "rampart nations" in European border regions in claiming a civilizing mission and providing a bulwark against external threats and danger. This myth has been one of the main motifs in national claims to be part of Europe.

The construction of Georgia's physical setting mattered not solely because of the Article 10 technicality regarding an aspirant's so-called European identity. Georgia's isolated location and extreme imbalance between its military capabilities and those of Russia would undoubtedly strain NATO's conventional defense plans if it were to become a member (Sweeney, 2021). At

²¹ Interview Y, U.S. defense official in Germany, by telephone, 5 March 2021.

²² Interview GG, U.S. defense official in Georgia, by telephone, 15 September 2021.

the same time, however, the alliance asserted that any expansion was “not hamstrung by geography.”²³ Indeed, NATO consistently asserted that membership was open to *any* European democracy that met the membership standards.

Despite the apparent tension over belongingness, many ordinary Georgians already “feel very European” and so want to be part of Europe in a “formal” sense, said a NATO official in Georgia.²⁴ Schimmelfennig (2001) argued that such a feeling of cultural belonging could be vindicated through Western affirmation of an aspirant’s identity claim, as signified by accession to NATO and the EU. A 2019 public opinion survey by the National Democratic Institute, a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization, found that there existed broad and stable support within Georgia for joining both organizations (NDI, 2019).²⁵ Moreover, many Georgians saw membership in either NATO or the EU as virtually indistinguishable, according to a NATO international staff officer.²⁶ Yet, in practice, Georgia’s growing association with the EU had brought cultural and economic benefits that were more visible to the public than NATO integration, such as the visa waiver program, which allowed Georgians to visit the Schengen Area without a visa, as well as higher education opportunities.²⁷

A similar phenomenon had been occurring in Ukraine. However, it was distinguished by a lack of public agreement regarding the merits of joining NATO. Ordinary Ukrainians generally held “a more ephemeral view of NATO membership,” seemingly unconvinced of the upside. On

²³ Interview I, U.S. military officer at NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 17 June 2020.

²⁴ Interview M, Italian NATO international staff officer in Georgia, by telephone, 30 June 2020.

²⁵ The survey was flawed, as it did not include the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus rendering it an inadequate measure of national popular support.

²⁶ Interview R, Dutch NATO international staff officer at NATO headquarters, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

²⁷ Interview FF, Georgian diplomat, Washington, DC, 3 September 2021.

the other hand, joining the EU was seen as “nirvana” from a socio-economic standpoint.²⁸

Yushchenko (2005) channeled this attitude in his inaugural address:

Our place in the European Union, my goal is Ukraine in a united Europe! In Europe, Ukraine has a historic chance to reveal its potential...European standards will become the norm in social life and Ukrainian politics...Every step towards Europe means new opportunities for millions of Ukrainians!

While the public saw the benefits of EU membership more clearly, as had been done in Georgia, the prospect of joining NATO did not stir similar excitement. “I’m not really sure that a majority of Ukrainians really understand what membership in NATO would bring,” admitted a British advisor to the Ukrainian Defense Ministry.²⁹ The apparent lack of knowledge among the Ukrainian people concerned both NATO and Ukrainian elites, who responded with public information campaigns inside the country to boost NATO’s profile. Historically, popular support for joining NATO had been relatively weak, with essentially half of the country preferring closer ties with Russia, according to a 2020 survey (Toal et al., 2020). The allies perceived this reluctance as attributed to the public’s ignorance of what NATO stood for rather than a legitimate policy position. If NATO were a free and open community of democracies, whose responsibility was keeping peace in Europe, as it had so vigorously promoted since the end of the Cold War, how could anyone object to being part of it? NATO expansion had in fact always rested on such a power of the assumption of its appropriateness. “If there are partners that want to join then NATO has to be responsive to that,” believed a NATO International Staff officer.³⁰ This was the essence of the open-door policy toward new members.

²⁸ Interview V, former British defense advisor in Ukraine, by telephone, 14 July 2020.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Interview R, NATO International Staff Officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

For their part, Ukraine and Georgia heeded the important lesson that the candidates who came before them had learned. It would take a while to join the EU, and it would be difficult to conform to all the rules and regulations that were expected of its members. By contrast, joining NATO appeared to be an easier way to “to show the world that we are part of Europe” by becoming a member of one of the key Western institutions.³¹ More importantly, NATO membership came with the crucial mutual defense guarantee, backed by U.S. power, which the EU lacked. Thus, the timing of Ukraine and Georgia’s desire to join NATO indicated that it was driven by instrumentalism—to obtain the only security guarantee available under the geopolitical circumstances. There was “no other option” for the two countries, asserted a German military officer, to avoid falling “under Russian control again.”³² Whether such a guarantee was secured through NATO membership or through bilateral relations with the United States was always secondary. According to several American interviewees, U.S. protection was what both Ukraine and Georgia ultimately “really wanted.”³³ Thus, despite preferring EU membership, joining NATO was perceived as the path of less resistance. It was believed to be better from a national security perspective anyway. In this manner, NATO represented the essential institutional way station on the journey “home” toward “Europe.” Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, of all the countries which have joined both organizations, only Finland has joined the EU without first joining NATO.³⁴

³¹ Georgia Interview G, academic, Tbilisi, 25 September 2017.

³² Interview U, German military officer at NATO HQ, by telephone, 14 July 2020.

³³ Interview EE, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 16 July 2021; Interview B, U.S. defense advisor, by telephone, 30 April 2020; Interview S, U.S. think tank researcher, by telephone, 10 July 2020; Interview GG, U.S. defense official in Georgia, by telephone, 15 September 2021.

³⁴ Finland’s admission to NATO in April 2023 broke this rule. Yet, the geopolitical circumstances surrounding its accession were markedly different from Ukraine and Georgia’s. No serious observer denies Finland’s credentials as a model European liberal democracy who has met NATO’s standards for membership.

The metaphors “habitat/home” and “family” were prominent in framing the integration with NATO. It was the “family we believe we historically belong to,” claimed a Georgian diplomat in the United States.³⁵ They provided a naturalness to the pursuit of membership and conferred upon it the legitimacy of an apolitical belonging to a “community of freedom and peace,” in NATO’s words, unspoiled by the effects of power, interests, and strategy (NATO, 2010). Under this view, to gain membership represented the fulfillment of an historical inevitability. It was the country’s “manifest destiny” to return to European civilization, its rightful place in the world, which was “lost several centuries ago,” proclaimed Saakashvili (2004). By contrast, while there were equivalent aspirations of realizing a European destiny of its own, Yushchenko presented his country’s path forward more as a firm declaration of independence than an historical inevitability. “Today,” he asserted, “Ukraine is free and independent...No one will dare to tell us how to live and who to choose” (Yushchenko, 2005). Ukraine’s journey toward “Europe” was not solely, or even principally, seen as a logical homecoming. It was instead shown as a choice, as the preferred cultural and civilizational endpoint “where we should seek our destiny” (Ibid.). In both cases, the rhetoric constructed a taken-for-granted common space to which the two countries belonged, and it enabled the absence from this space to be rendered as an unnatural exclusion of a family member (Behnke, 2013). Whether or not we believe Ukraine and Georgia’s assertion that they were once a part of the West or Europe, the rhetoric of home and family portrayed gaining membership as more a matter of receiving psychological validation from other European family members than of balancing power against perceived threats, whether they be Russia or other enemies.

³⁵ Interview FF, Georgian diplomat, Washington, DC, 3 September 2021.

4.3 “Democracy” Endangered

In a second move, Ukraine and Georgia claimed that their independence and revival were under attack from forces working together to obstruct the route to westernization and reform that would take them back to Europe. The complementary storylines of victimhood and suffering struck a chord with a geopolitical culture in the United States predisposed to view the world in terms of imperialist Russia and captive nations (Toal, 2017). The sales pitch seemed tailor-made for a U.S. foreign policy course inspired by the Freedom Agenda.

Saakashvili (2004) claimed that “Great barriers lie ahead. Georgia will have to overcome huge obstacles to achieve our goals” such as the “malignant circle of corruption” which betrayed “state interests.” Although Georgia “holds a special place in European civilization” it was beset by a “highly complicated geopolitical situation and location” (Ibid.). The rhetoric of Georgian exceptionalism was thus cast against its vulnerability and fragility, as shown by the contemporary conditions of breakaway territories lost to separatists, thousands of impoverished displaced people, and Russia as the “imperial manipulator” calling the shots behind it all (Toal, 2017, p. 103). In this “emplotment” of geopolitical roles, the United States was duly cast as the liberator of oppressed people, which was how it understood itself in the world (Krebs, 2015, p. 11). Georgian officials artfully appropriated the framing to justify the need for U.S. support and protection in the coming years, while stressing the immediacy of the Russian threat. “Russia is the guy in the neighborhood who’s not so buff, not so good looking, but has a weapon,” described one interviewee.³⁶ On the other hand, the United States “is bigger, stronger, buffer, and better looking” (Ibid.). Another example of the small country’s perceived vulnerability and helplessness was that many Westerners thought Georgia was simply “crying wolf” about Russia

³⁶ Georgia interview A, academic, Tbilisi, 24 August 2017.

before 2008.³⁷ Thus, it was implied that Georgia's alarmism had been justified by Russia's invasion. The vivid personifications sparked heroic self-images of the United States rescuing a weaker family member from a predatory neighborhood bully.

The notion that Georgia's dream of becoming a "stable, democratic, independent, and powerful state" was always being held back by its territorial fragmentation was a central theme of its post-Cold War transition (Saakashvili, 2004). Abkhazia and South Ossetia were constructed as mere geopolitical pawns exploited by Russia in a "civilizational struggle" against Georgia and "the West" instead of nuanced secessionist regions with their own national identities.³⁸ This was a dramatic, purposeful upscaling of a local conflict into a broader crisis, which was meant to rally the support of powerful Western states. "If people see that Russia can occupy part of a country whose people are willing to join NATO, then this undermines NATO greatly," asserted a Georgian diplomat.³⁹ Such statements sought to appeal to powerful emotions such as honor and credibility to persuade the allies into committing themselves to incorporating the two countries as members to defend democracy and, therefore, protect NATO's self-ascribed identity and purpose.

Yushchenko depicted Ukraine's quest for democracy and independence as being under attack from numerous directions. First, if the recent democratic accomplishments were not safeguarded, there was the threat of reverting to the old ways. The adversaries here were the legacies of the past: principally communism, as well as the associated ills of tyranny, corruption, and incompetence. "We have awakened dignity, nobility, and mercy.... This is the victory of

³⁷ Georgia interview C, former diplomat, Tbilisi, 30 August 2017.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Interview FF, Georgian diplomat, Washington, DC, 3 September 2021.

freedom over tyranny, law over lawlessness, the future over the past,” declared the president. Despite claiming victory for freedom and democracy, the military and administrative bureaucracy were seen as still showing a “post-Soviet crust” by 2018, as in being significantly less “pro-Western” than their Georgian counterparts, according to a British advisor to the Ministry of Defense.⁴⁰ Indeed, the institutions of state authority generally resisted reforming, according to a Ukrainian Vice Prime Minister’s staff member.⁴¹ Nonetheless, the vision of a bright, optimistic future, enabled by “democracy,” was cast in opposition to a dark past filled with problems. “We will destroy the system of corruption in the country, bring the economy out of the shadows...The budget will no longer be a feeder for anyone” (Yushchenko, 2005). It was assumed that an outside force had imposed these problems on Ukraine, which overlooked its own responsibility in the Soviet era.

Second, Ukraine’s autonomy and independence were at risk to renewed manipulation by external powers. Here, the country understood itself principally as a “rampart nation,” and thus an important geostrategic actor on the global and regional stage. Incidentally, the latter was an identity that defined the way the country was represented in NATO’s discourse. Any civilizational characteristics were rendered secondary. “We greet all our neighbors in the East and in the West with kindness and respect,” however, “Ukraine will neither be a buffer nor a field for anyone’s competition,” Yushchenko (2005) declared. The country was presented as a so-called in-between place, who nonetheless objected to being used a stage where the great powers acted out a geopolitical contest. However, according to a British advisor to the Ukrainian

⁴⁰ Interview V, British defense advisor in Ukraine, by telephone, 14 July 2020.

⁴¹ Interview D, Ukrainian government official, by email, 1 June 2020.

Defense Ministry, NATO did in fact perceive Ukraine as a buffer “on its eastern flank against Russia,” imagery which implied its official status as an “outsider.”⁴²

Lastly, a concern with the country’s ethnoterritorial characteristics emerged as an issue that could be exploited to undermine national unity and territorial integrity. Although it was not stated in the speech, it was conceivable that Yushchenko was concerned that Russia could exert its traditional influence in Crimea and the southeast to inflame the grievances of national minorities. This was especially true given the earlier comment about Ukraine being seen as a “buffer state” between east and west. He asserted:

We, citizens of Ukraine, have become a single Ukrainian nation. We cannot be divided by the languages we speak, the beliefs we profess, or the political views we choose. We have one Ukrainian destiny. We have one Ukrainian pride.

However, such diversity was also seen as a strength. “Only in a democratic Ukraine, a bright palette of languages, cultures and views, will become the wealth of this country.” Thus, it was understood that the unifying power of “democracy” might protect the country from dangers and aid in realizing its untapped potential. “Only in unity and only in democracy will we solve our national tasks.” An uneasiness about the potential for state fragmentation might have explained the emphasis on national political symbols and founding myths. Thus, the Ukrainian flag “unites all of us who live in the East, in the West, in the North and in the South.” Equally, the claim that Ukraine was where “the code of laws ‘Russian truth’ was drawn up a thousand years ago” was meant to justify the choice to build a democratic future and leave behind the communist past (Yushchenko, 2005).

⁴² Interview O, British defense advisor in Ukraine, by telephone, 1 July 2020.

Both Ukraine and Georgia depicted their “return” to democracy as insecure and precarious. They sought to impose moral pressure on the reluctant NATO allies and create a sense of urgency for their membership ambitions by highlighting the threat to core Western norms and values.

4.4 Loyal Wingmen

In a final rhetorical step, the two countries were presented as loyal wingmen of the United States and NATO, working together to advance democracy and stability throughout Europe and beyond.

Georgia, Ukraine, and those who supported them within NATO appealed to the alliance’s identity, but did so in a self-serving, manipulative manner. Their “entitlement” to join NATO followed logically from their European, liberal identity, their internalization of democratic values, and their contributions to Euro-Atlantic security, on one hand, and NATO’s identity as the security community of Western liberal democracies and its historical mission of protecting and spreading democracy, on the other. By refusing to commit itself to further expansion, NATO would betray its own identity, break its promises, and act inconsistently (Schimmelfennig, 2003).

Reintroducing the language of familial bonds as well as the imagery of an epic journey, Saakashvili (2004) declared that it was time for his country to:

take its own place in [the] European family...our direction is toward European integration. It is time for Europe finally to see and appreciate Georgia and undertake steps toward us.

In a similar way, Yushchenko (2005) proclaimed that:

Every step towards Europe means new opportunities for millions of Ukrainians! Until recently, joining the European Union seemed like a distant prospect, but the free European nations have repeatedly sped up time.

The Ukrainian president's explicit appeal to the EU rather than NATO can be seen as a public relations move recognizing that most Ukrainians favored closer ties with the socio-economic bloc. For his part, Saakashvili (2004) spoke directly to NATO's leader:

We are grateful and appreciate the help, rendered by the United States for years, when Georgia faced the most acute hardship; when we were in the most desperate need for a friend, the United States backed us. This will never fade from our memories and Georgian people will pass this sense of gratitude to the next generations, like the Europeans, assisted by the Americans during World War II, did after the war.

This passage revealed a typical rhetorical strategy through which both Ukraine and Georgia appealed to longstanding principles in the conceptualization of U.S. foreign policy, namely an anti-imperialist commitment to the self-determination of small states and a desire to protect democracy and liberal values (Toal, 2017). Saakashvili expressed gratitude for U.S. support as his country suffered from numerous "hardships," ostensibly poverty, corruption, and "the impotency of government." It was understood that these problems lingered like a bad hangover long after the legacies of dependence on Russian and Soviet "imperialism" had been broken. They were to blame for impairing Ukraine and Georgia's progress, and not any policy choice by the national governments. Saakashvili also drew a direct connection between his country's difficulties and the death and devastation in Europe wrought by Hitler and Nazism. A purposeful conflation was at work here in linking two distinct historic events with different geopolitical contexts, seemingly united by the imagery of Americans coming to the rescue. The framing cleverly linked the "manifest destiny" of Georgia to that of "the Europeans," who had already

reestablished their “rightful” place in the Euro-Atlantic liberal community as shown by NATO membership. This depiction incidentally rendered Georgia “non-European,” which was unintentional.

Moreover, the references to the Second World War were a symptom of a greater effort to dramatically upscale the local conflicts by introducing a crisis storyline to the plot. According to the former special advisor to the Georgian Minister of Defense, if the West “did nothing” while Russia violated Ukraine and Georgia’s territorial integrity, then it “undermines the entire system that the West developed after World War Two”.⁴³ Another Georgian interviewee surmised the post-war Western-led international order would plunge into chaos if NATO chose not to protect embattled countries like Ukraine and Georgia who were adhering to democratic values under harsh conditions.⁴⁴ Russia, as the successor state to the Soviet Union, “voluntarily subscribed to the rules-based security order,” claimed a German officer at NATO.⁴⁵ This included agreements such as the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 1990 Charter of Paris, which held that states had the right to seek treaties of alliance. Russia’s aggressive actions apparently had betrayed its earlier commitments and “seriously undermined Euro-Atlantic security.”⁴⁶

Taken together, these arguments had many intentions. First, they appealed to inter-democratic solidarity and the democratic conscience of the NATO members. Ukraine and Georgia, so went the narrative, were entitled to join NATO because they had embraced democratic values and multilateralist norms and since NATO was a community of likeminded states intent on promoting and protecting democracy.

⁴³ Georgia Interview B, senior former government official, Tbilisi, 29 August 2017.

⁴⁴ Georgia interview A, academic, Tbilisi, 24 August 2017.

⁴⁵ Interview T, German NATO International Staff Officer, by telephone, 10 July 2020.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Second, they sought to create moral pressure by invoking the West's historical failures. Alludes to the Second World War were implicit references to Yalta to remind the Western powers that they abandoned their allies after the war and tolerated their Soviet domination and communist transformation (Schimmelfennig, 2003).

Finally, they raised historical precedent as a way of compelling NATO to act consistently. Unlike some current allies, Ukraine and Georgia had demonstrated their worth by carrying out the required reforms and providing security contributions, so went the argument.⁴⁷ Many interviewees cited Albania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and North Macedonia as examples of second-rate candidates who nonetheless made the cut in earlier expansions.⁴⁸ In popular imagination, these were Balkan territories, making them a lesser status and less "European." NATO would violate the democratic principles of fairness and justice by refusing to accept Ukraine and Georgia, as well as practice harmful "double standards," cited a U.S. defense official.⁴⁹

Ukraine and Georgia did not limit themselves to identity- and norms-based arguments in making their sales pitch to NATO. They also referred to the material and strategic benefits of their membership.

Both countries have worked to show their loyalty by contributing to NATO's missions and expeditionary operations over many years. According to NATO, Ukraine has been the only partner to support all NATO-led "out of area" operations. This included allowing overflight

⁴⁷ Interview Y, U.S. defense official at Special Operations Command Europe, by telephone, 5 March 2021.

⁴⁸ Interview AA, U.S. military attaché, Washington, DC, 29 April 2021; Interview F, senior U.S. military officer at U.S. European Command, by telephone, 12 June 2020; Interview FF, Georgian diplomat, Washington, DC, 3 September 2021; Interview BB, Ukrainian military attaché, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021.

⁴⁹ Interview DD, U.S. defense official at NATO headquarters, by telephone, 14 May 2021.

clearance, the transit of supplies, and contributing medical personnel and instructors to the ISAF in Afghanistan. Ukraine also deployed officers to the NATO Training Mission in Iraq from 2005 to 2011 and participated in maritime missions in the Mediterranean and Black Seas and off the Horn of Africa (NATO, 2023). Ukraine was the first partner country to contribute to the NATO Response Force, a quick-reaction special operations force (Yost, 2014, p. 228).

For its part, Georgia has contributed in a remarkable way considering the limited capabilities of its military. It deployed its best army brigade to central Iraq during the so-called U.S. troop surge in 2007-2008. After Russia's invasion, the U.S. Air Force redeployed the entire unit back to Georgia to help defend the country. Georgia was also the largest non-NATO troop contributing partner to the Afghanistan war between 2010 and 2014 (NATO, 2013).

In U.S. military popular culture, U.S. marines and Georgian soldiers had developed a so-called blood brotherhood through shared sacrifices fighting insurgents in Helmand province. "Georgia is putting its life at risk" by consistently deploying troops to support the alliance, which was offered as concrete proof that it was "loyal to the NATO cause...for many years," argued a NATO International Staff officer in Georgia.⁵⁰ Ukraine and Georgia's support to NATO missions was understood to ingratiate themselves to the allies.

The realities of the contemporary battlefield required NATO allies and partners to adopt counterinsurgency warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan. This meant making their forces lighter, faster, and more maneuverable against unconventional forces and terrorist attacks. Ukraine and Georgia recognized the demand signal and readily accepted Western financial and material assistance to adapt their militaries to address such threats. Crisis response operations supplanted

⁵⁰ Interview M, Italian NATO international staff officer in Georgia, by telephone, 30 June 2020.

the previous focus on territorial defense, encouraged by U.S. and NATO officials, who offered security assurances. “We were told for many years [that] someone will come to protect us,” lamented a Ukrainian diplomat.⁵¹ Yet, the military reforms had unintended consequences. They left both Ukraine and Georgia’s forces ill-equipped and underprepared to repel superior Russian forces, lacking key capabilities such as armor and air defense.

Ukraine, Georgia, and their supporters within NATO also presented the two countries’ geostrategic locations as justification for their incorporation into the alliance. They were envisioned as emergent transit spaces between Europe and Asia, reputations which were inevitably aided by their roles as logistics thoroughfares for NATO forces in Afghanistan (e.g. Coffey & Mrachek, 2018). The emphasis on geography intended to bolster Ukraine and Georgia’s claim to membership in an alliance in which some reluctant members may have valued the so-called strategic utility of a new ally. It also mimicked the earlier arguments of countries like Romania, who referred to its geographical position and territorial size to promote itself (Schimmelfennig, 2003). Ironically, opponents of Ukraine’s membership cited the same factors as justification for not admitting it into NATO (Sweeney, 2020). Nonetheless, the focus on such geostrategic benefits suggested that Ukraine and Georgia lacked confidence in their democratic credentials and were concerned that they would not be invited to join NATO as a result.

4.5 Conclusion

Ukraine, Georgia, and their advocates within NATO have used rhetorical action, the strategic employment of arguments based on the ideas shared within the Euro-Atlantic community environment, to convince NATO to succumb to their pro-expansion claims and act

⁵¹ Interview BB, Ukrainian military attaché, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021.

accordingly. The allies have acquiesced to these arguments because they feared that walking away from the Bucharest decision would damage their reputations as reliable community members and, more importantly, cast doubt over their own mutual defense commitments. Indeed, NATO's credibility "is the railway on which everything is riding," declared a U.S. advisor to the Georgian defense ministry.⁵²

The two countries have followed the same argumentative strategy as the other post-communist states who have aspired to join NATO. There were three elements to the sales pitch. First, the countries were fundamental parts of the West and Europe, communities to which they had historically belonged and from which they had been forcibly separated from during the Soviet era. Second, they had successfully made democratic transitions, but their progress was under threat by an illiberal force—Russia—who was itself fearful of the increased western influence in its neighborhood. Finally, they had internalized NATO's values and norms and contributed to its military operations. NATO's numerous expeditionary missions, from the Balkans to Afghanistan, provided ample opportunities to prove their loyalty. By appealing to NATO's self-ascribed identity and the historic precedent of an open-door policy toward welcoming new members, the two countries have compelled the allies to honor identity- and value-based commitments to protect their reputations.

What is unique to these cases is that while the arguments in the earlier rounds of NATO expansion sought to overcome the initial opposition to expansion, the rhetorical action in the Ukraine and Georgia cases has succeeded in helping maintain NATO's rhetorical commitment to the Bucharest decision over the space of 15 years. This is despite both countries' territorial

⁵² Interview HH, U.S. defense official in Georgia, by videoconference, 15 November 2021.

divisions and active conflicts, making their membership bids more unlikely, which may attest to the power of their arguments. The fact that Ukrainian President Zelensky routinely employs the sales pitch in his ongoing requests for Western financial and material support speaks volumes about persuasiveness of the rhetoric.

Chapter 5 - Georgia in 2007-2008: From eager partner to future Member

5.1 Introduction

From the beginning of 2007 to the August 2008 Russia-Georgia War, NATO constructed and projected a strategic narrative of Georgia as an eager aspirant, willing to carry out an ambitious and far-reaching reform agenda to ready itself for possible membership in the alliance. NATO sought to encourage Georgia to continue a westernizing pathway and signaled to other candidates that its door remained open to likeminded states, regardless of their geography. In a parallel effort, the United States forged its own bilateral partnership with Georgia, which both led and reinforced NATO's engagement. Together, this combined effort culminated in NATO's April 2008 decision that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of the alliance. The decision accelerated the downward spiral of tensions with Russia, leading to the outbreak of war in the summer.

The analysis of the enlargement discourse about Georgia prior to the August 2008 war yields several key findings. First, Georgia's apparent enthusiasm for internalizing NATO's norms and values, as shown by willingness to take on an aggressive reform agenda, on the one hand, and concern for its territorial integrity and autonomy on the other, defined how the country was portrayed in NATO's official documents. Second, the Georgia case brought into play a different rationale of security than the favored enlargement narrative of a cultural and civilizational homecoming to the West as signified by joining NATO. Georgia's identity was instead constructed according to its territorial condition, namely the reality of its territorial fragmentation. Finally, NATO's statements further asserted and institutionalized the alliance's authoritative role as "teacher" from which judgements on the identity of Georgia were made.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. The chapter begins with an historical and geopolitical context of NATO-Georgia relations, focusing on its origins and Georgia's motivation for pursuing NATO membership. The next part examines NATO's construction of Georgia in 2007-2008. The chapter ends with a critical review of the April 2008 Bucharest Declaration, which fundamentally changed the NATO-Georgia relationship by committing the alliance to Georgia's future membership.

5.2 Origins

After the Soviet collapse, Georgia was born as an independent state without full control over its internationally recognized territory. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia emerged as unrecognized statelets, gaining de facto independence in the early 1990s as the result of successful civil wars against the central government. The wars were characterized by ethnic cleansing, population displacement, and destruction of infrastructure. Russia brokered the ceasefire agreements to the conflicts, which established an enduring presence of Russian peacekeepers in both regions. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have functioned as de facto states since, relying on crucial financial and military support from Russia to ensure their survival. The territories have now been outside of Tbilisi's control for nearly three decades.

Under President Eduard Shevardnadze, post-Soviet Georgia's foreign policy began a Western geopolitical orientation. Georgia became a member of the NACC in 1992 and then joined the PfP program in 1994 (Yost, 2014). In 1999, the country became a member of the Council of Europe while it left the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). After the outbreak of the second Chechen War in 1999, Shevardnadze refused to give Russian forces access to military bases on Georgian territory to launch attacks on Chechen separatists in

the Pankisi Gorge (Toal, 2017). In October 1999, Shevardnadze claimed that Georgia intended to “knock very hard on the door” of NATO for admission by 2005 (Peuch, 2002).

Georgia’s growing ties with NATO mirrored its closer defense cooperation with the United States. Both countries concluded a Defense Cooperation Agreement in November 2002 to expand military-to-military activities. The United States responded to Shevardnadze’s request for help to assert control over Pankisi by establishing the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) from February 2002 to March 2004, which deployed U.S. soldiers to Georgia for the first time. That program was superseded by the Georgia Sustainment and Stability Operations Program (GSSOP), which trained Georgian units preparing for deployment to the U.S.-led war in Iraq until ending in 2007.

Securing NATO membership has been a main and consistent focus for successive Georgian governments for nearly two decades. The latest National Security Strategy of Georgia asserted that joining NATO would “create solid guarantees for the nation’s security and stability and will play an important role in strengthening stability in the entire region” (MFA, 2011). Shevardnadze formally declared the country’s aspiration for membership at the NATO Prague summit in November 2002: “NATO membership means security for Georgia. It means that we will have final security guarantees” (Peuch, 2002). Meanwhile, NATO announced the beginning of accession talks with the seven candidates that would join in 2004, but not including Georgia. Shevardnadze also expressed interest in participating in an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), which aimed to bring Georgian military capabilities to NATO standards. Under Shevardnadze, Georgia became an eager contributor to international peacekeeping efforts, having participated in the NATO-led Kosovo Force in 1999-2008 (Hill, 2018).

Georgian politics was transformed by the Rose Revolution of November 2003, which ousted Shevardnadze and brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power. As president, Saakashvili pursued two main national security goals: to recover the territories not under central government control and seek membership for Georgia in NATO and the EU (Toal, 2017). Saakashvili did not believe he could survive as president if he failed to defend the Georgian citizens in the areas the government still controlled within the breakaway regions or if he lost Abkhazia and South Ossetia permanently (Asmus, 2010). His government took a series of bold actions against the de facto states to regain control as part of a broader effort of projecting Georgian sovereignty. In May 2004 Saakashvili launched an “anti-smuggling” campaign against contraband commerce in South Ossetia. In 2006 Saakashvili began implementing a policy of establishing parallel governments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These moves led to escalated levels of interethnic violence, increased polarization, and punitive measures by Russia. That same year, Russia imposed an embargo on crucial Georgian exports, including wine, and blocked transport and postal links (Asmus, 2010). Ethnic Georgians living in Russia became subjected to harassment and deportation. An escalation of violence in South Ossetia in summer 2007 involved Russian aircraft violating Georgian airspace (Illarionov, 2009). Georgian-Russian relations became increasingly tense in the spring of 2008, when Russia, following Kosovo’s contested independence and NATO’s Bucharest summit, took steps to increase its political and military control over the de facto states. Russia ended its unilateral sanction agreement against Abkhazia in March 2008, which dated back to 1996 (Asmus, 2010). In April 2008, President Putin authorized for the first time formal diplomatic relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In Saakashvili’s quest for possible NATO membership, he pursued a reform agenda with great vigor. This included strengthening presidential power, privatizing state-run enterprises,

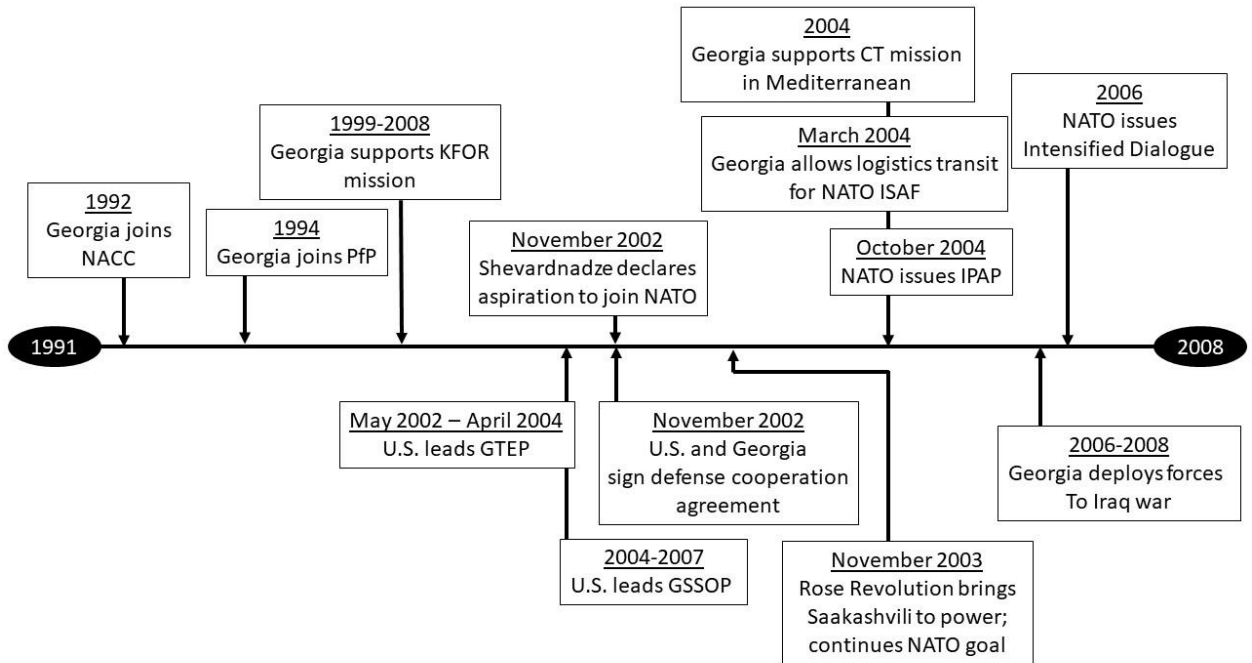
curtailing corruption, increasing tax revenue, and adopting NATO's doctrine and standards. In this effort, Georgia received substantial aid from Western countries, especially the United States. By 2001, Georgia had already become the third largest recipient of U.S. aid per capita. Saakashvili's government was central to the Bush Administration's freedom agenda and Georgia was generally seen by Western audiences as an example of a democratizing success story which could be a model for other countries in the region (Toal, 2017). However, while Saakashvili espoused freedom and democracy on the international stage his government became increasingly authoritarian at home. This culminated with the violent suppression of anti-government demonstrations in November 2007.

The U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq created opportunities for Georgia to build goodwill with NATO's most powerful member and the main driver of alliance expansion. Georgia supported the U.S. Global War on Terror by deploying troops to both wars. Under Saakashvili, Georgia became proportionately one of the largest troop contributors, at one point deploying about 2,000 troops to Iraq and later more than 1,500 to Afghanistan (Hill, 2018). Georgia even committed troops to Afghanistan without "national caveats" restricting their exposure to combat, unlike some founding NATO members such as Belgium and Italy (Saideman & Auerswald, 2012). In March 2004, Georgia opened its airspace, road, and rail infrastructure to NATO to transport supplies for the sustainment of NATO forces in Afghanistan. That same year Georgia began providing intelligence support to NATO counterterrorism operations in the Mediterranean Sea (NATO, 2021). While it was never made explicit whether Georgian state leaders expected a quid pro quo for these efforts, it earned Georgia more military assistance, U.S. support for its NATO membership, an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO in October 2004 (the first partner country to have one), an Intensified

Dialogue on potential NATO membership in September 2006, and helped to construct an image of Georgia as a “proven and dependable” ally of the United States (Coffey & Mrachek, 2018, p. 2).

Georgia’s steady geopolitical reorientation toward the West and especially the United States mirrored a deterioration of relations with Russia from 2002 to 2008. The source of the discord was Saakashvili’s ambition to establish full control over Georgia’s internationally recognized territory and to join NATO. Although Georgia became imagined in Western capitals as a country on the “right path” of reform and westernization, Saakashvili’s efforts to transform Georgian society were always undermined by the central government’s lack of control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. That these regions had unresolved legacies of violence and displacement and tended to be bastions for corruption, organized crime, and smuggling made it difficult to introduce market reforms and better governance to strengthen Georgia’s case for NATO membership. On all sides, the period prior to the August 2008 war involved aggressive actions leading to escalating competition, polarized populations, and simmering levels of violence that eventually boiled over in late summer. Figure 1 depicts a timeline of the key events in Georgia’s engagement with NATO from the time of its independence to the beginning of 2008.

Figure 1. NATO’s engagement with Georgia, 1991-2008.



5.3 Defining Georgia in NATO’s discourse before the August 2008 War

Georgia’s apparent willingness to take on political and military reforms to ready itself for possible NATO membership on the one hand, and concern for its territorial integrity and sovereignty on the other, defined how the country was presented in NATO’s discourse prior to the August 2008 War. In 2007-2008, the NAC constructed a strategic narrative of Georgia as an eager partner on a positive trajectory toward the West proper, eventually leading it to “full membership” in the alliance. This narrative manifested in a dual-pronged rhetorical strategy whose defining theme was cautious optimism. In nearly all statements, NATO praised the reform achievements that Georgia had already made and conveyed hope for those yet to come. This

optimism was tempered by hedging language to express uncertainty about Georgia's future based on its fraught relations with Russia and the irrefutable reality of its territorial fragmentation.

In an initial gesture, the alliance affirmed its support for Georgia "as it pursues its Euro-Atlantic aspirations" for membership (NATO, 2007a). While the allies "welcome the progress achieved," (NATO, 2007b) through the Intensified Dialogue framework, they expected Georgia to "implement fully its wide-ranging reform plans" (NATO, 2007a). NATO "looks forward" (NATO, 2008) to further reforms and encouraged Georgia "to continue to make progress in accordance with NATO's standards and values" (NATO, 2007a). NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer was an early advocate, declaring at the 2007 Munich security conference that he wanted to see the allies "honor the ambitions" of both Georgia and Ukraine in the near future (de Hoop Scheffer, 2007).

The language of the alliance's public statements further institutionalized the hierarchical relationship between NATO as teacher and Georgia as learner in two ways, which reaffirmed the power dynamic between NATO and the CEE candidates in the late 1990s and early 2000s. First, NATO asserted its self-defined role as a security provider by imparting its values on non-members. NATO's role was to spread "peace and stability through its widening network of security partnerships with nations..." (NATO, 2007a). The alliance would monitor the progress made by partner countries "under close and intensive scrutiny" and only then extend membership invitations to those which met "NATO's performance-based standards, share our values, and are able to contribute to Euro-Atlantic security..." (NATO, 2007a). Candidates must have exhibited "a demonstrated commitment" to learning and internalizing NATO's values. Only then would NATO deem them "able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership..." (NATO, 2008, §2).

Second, the structure of NATO's partnerships was such that aspirants participated in individualized partnership arrangements with the alliance as a unitary actor. This "hub and spokes" framework oriented each partner country individually toward NATO through various institutional mechanisms ranging in degrees of formality—such as the semi-formal Intensified Dialogue—while deemphasizing any cooperation and development of a collective voice among the aspirants (Behnke, 2013, p. 102). Their identity was thus individualized into competitors for NATO's attention and approval. NATO thereby reasserted and institutionalized its central authoritative role in the relations with its partners.

The status of "partner" entailed that Georgia was neither a member of, nor an outsider to, the discursive space of "the West." From NATO's standpoint, this suggested a level of intimacy with Georgia short of a familial relationship. The best way to describe Georgia's status in 2007-08 was as an outsider on the inside, as a non-Western actor within a space exclusively defined by NATO as representative of Western civilization.

In the second prong of the rhetorical strategy, NATO tempered any expectation that Georgia would receive a swift conferral of membership. Georgia's own concern for its independence and territorial integrity defined how the state was identified in NATO's discourse. Virtually all statements affirmed NATO's uneasiness about Georgia's contemporary geopolitical condition. "We urge Georgia to maintain its commitment to the peaceful resolution of outstanding conflicts on its territory" (NATO, 2007a). NATO unequivocally sided with the Georgian government in its disputes with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, proclaiming that "our nations support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and its commitment to the peaceful resolution of the conflicts on its territory..." (NATO, 2007b). This speech act did more than show solidarity with a partner country. It also implicitly supported President Saakashvili's

maximalist claims over the de facto independent states within Georgian internationally recognized territory. By uncritically supporting Georgia's so-called territorial integrity NATO was backing a cause inevitably involved with Georgian nationalism and ethnocentric tendencies (Ó Tuathail, 2008). In so doing, NATO aligned itself with a radical policy ambition: the full territorial integrity of Georgia under the central government's authority. This overlooked the fact that "from Day One" of its post-Soviet independence, Georgia had never been in full control of its internationally recognized territory (Trenin, 2011, p. 49).

The emphasis on Georgia's geography, specifically the importance of supporting its "territorial integrity" and settling the "conflicts on its territory," was fundamentally different from NATO's discourse of the CEE states in the earlier expansions. Previously, NATO had defined the CEE states according to their civilizational attributes. Their incorporation into NATO was framed as an institutional "homecoming" to their rightful place among the family of Western democracies (Behnke, 2013). By contrast, Georgia's identity was constructed according to its overriding geographical condition of state territorial fragmentation. While democratization was indeed a central theme in NATO's narrative of Georgia, in terms of the comparative frequency in publicly available documents, it usually appeared in conjunction with an expression of worry and doubt for the country's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence. As for the positioning in text, the geographical issues almost always were subordinated to the expressions of support for further political and military reforms, which suggested that NATO's main concern was Georgia's internalization of the alliance's own standards and values.

In a final move of cautious optimism, NATO reassured Georgia and yet was ambiguous on the membership issue. "We continue to support Georgia as it pursues its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, without prejudice to any eventual Alliance decision" (NATO, 2007a). Invoking the

legal term “without prejudice” framed Georgia’s push for membership as a claim on which a “court” rendered judgment. Often used in dispute settlements between two parties, a dismissal without prejudice was when a court dismissed a claim but left the plaintiff free to bring a future suit based on the same grounds as the dismissed claim. This allowed the option to refile and was often a court’s response to technical problems with the claim that the plaintiff could correct when filing again (Cornell, 2020). NATO therefore cast itself as a judge dismissing Georgia’s claim of warranting membership in NATO, based on deficiencies that could be corrected with enough “learning” presumably. Indeed, “without prejudice” meant the door of membership remained open for Georgia in the future if it further internalized NATO’s values and norms through continued reforms. In so doing, NATO further institutionalized its role as the central authority from which judgements on the identity of non-members was distributed and disseminated. A “dismissal without prejudice” ruling told Georgia that it was not yet ready to be part of “the West” in a formal sense, but that it should be encouraged to keep trying.

Secretary-general diplomacy and engagement between NATO and Georgian officials also played a part in cultivating a maturing relationship in 2007-2008. In the spring of 2007 Georgia’s ministers of foreign affairs, defense, and “European and Euro-Atlantic Integration” traveled to NATO headquarters to discuss strengthening bilateral cooperation. That October, de Hoop Scheffer delivered a speech at Tbilisi State University, where he lauded the Georgian government’s willingness to take on an aggressive political and defense reform agenda. However, he also made clear that there was “no timeline” associated with Georgia’s bid for NATO membership (NATO, 2007).

5.4 The Fateful Bucharest Declaration

The Bucharest Summit Declaration was NATO's final public statement about Georgia before the Russian invasion of August 2008. Coupled with Kosovo's contested declaration of independence in February, the two events contributed greatly to the escalatory dynamic leading to the August war. Kosovo gave Russia an opportunity to expose what it saw as a clear instance of a Western "double standard," whereby the United States and its European allies supported Kosovo's independence from Serbia, a traditional Russian ally, but not Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence from Georgia, an aspiring NATO member which had developed close ties with the United States (Ó Tuathail, 2008).

Kosovo's independence ended a period characterized by a lack of success of the EU, OSCE, NATO, and UN mechanisms seeking an agreement between Serbia and the breakaway province (Hill, 2018). Russia adamantly opposed Kosovo's independence, calling it a violation of Serbia's territorial integrity. Russian leaders argued the move might serve as precedent for Chechnya or other potential separatist entities in the Russian Federation, could create a spillover to other territories in the Balkans such as Republika Srpska, and could buttress the claims for recognition of the de facto states within Georgia and elsewhere in the post-Soviet region (Putin, 2006). Faced with the possibility of a Russian veto in the UN Security Council, the United States and the EU removed the question of Kosovo's future status from the UN framework (Hill, 2018). Kosovo declared independence on February 18 and was immediately recognized by the United States and most EU and NATO members. Western leaders argued Kosovo represented a unique case, thus recognition was warranted since it had built effective democratic structures (Caspersen & Stansfield, 2011). In response, the Russian State Duma passed a motion urging the Kremlin to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. On February 22, 2008, Putin

reportedly told Saakashvili that Russia would be forced to answer the West on Kosovo and that Georgia would be part of that response.⁵³ The occasion of the war enabled Putin to follow through on his promise to respond to the example of Kosovo.

The Kosovo drama set the stage for NATO's April 2008 Bucharest Summit. The most important question for Russia was whether NATO expansion would continue and if so, which aspirants would be invited to join. In the summit's press release, the NAC announced it had invited Albania and Croatia to "begin accession talks to join our Alliance," which represented an "historic achievement, earned through years of hard work and a demonstrated commitment to...NATO's shared values" (NATO, 2008, § 2). The language here rendered the aspirants' learning processes complete in their journey of achieving NATO membership. The move however received "little fanfare," as both states had been participating in a MAP for some time (Hill, 2018, p. 262). The real controversy was whether the allies would be able to reach an agreement on a MAP for Georgia and Ukraine. Even before the summit, it was well-known to the United States there was no alliance consensus on the issue, as the "battle lines" already had been drawn between the pro- and anti-MAP camps.⁵⁴ The Bush administration nonetheless decided to press forward, as the President believed granting MAPs was central to advancing his freedom agenda (Stent, 2014).

As the leader of the alliance, that the United States entered a NATO summit without having secured unanimous agreement on a high-stakes issue such as the decision to offer membership was remarkable. Summits were normally well-orchestrated affairs whereby the

⁵³ According to the Georgian record, Putin explained to Saakashvili: "You know we have to answer the West on Kosovo. And we are very sorry but you are going to be part of that response. Your geography is what it is." Toal, 2017, p. 155.

⁵⁴ Interview GG, former U.S. military attaché in Georgia, by telephone, 15 September 2021.

heads of state and government of the allies gathered in a show of solidarity to publicly announce the decisions made behind closed doors and several months ahead of time. Typically, the language of a summit communique was drafted by a working group of mid-level NATO international staff officers and submitted to the national capitals for review and approval.⁵⁵ If there were differing national perspectives or disagreement on specific verbiage, then the allies in question met separately to reach a compromise and did not involve the other members. “All of the wording in a communique is carefully constructed and figured out before the high-level meetings take place,” explained a former U.S. military attaché at NATO headquarters.⁵⁶ However, that did not happen in the Bucharest Summit. Instead, the declaration’s final language was drawn up by a small group of the state leaders of Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania, who were able to strike a last-minute agreement with German Chancellor Angela Merkel when President Bush could not (Asmus, 2010, pp. 132-134). The result of this effort was an extraordinary commitment to Georgia and Ukraine: “We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO” (NATO, 2008, § 23). There was no MAP. Still, NATO had never stated explicitly that a country would join the alliance.

Like the 1990s debates over expansion, the negotiations at Bucharest involved shaming episodes whereby Georgia and Ukraine’s advocates applied pressure on the reluctant allies. Polish President Lech Kaczyński told Chancellor Merkel, “We cannot let Russia have a veto. This is not fair to Georgia and Ukraine. This is not how NATO works” (Asmus, 2010, p. 133). This invoked the specter of conceding a “Russian veto” over enlargement as well as NATO’s

⁵⁵ Interview R, Dutch NATO International Staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

⁵⁶ Interview AA, U.S. military attaché, Washington, DC, 29 April 2021.

past value-based commitments to aspirants and its self-styled community identity as an “inclusive organization.”

The Bucharest decision was riven by two deep tensions, which opened the door for Russia’s intervention. The first was that it weakened NATO’s ability to use the carrot of membership to stimulate the necessary reforms in accordance with the 1995 *Study on NATO Enlargement*. Since NATO already said they would become members, what incentive did the Georgian and Ukrainian governments have to continue striving to meet the requirements of a MAP? There was thus a feeling that NATO “gave away the goods” by promising membership without making the two countries carry out the reforms first. “The NATO International Staff was not happy about that.”⁵⁷ Yet, there was no rule that obtaining a MAP was required for membership, explained a U.S. defense advisor in Georgia: “If all 30 allies said today that Georgia would be added to the alliance, then it would be so.”⁵⁸ Despite this, NATO promoted the expectation that a MAP was a prerequisite for membership. The precedent of the 2004 expansion showed that every candidate that joined NATO had a MAP since 1999. For its part, the NAC did unambiguously communicate the weight of the issue in the summit communique, stating that “MAP is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their direct way to membership” (NATO, 2008, §23). As a sign of reassurance, the allies acknowledged that “we support these countries’ applications for MAP”—which is not the same thing as supporting MAP for these countries (Ibid.).

In a rare move, the NAC made specific reference to the December 2008 foreign ministers’ meeting and publicly delegated authority to them to make an “assessment of progress”

⁵⁷ Interview R, Dutch NATO International Staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

⁵⁸ Interview C, U.S. defense advisor in Georgia, by video call, 28 May 2020.

and even “decide on the MAP applications” (Ibid.). The wording here further impressed NATO’s authority over the so-called learners and its role as the chief decider. The delay in any MAP decision was presented as a prudent diplomatic gesture to allow for “a period of intensive engagement with both...to address the questions still outstanding pertaining to their MAP applications” (Ibid.). It was also a face-saving move by the allies, meant to buy themselves time until the end of the year to reach a consensus on MAP. The announcement had the unintended effect of telling Russia how much time it had to do something before MAPs would likely be awarded (Smith, 2010). Postponing the decision “gave an opening to Russia to intervene,” claimed a former deputy minister in the Georgian government, who believed that MAP “would have been enough” to deter it from invading Georgia.⁵⁹

The second tension was that the decision signaled NATO’s intent to extend the article five collective defense provision to Georgia, which lacked full control of its internationally recognized territory. Even before the August 2008 war, Georgian government forces controlled only a small sliver of territory in Abkhazia and a patchwork area of less than half of South Ossetia (Asmus, 2010). Tbilisi’s inability to exert sovereignty over the two de facto states was central to the question of its possible NATO membership. Opponents claimed Georgia’s territorial fragmentation precluded it from gaining membership, while advocates said there was precedent in NATO for such a move. The Atlantic Council for instance, has proposed using the example of West Germany’s accession in 1955 as “a precedent Georgia can cite when it is otherwise prepared to join” (Courtney, et al, 2018). As the 1995 enlargement study made clear, however, the peaceful resolution of territorial conflicts would be a factor in determining a candidate’s suitability to join the alliance, yet also not a pre-condition of membership (NATO,

⁵⁹ Georgia interview E, senior former government official, Tbilisi, 21 September 2017

1995, §6). If Saakashvili were to establish full control over one or both de facto states it would have eliminated a major obstacle to Georgia's membership. Yet, decisions on new members were ultimately at NATO's discretion, based on unanimous agreement, and taken on a case-by-case basis, as the enlargement study also stated.

Proponents pointed out that NATO had previously incorporated a new member with a territorial dispute. Several Georgian interviewees raised the admission of West Germany despite it not having control over East Germany as a model.⁶⁰ Drawing the same analogy, former NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen suggested Georgia could join with sovereignty over only part of its lands (Chkhikvadze, 2019). But how would NATO extend article five protection given Georgia's territorial divisions? Article five was direct and explicit, committing all allies to respond if an ally was attacked, including using force. Given the situation on the ground, the allies could be faced with an article five scenario upon Georgia's accession, presuming the rule covered all its internationally recognized territory and not only the parts under Tbilisi's control. Not extending article five to Abkhazia and South Ossetia would implicitly acknowledge their permanent separation from the Georgian state. Yet, this was the very solution that some Western observers nonetheless suggested in order to bring Georgia into NATO (Coffey & Mrachek, 2018). But the prospect of incorporating Georgia without the de facto states was "never seriously considered" by the NATO international staff, said an official, despite the wishful thinking.⁶¹

Within the Bucharest Declaration document, the positioning in text of the concern for Georgia's territorial fragmentation showed that the allies meant to minimize the issue. NATO's

⁶⁰ Georgia interview B, former diplomat, Tbilisi, 29 August 2017; Georgia interview C, former diplomat, Tbilisi, 30 August 2017.

⁶¹ Interview R, Dutch NATO International Staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

earlier public statements of Georgia throughout 2007 mentioned the topics of democratization and territorial integrity and sovereignty together in the same paragraph. In the Bucharest text however, the expression of concern for the persistence of conflicts was separated and relegated to the end of the document to not distract from the lofty assertion that Georgia “will become” a NATO member. This subordinated positioning was strategic, as it downplayed the messy reality of Georgia’s internal territorial divisions, which was always going to complicate its swift accession to NATO. So long as there was an unresolved conflict, Georgia “will not join” the alliance, admitted a U.S. defense official at NATO headquarters. “We are talking out of both sides of our mouth” about Georgia’s potential for membership.⁶²

In a final rhetorical move, NATO conflated the numerous ethnoterritorial conflicts within the post-Soviet space to avoid singling out Georgia: “We are concerned with the persistence of regional conflicts in the South Caucasus and the Republic of Moldova” (NATO, 2008, §43). In so doing, the varied conflicts involving Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno Karabakh, and Transnistria, each with their own unique conflict histories and geopolitical contexts, were reduced to a single source of destabilization, impeding NATO’s goal of a “Europe whole and free, united in peace, democracy and common values” (Ibid., §2).

The NAC’s Bucharest decision constituted both consensus and compromise. While the allies did come to an agreement on the language, the specific verbiage was very careful in not extending MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine. The result was a decision in principle to expand NATO to include the two countries. In this respect, the move was like the compromise NATO had reached in 1994, when it had asserted that enlargement was not a question of whether but

⁶² Interview DD, U.S. defense official at NATO, by telephone, 14 May 2021.

when. According to one interviewee, Georgia interpreted the NAC's decision as signaling "huge political support from the West" but not much in the way of material support.⁶³ After the announcement, President Saakashvili proclaimed publicly that "we got a 100-percent guarantee, at least formally, for membership. That's very unusual" (RFE/RL, 2008). But the Bucharest decision was more than unusual, it was also fateful. The impact of the move has brought serious consequences for NATO, Georgia, and Ukraine, as well as other aspirants.

5.5 Conclusion

Securing NATO membership was a top foreign policy goal for successive Georgian governments ever since the country gained its independence after the Soviet collapse. However, that the central government never had full control over its Soviet-era territory complicated Georgia's straightforward accession to NATO. In this context, Georgian officials and their proponents within NATO cultivated an image of Georgia as an essential part of Europe, whose nascent democratization was threatened by Russia and its de facto state proxies. They emphasized Georgia's loyalty to NATO missions and stressed that the alliance's identity and values, as well as the precedent of earlier expansions, compelled NATO to commit to further expansion to include Georgia.

NATO showed a readiness to buy into the pro-Georgia rhetoric. In 2007-08, NATO developed an enlargement narrative of Georgia as an enthusiastic learner on the right path toward achieving its enduring goal of NATO membership. The allies praised Georgia's reforms, which strove to meet alliance standards, and expressed concern for its territorial divisions. NATO supported Tbilisi's tenuous claim over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and minimized the

⁶³ Georgia interview G, university professor, Tbilisi, 25 September 2017.

seriousness of the unresolved conflicts. This was despite the allies themselves stating in the 1995 enlargement study that they were a key factor in determining Georgia's candidacy for membership.

The Bucharest decision came about as the result of successful rhetorical action by a pro-Georgia transnational advocacy network. The fundamental problem NATO created with the decision, however, was committing itself to expansion without affording Georgia the practical means to obtain membership through a MAP. This ambiguous commitment profoundly redefined relations between NATO and Georgia. While it did firmly demonstrate NATO's support for Georgia's geopolitical ambitions, it did not oblige the allies to defend Georgia if it came under attack. The decision exposed Georgia to increased pressure and coercion by Russia.

Chapter 6 - Georgia in the aftermath of the August War: The beginning of a special Relationship

6.1 Introduction

By April 2008, NATO had constructed a narrative of Georgia as a future alliance member. The Bucharest summit decision amounted to an unequivocal commitment to the country—at least in theory. It appeared Georgia’s longstanding goal to geopolitically reorient itself away from Russia and (re)join the West by ascending to one of its elite institutions was finally within reach. Despite the promise of eventual membership, however, Georgia did not receive a security guarantee from the allies, since the protection explicit and implicit in article five extended only to members of the alliance.

President Putin was dead set against Georgia’s NATO membership. By proclaiming as manifest destiny that Georgia would join the alliance, Russia’s declared “red line” was clearly crossed. At his press conference after the summit, Putin reiterated Russia’s well-established position on NATO expansion: “We view the appearance of a powerful military bloc on our borders...as a direct threat to the security of our country. The claim that this process is not directed against Russia will not suffice. National security is not based on promises” (Putin, 2008). The prospect of NATO incorporating Georgia contributed greatly to Russia’s already existing sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future. While there were longstanding, structural conditions which contributed to the August 2008 war, it would have been unlikely without the trigger of NATO’s April 2008 enlargement decision.

The war itself was brief and tragic. It followed a period of long-simmering tensions between Russia and Georgia, which escalated quickly when fighting broke out between Georgian forces and South Ossetian forces after many years of polarization, radicalization, and intermittent violence in the breakaway region. The conflict was initially over South Ossetia but spread to Abkhazia as well. Russia responded with overwhelming force by mounting a large scale invasion of Georgia proper. French President Nicolas Sarkozy brokered a ceasefire agreement that brought an end to the fighting.⁶⁴ On August 26th Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced the Russian Federation was recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, a move that was followed by a handful of other countries. Russian forces finally completed their withdrawal from occupying positions in Georgia on October 8th.

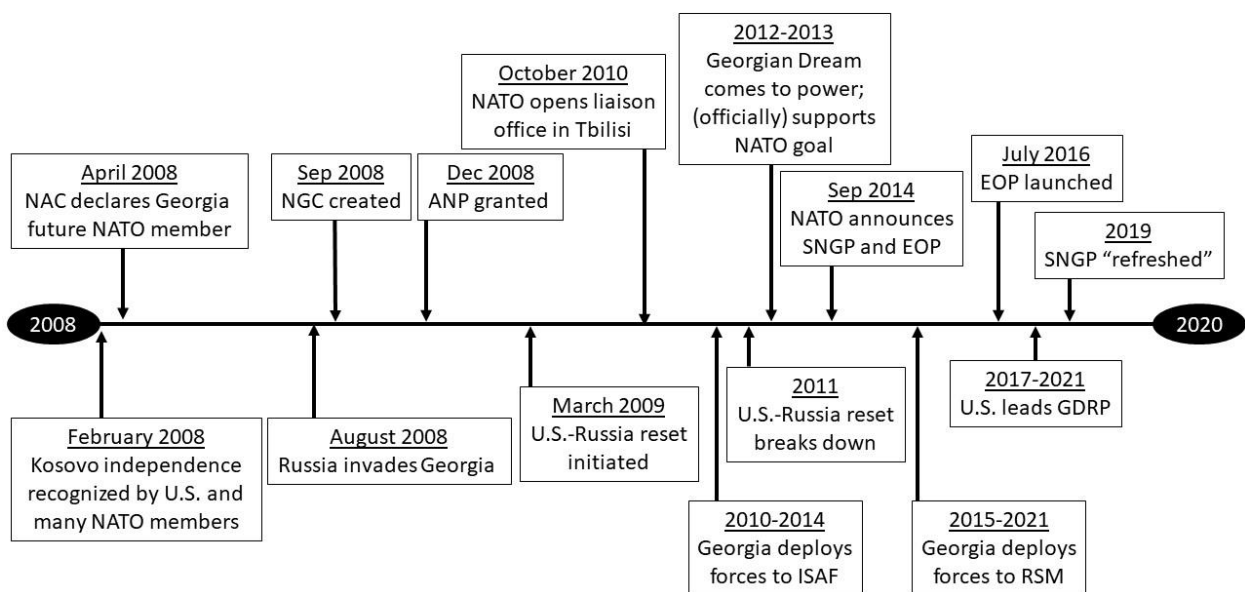
The war resulted in a Russian military victory, which enabled it to consolidate territorial control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus making them more defensible. Russia's actions sent a clear message to other neighboring states which had Western ambitions: that it could lead to their territorial dismemberment. The war prevented Georgia's accession to NATO for the foreseeable future and likely resulted in the permanent loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as part of the Georgian state.

This chapter examines how the August 2008 war played out in the ensuing months after its outbreak until the December 2008 NATO foreign ministers' meeting. In the analysis, three main themes emerged in the early post-war narrative of Georgia. First, the alliance continued defining Georgia according to its territorial fragmentation, as it had done before the war. This manifested in routine and persistent expressions of support for Georgia's "territorial integrity."

⁶⁴ Sarkozy was acting in his capacity as president of the Council of the European Union.

Second, NATO labored to keep up the appearance of a commitment to Georgia’s future membership, but the ambiguity of its language suggested equivocation behind the appearance. Finally, the allies encouraged Georgia to continue striving to reform to NATO’s standards. This became most significantly visible through making symbolic gestures, which contributed to a growing special relationship between NATO and Georgia. Already in the subsequent months after the August war, NATO’s moves began to indicate a robust action strategy in the making. Figure 2 shows the growing NATO-Georgia relationship in the several years after the August 2008 war.

Figure 2. NATO’s engagement with Georgia, 2008-2020.



6.2 The Initial Response: August – December 2008

As compared to the assertiveness of the Bucharest decision, NATO’s rhetorical response to Russia’s invasion of internationally recognized Georgian territory was subdued. NATO’s first

press release after the fighting ended set a muted tone for the future: “We remain concerned by Russia’s actions during this crisis and remind Russia of its responsibility for maintaining security and order in the areas where it exercises control” (NATO, 2008g). Rather than openly condemning Russia, which was expected given NATO’s clear backing of Georgia before the outbreak of war, the allies refrained from assigning blame to either side. NATO’s official position was that the two countries shared responsibility: “The conflict between Georgia and Russia has compromised regional stability and security. We deeply deplore the use of force in the conflict between Georgia and Russia” (Ibid.). This framed the war as explicitly between two states and silenced any of the intra-Georgia or intra-South Ossetia structural conditions which contributed to its outbreak (Toal, 2017).

In a parallel vein, NATO secretary-general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer struck a balance between showing support to Georgia while avoiding directly condemning Russia. In a September 2008 speech delivered in Tbilisi, he reiterated the alliance’s backing of Georgia and yet also said that NATO was not “in the business of punishing Russia” (NATO, 2008).

Although NATO did declare “Russia’s military action” as “disproportionate,” even that statement implied that some level of Russian force was acceptable (NATO, 2008d, 2008f). That the word “invasion” was too divisive for NATO’s official statements indicated there were disagreements between the allies over how to respond to the war and even how to interpret the events taking place, specifically which side was at fault (NATO, 2008d, 2008f, 2008g). Indeed, “there’s a story behind each word” of NATO texts, acknowledged an interviewee, including the words that are left out.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Interview L, former U.S. National Security Council staff officer, by telephone, 29 June 2020.

Taken together, NATO's statements evenly divided the culpability for the war between Georgia and Russia. In that respect, it was not unlike the independent fact-finding report commissioned by the EU, which concluded that the Georgian government initiated open hostilities on August 7th but the Russian government was partly responsible for the conditions that led to the start of the large scale conflict in Georgia (IIFMCG, 2009). After the outbreak of fighting, while NATO did publicly admonish Russia for its "military actions," neither the United States nor any NATO ally provided any meaningful military and logistical assistance to Georgia in its fight against Russia (Hill, 2018). From Georgia's perspective, the allies' response to the war was disappointing, as it felt that its loyalty to NATO warranted more forceful action (Asmus, 2010). Yet, in this case, it was clear that promising eventual membership to a country did not convey some semblance of implicit security assurance.

6.3 Supporting Territorial Integrity

Following the end of the war, Georgia's preexisting concern for its territorial fragmentation continued to define how the country was presented in NATO's discourse. NATO swiftly prioritized the topic in its texts, supplanting the earlier dominant storyline of emphasizing Saakashvili's ambitious reform agenda to bring his country to the alliance's standards. All statements between August and December 2008 affirmed NATO's anxiety over Georgia's so-called territorial integrity. However, in contrast, there was no mention of territorial integrity within the final version of the ceasefire agreement that put an end to the open fighting. In order to reach an agreement, the document was purposely written vaguely, which left many things open to interpretation, such as the future status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Asmus, 2010).

In NATO's first public statement on August 19th, after the ceasefire, the allies declared that a "lasting solution to the conflict...must be based on full respect for the principles of Georgia's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity..." (NATO, 2008g). This was an obvious show of solidarity with Georgia after it had been throttled by the war. It also signaled that NATO still backed—at least implicitly—Saakashvili's lost cause of incorporating Abkhazia and South Ossetia under Georgian central government control. This was despite the conflict resulting in ending any Georgian government presence in the separatist entities and further isolating them from international security conflict resolution mechanisms (Hill, 2018).

The August 27th NUC meeting statement announced that "Ukraine welcomed and fully shared the Allied position on the situation in Georgia," in addition to a generic line about supporting the territorial integrity and independence of unnamed "partner nations" (NATO, 2008c, §2). This was NATO's first statement after Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states and the commission was unsurprisingly able to bring itself to firmly rebuke the move: "The NATO-Ukraine Commission condemned the decision by the Russian Federation to extend recognition to the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia" (NATO, 2008c, §3). Adding the unnecessary clause "regions of Georgia" here was a nod to Saakashvili's territorial claims and meant to delegitimize the de facto states' very limited international recognition. Indeed, some NATO members—as well as Ukraine—had concerns about actual or possible separatism in their own countries. Thus, it was believed that Russia's decision might serve as a precedent allowing separatist entities elsewhere to demand recognition. After a period of only six months, the West's recognition of Kosovo's contested declaration of independence in February seemed to blow back in its face, as Putin had predicted (Sydney Morning Herald, 2008).

Following Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, NATO understandably sought to link that issue with the topic of Georgia's territorial divisions. The communique of the December 2008 foreign ministers' meeting involved a shaming episode whereby NATO invoked the assumed authority of international security mechanisms to call out Russia's perceived recklessness and duplicity: "Russia's recognition...contravenes the OSCE principles on which the security of Europe is based and the United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding Georgia's territorial integrity which Russia endorsed" (NATO, 2008d). This overlooked the fact that the United States and many NATO members previously endorsed similar arrangements supporting Serbia's territorial integrity before they ultimately recognized Kosovo's independence.

The public statement of September 15th reiterated NATO's condemnation of Russia's decision and included verbiage that was identical to the Bucharest text:

We remain concerned with the persistence of regional conflicts in the South Caucasus and the Republic of Moldova. We continue to support the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova (NATO, 2008f).

Although this was pre-approved language, it did seem to equate the war in Georgia with the other unresolved ethnoterritorial conflicts in the post-Soviet space, which was a mistake.

Notwithstanding the seriousness of those conflicts, Georgia's condition in the months after the war was clearly worse, as it dealt with population displacement, the destruction of infrastructure, and the loss of one-fifth of its internationally recognized territory. For its part however, NATO's reuse of text was a standard public messaging practice inherent to many large bureaucracies and done in the interest of time and convenience. "There are a lot of phrases that are used repeatedly in NATO documents because they have been approved" by all the allies, acknowledged a U.S.

military officer at SHAPE.⁶⁶ However, crucially, “in terms of specific verbiage, silence means consent, but not necessarily approval.”⁶⁷ This meant that what was articulated publicly as a consensus position possibly concealed a compromise.

6.4 Reaffirming the Bucharest Decision

In the subsequent months after the war, NATO’s April 2008 decision that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of the alliance at an unspecified point in the future was recoded. NATO invoked the previous decision by employing creative language, which was presented in various forms and tailored to specific audiences. In the earliest public responses, the allies reaffirmed their commitment to “Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations,” but omitted any reference to the past assertion that the country would join NATO (NATO, 2008c, 2008g). It was not until the NATO-Georgia Joint Press Statement on September 15th, more than a month after the end of the war, that NATO publicly brought up the April membership decision (NATO, 2008f). Even then, NATO did not make clear it would maintain a commitment to the decision, only that it had happened in the first place: “Allied Ambassadors recalled the Bucharest Summit Declaration, in which NATO Heads of State and Government...agreed that Georgia will become a member of NATO” (Ibid., §6). This ambiguity characterized NATO’s early response to the August 2008 war and signaled the emergence of a robust action strategy for “the Bucharest decision.”

How NATO publicly responded to its failure to prevent a military attack on one of the countries promised eventual membership could have far-reaching consequences for its own

⁶⁶ Interview W, U.S. military officer at NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 15 July 2020.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

reputation for reliability and credibility with external audiences, namely political elites in Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia. On one hand, if NATO reversed the decision, it could undermine the pro-Western governments in Tbilisi and Kyiv. In addition, other ex-communist states might be discouraged to take on the difficult reforms to NATO's standards if the reward of alliance membership could be revoked in the future. Walking back from Bucharest would prove that Russia did hold veto power over NATO's enlargement decisions. It would also run contrary to the cherished liberal principle that states were free to join the alliance of their choosing. However, it might also indicate a capacity for self-inflection and a willingness to learn from mistakes. Indeed, there was a debate within the strategic community after the August war calling for NATO expansion to come to a halt. Charles Kupchan, for example, argued that expansion should stop after the consolidation of the Balkans. This could help to alleviate Russia's threat perceptions and reduce NATO's obligation to extend security guarantees to countries that were deep into the post-Soviet space and thus difficult to defend (Kuchan, 2017).

On the other hand, maintaining the rhetorical commitment could help NATO follow multiple agendas. First, it would reassure the Georgian and Ukrainian governments to continue striving to meet the requirements of a MAP. Second, and related, it supported NATO's self-assigned role as the defender of democracy as well as the democratic community-building narrative which it projected. Third, openly defying Russia's violent opposition could help to shore up NATO's external legitimacy during a period of internal discord in the alliance. Besides the MAP disagreement, NATO faced increasing setbacks with its major out-of-area operation in Afghanistan, which exposed the widening gap between NATO's aspirations and the European allies' ability to supplement the robust U.S. contribution with similar resources (Rynning, 2012). Lastly, by keeping up the appearance of resolve, the allies signaled to themselves their collective

willingness to set aside differences to preserve political cohesion. In this manner, reaffirming the commitment to the Bucharest decision was not entirely, or even principally, about Georgia and Ukraine. Instead, it was about reinforcing the allies' fundamental commitment to the article five collective defense pledge, which was the bedrock principle of the alliance.

Already in the first statement after the end of the war, NATO's rhetoric became instilled with multivocal meanings. This allowed the allies to maintain flexibility and autonomy in making future moves:

We reaffirmed our commitment to the decisions taken by the Heads of State and Government at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, including those regarding Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and we will continue our intensive engagement with Georgia to address in December the questions pertaining to its Membership Action Plan application...(NATO, 2008g, §7).

This statement exemplified how messages could be interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives at once. While Georgia enthusiasts were comforted by the words "we reaffirmed our commitment to the decisions" made in Bucharest, the opponents of expansion noticed that NATO did not explicitly say what those decisions were—only that they concerned "Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations." However, the Bucharest decision was not about acknowledging geopolitical ambitions. Georgia's desire to obtain NATO membership had been there for all to see since at least 2002 and reiterated many times since. Rather, the specific decision in question had to do with future alliance expansion to include Georgia and Ukraine: "We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO" (NATO, 2008a, §23). In the weeks after the August war, while NATO did say publicly that its commitment to Georgia had not changed, the ambiguity of the initial response left that open to interpretation. Moreover, that this response coincided with the NAC's August 19th announcement to establish a NATO-Georgia

Commission, the counterpart of Ukraine's existing bespoke structure, was puzzling (NATO, 2008g, §4). One would have expected the occasion to befit a firm endorsement of Georgia's future NATO membership, which did not happen.

In the September 15th press release marking the creation of the NATO-Georgia Commission, a special bilateral commission between the two sides, NATO continued the pattern of speaking ambiguously. While the allies specifically referenced "paragraph 23 of the Bucharest Summit communique, in which NATO heads of State and Government...agreed that Georgia will become a member of NATO..." they did not publicly reaffirm a commitment to that agreement (NATO, 2008e, §1). According to NATO, one of the goals of the new commission was to reinforce Georgia's efforts to further implement its political, economic, and defense reforms "pertaining to its Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO" (Ibid., §3).

The September text also introduced yet another temporal dimension to Georgia's status as a perpetual learner in its protracted integration with NATO, as the commission was meant to "supervise the process set in hand at the NATO Bucharest Summit" (Ibid.). Thus, NATO's earlier decision that Georgia will become an alliance member became reinterpreted as marking the beginning of a new journey, and not the end of Georgia's quest to formally (re)join the West by obtaining membership. In many following official statements, the vague phrase "the process set in hand at Bucharest" became code for NATO's April 2008 announcement of Georgia's eventual membership.

NATO's final press release of 2008 was a wide-ranging document which sought to put a positive spin on an otherwise inauspicious year. In the opening paragraphs the allies reaffirmed their "cohesion, solidarity, and commitment...to shared democratic values" and told themselves that collective defense remained their "most important security task," in line with NATO's

charter (NATO, 2008d, §1). NATO proclaimed that the “ongoing enlargement process has been a historic success” by spreading peace and stability in Europe, despite the prospect of Georgia’s membership which prompted Russia’s invasion and the biggest outbreak of fighting on the continent since the Kosovo war (Ibid., §2). The statements were intended to boost NATO’s self-esteem and legitimacy.

Besides the routine assertion about staying committed to the longstanding open-door policy of welcoming new members, expressed prominently within the second paragraph, the topic of expansion did not appear until about halfway through the text—in paragraph 16 of 39. This positioning indicated the allies sought to downplay the issue in deference to other topics, which suggested a desire to save face after the Georgia crisis. NATO lauded its ongoing out-of-area missions in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq, off the Horn of Africa, and in the Mediterranean Sea (Ibid., §4-8). It also highlighted its cooperation with multilateral partners as varied as the UN, EU, OSCE, and the African Union, further cultivating its self-image as the premier global security actor (Ibid., §9-12).

Regarding expansion, NATO reasserted its prerogatives over Russia’s objections, but in this instance, by restating its preference for consolidating the Balkans region instead of extending into Russia’s periphery. “We look forward to welcoming Albania and Croatia as new members,” a decision which had been introduced at the April Bucharest Summit (Ibid., §16). NATO reiterated its promise “to extend an invitation to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” after the seemingly endless dispute with Greece over “the name issue” had been reached (Ibid., §17).

Finally, NATO drew its attention to Georgia and Ukraine. “We reaffirm all elements of the decisions...taken by our Heads of State and Government in Bucharest” (Ibid., §18). Again,

NATO neglected to mention that “the decisions” had included promising membership. The crucial next line sought to establish a retroactive justification for the April decision to decline MAPs: “Both countries have made progress, yet both have significant work left to do” (Ibid., §18). The allies would reuse that line many times in the future. NATO here resumed the role of teacher in its relationship with the two candidates, which had to show more learning progress before they could “assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership...” (Ibid., §2). Since the allies judged there was “significant work left to do,” it logically followed that they would “provide further assistance to both countries in implementing needed reforms as they progress towards NATO membership” (Ibid., §18). Underlying this differentiation between NATO as teacher and the aspirants as students was the self-fashioned quintessentially benevolent nature of the alliance, which perpetuated the hierarchical relationship that NATO established with the previous candidates in earlier expansions (Behnke, 2013). Providing “further assistance” meant NATO would develop additional institutional mechanisms to “maximize its advice, assistance, and support for their reform efforts...” (NATO, 2008d, §19). It was implied that Georgia and Ukraine would submit to the new curriculum laid out for them. By the end of 2008, NATO began pursuing creative ways to further integrate Georgia other than through “full membership.”

6.5 The Beginning of a Special Relationship

In the months following the August war, NATO signaled its intent to reinforce Georgia’s integration process, over Russia’s objections and despite open disagreement within the alliance about a MAP for Georgia. There were two major developments which contributed to an emerging special relationship between Georgia and NATO by the end of 2008. These developments marked the beginning of a pattern of behavior by which NATO periodically

awarded Georgia “consolation prizes” for continuing to strive to meet the MAP requirements and for maintaining its overall Western geopolitical orientation.⁶⁸ This manifested in symbolic gestures which were rife with multivocal meanings.

The first move was the creation of the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) in September, which was a special bilateral framework comprising Georgia and all NATO member states. Georgia became one of only three NATO partners to garner such a privileged status—Russia and Ukraine were the other two. Less than two weeks after the ceasefire, NATO announced the rapid development of the NGC to oversee the “process set in hand at Bucharest,” and in response to Georgia’s request for help to restore “normal public life and economic activity” (NATO, 2008g). At the September 15th NAC visit to Georgia and the inaugural meeting of the NGC, Georgian Prime Minister Lado Gurgendidze expressed optimism that the Commission would “accelerate Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration process,” which was code for obtaining NATO membership from the Georgian’s point of view (NATO, 2008f). The NGC announced it would hold meetings at regular intervals and at “all appropriate levels,” from the heads of state and government down. The NGC aimed to “deepen political dialog and cooperation between NATO and Georgia” and to assist Georgia’s efforts to “take forward” the “reforms pertaining to its Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO...” (NATO, 2008e). Again, Georgia of course held more than mere “aspirations for membership,” but NATO nonetheless omitted invoking the earlier enlargement decision within its September 15th press release. According to NATO, creating the NGC signified a “commitment to adding substance” to the relationship with Georgia, which presumably had been lacking (NATO, 2008b). The decision to establish the NGC enabled NATO to claim it was committed to Georgia’s progress toward membership. However, such a

⁶⁸ Interview P, U.S. military officer at U.S. Mission to NATO, by telephone, 3 July 2020.

commission was not a precondition for joining NATO. Except for the Ukraine case, having a bilateral commission was not part of the expansion process.

At the December 2008 allied foreign minister's meeting, NATO agreed to allow Georgia and Ukraine to develop Annual National Programs (ANP). This was the second crucial move in the making of a special relationship. The ANP was the formal monitoring instrument for reporting individual reform progress to NATO. Under the ANP, the candidates outlined a yearly program of political, defense, and conflict resolution reforms and presented "progress reports" at the end of the period. The allies provided feedback, which the candidates were supposed to incorporate into their future reform plans.⁶⁹ The structure further impressed NATO's role as the central authority from which knowledge was distributed.

This decision to award ANPs was unprecedented. Previously, the program was reserved for only those candidates that participated in the MAP. The move was the result of Bush administration officials leading a successful effort to apply moral and social pressure on the reluctant allies, led by France and Germany (again), to circumvent the normal applicant membership procedure via a MAP and consult directly with the two countries about their progress toward membership (Wolff, 2017). In Georgia's case, the ANP constituted the rebranding of the Individual Partnership Action Plan, a bilateral framework which facilitated cooperative activities but without the explicit goal of membership, which NATO awarded in 2004 (NATO, 2009). This likely made it easier for the allies to gain consensus on the move since it did not involve creating a new institutional mechanism.

⁶⁹ Interview M, Italian NATO international staff officer in Georgia, by telephone, 30 June 2020.

With the ANP decision, NATO bestowed a “special status” on Georgia and Ukraine, indicating that “we’ve made a promise to you.”⁷⁰ The language games of family were thus reintroduced to the narrative, importing notions of commitment, marriage, and stability. With an ANP in hand, it was conceivable that Georgia and Ukraine could take a “backdoor route” to NATO membership which avoided the formal MAP process, one observer asserted at the time (Marcus, 2008).

The ANP episode typified the multivocal character of NATO’s robust action strategy. Different audiences interpreted the move in various ways. The Georgian and Ukrainian governments generally saw it as reaffirming NATO’s commitment to their eventual membership. Likewise, NATO publicly acknowledged that ANP constituted the MAP instrument: “countries participate in the MAP by submitting individual *annual national programs* on their preparations for possible future membership” (NATO, 2022).⁷¹ The ANP afforded the two countries special attention through a formal feedback mechanism to help advance their reforms, which would be reviewed annually by the allies (NATO, 2008d). No other non-MAP partners in the membership pipeline could claim that. While the ANP designation did not connote an official designation of future NATO membership as MAP did, it still imparted an exclusive status on Georgia and Ukraine.

The range of interview responses about ANP contributed to a perception of ambiguity of NATO’s decision. On one hand, some understood that an ANP and a MAP were fundamentally linked, if not indistinguishable in practice. “The ANP is a MAP without calling it that,” a U.S.

⁷⁰ Interview W, U.S. military officer at NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 15 July 2020.

⁷¹ Emphasis added.

defense official at NATO admitted plainly.⁷² Similarly, “the ANP is the implementation plan for MAP,” declared a U.S. military officer at NATO.⁷³ In writing terminology, the MAP constituted the “cover sheet” of the ANP, meaning the outward-facing product allowing a reader to quickly identify work and learn about the substance therein, because “all of the practical aspects are within the ANP” and not the MAP.⁷⁴ Given that NATO had already publicly announced Georgia would become a member, it logically followed that ANP was “implemented with the objective of membership,” acknowledged an Italian NATO International Staff officer in Georgia.⁷⁵

On the other hand, others believed that while an ANP may be a significant step in the integration process, it did not necessarily commit NATO to Georgia’s membership. The “ANP is the key instrument for monitoring political developments in Georgia,” asserted a Dutch NATO international staff officer at NATO Headquarters.⁷⁶ The MAP, in contrast, “is just a technical document,” without a time limit and feedback loop, a former Georgian diplomat said disapprovingly.⁷⁷ Some responses were in direct conflict with each other. The ANP is “not a MAP in all but name.”⁷⁸ The ANP was simultaneously described as “an intermediate step to a MAP,”⁷⁹ and yet “not a prerequisite for membership.”⁸⁰ One interviewee said the “ANP is a MAP, but without a goal of membership,” which clashed with NATO’s stated position. Since the

⁷² Interview II, U.S. defense official at NATO, by telephone, 13 December 2021.

⁷³ Interview G, U.S. military officer at NATO, by telephone, 15 June 2020.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Interview M, Italian NATO international staff officer, by telephone, 30 June 2020

⁷⁶ Interview R, Dutch NATO international staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

⁷⁷ Georgia interview C, former diplomat, Tbilisi, 30 August 2017.

⁷⁸ Interview W, U.S. military officer at NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 15 July 2020.

⁷⁹ Interview K, U.S. foreign service officer at NATO Headquarters, by telephone, 24 June 2020.

⁸⁰ Interview E, British defense advisor in Georgia, by telephone, 9 June 2020.

allies could not agree on a MAP, Georgia was given an ANP as a “consolation for membership,” which was meant to prove NATO’s commitment.⁸¹

The ANP decision allowed NATO to work multiple agendas at the same time, which added multivocal meaning to the move. First, it gave the impression that NATO was serious about helping Georgia proceed toward membership and compensated for not approving a MAP. Previously, ANPs were only given to countries that also had MAPs. This enabled NATO to credibly claim it was upholding the “commitments undertaken in Bucharest,” which it stressed in all public statements between August and December 2008. Second, the move projected resolve against Russia’s attempts to block NATO’s integration of Georgia. The allies asserted their claim of autonomy in decision-making, whereby no “third country” held a veto over NATO’s membership decisions. Finally, the move showed the difficulties of parsing the public and private motivations of NATO’s behavior. Publicly, NATO seemed interested in supporting Georgia and upholding the April 2008 decision that the country would join the alliance. This is evident in the justification for ANP: “Therefore, we have decided to provide further assistance to both countries in implementing needed reforms as they progress towards NATO membership.” (NATO, 2008d, §8). The rationale here further cultivated NATO’s self-image as a benevolent central authority, unselfishly providing “advice, assistance, and support for Georgia’s reform efforts” (NATO, 2008b, §4).

However, the ANP action also connoted private self-interest. In the April 2008 Bucharest summit declaration, the NAC publicly committed itself to taking future action when it announced that allied foreign ministers would “make a first assessment” of Georgia and Ukraine’s MAP

⁸¹ Interview R, Dutch NATO international staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

applications at their December 2008 meeting. The NAC delegated its responsibility by giving the ministers “the authority to decide on the MAP applications” (NATO, 2008a, §23). While the allies still could not reach a consensus on MAPs, the decision to approve ANPs did enable them to claim to have fulfilled the obligation to the two candidates—at least in part. Thus, the ANP move constituted a symbolic face-saving gesture meant to preserve NATO’s perceived reputation for reliability and credibility with international audiences. Moreover, extending ANPs represented ambiguous action by NATO. While NATO did agree to institutionalize the reform reporting and evaluation cycle through a formal monitoring instrument, that did not really compel it to do anything other than providing feedback. The ANP was “a tool where ownership is entirely in Georgian hands,” declared a NATO official in Georgia, and, from NATO’s perspective, was “not as binding as a MAP.”⁸² This sentiment channeled a basic understanding of NATO’s open-door policy: that it was driven by those outside of the alliance seeking to join—“above all else.”⁸³ While NATO did not necessarily have an “enduring interest” in incorporating Georgia and Ukraine, they were “welcome to come in” as soon as they met the criteria for membership as was set by the allies, and therefore, subjective.⁸⁴

In the aftermath of the war, the United States worked to reinforce its own partnership with Georgia. After the ANP move but before giving way to the Obama administration in late January 2009, the Bush administration established a “strategic partnership” charter with Georgia. The initiative encompassed a broad range of issues, from economic cooperation to cultural exchanges to energy security. In the defense sector, the United States and Georgia agreed to intensify security cooperation to increase Georgian military capabilities and improve its

⁸² Interview M, Italian NATO international staff officer in Georgia, by telephone, 30 June 2020.

⁸³ Interview T, German NATO international staff officer, by telephone, 10 July 2020.

⁸⁴ Interview AA, U.S. military attaché, Washington, DC, 29 April 2021.

candidacy for NATO membership (U.S. Department of State, 2009). Creating the charter allowed the Bush administration to claim a final freedom agenda win before leaving office.

6.6 Conclusion

NATO's narrative of Georgia did not change because of the August 2008 war. While the ambiguity of its initial rhetorical response suggested a lack of unity within NATO over how to interpret the crisis, the underlying logic driving expansion endured—that it was vital for enabling democracy and thus preserving peace and stability. Georgia's aspirations were unfazed and thus NATO carried on with the expansion process, despite Russia's opposition and disagreements over a MAP.

NATO's narrative from August to December projected three main themes. First, the allies continued to support Georgia's territorial integrity, reflecting the Georgian government's own preoccupation with the issue. Second, NATO showed a readiness to evoke the April 2008 decision that Georgia will become a member of the alliance, as it was practiced in its talking points and could not move beyond them without consensus. However, NATO sought to recode "the Bucharest decision" as principally about Georgia's aspirations for membership and not NATO's promise of eventual membership. Lastly, the allies endeavored to reinforce Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration process by proposing a special bilateral relationship. This effort involved unconventional moves by NATO which were meant to offset the fact that Georgia's "full membership" was out of the question. As NATO tried to save face in the subsequent months after the war, a robust action strategy became evident. This was defined by moves which were instilled with multivocal meanings.

Chapter 7 - Georgia from 2009 to 2014: Reset and Rhetoric

7.1 Introduction

After the rapid development of a special partnership after the August 2008 war, the NATO-Georgia relationship fell into a state of relative inactivity and inattention from 2009 to 2014 as NATO's focus was drawn elsewhere.

The United States under the Obama administration attempted to repair relations with Russia, which had been reduced to a level of mutual resentment and bitterness after the Georgia war not seen since the Cold War. This involved preserving the status quo in U.S. relations with Georgia and the latter's integration with NATO while simultaneously enhancing U.S.-Russia security cooperation.

The Obama administration also decided to substantially increase U.S. involvement in the Afghanistan war to support the struggling NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. In a parallel effort, which benefited the U.S.-led war by increasing burden sharing as well as Georgia's military capabilities, U.S. marines began training Georgian soldiers preparing for deployment to Afghanistan. The program ran from 2009 to 2018. The source of NATO's difficulties in Afghanistan were multiple and complex, as resource shortfalls, unfair burden sharing, unequal exposure to combat risks, and differing views of mission goals all contributed to transatlantic friction throughout the operation. Georgia deployed units to the NATO ISAF

mission in Afghanistan in 2010-2014 and to the follow-on Resolute Support Mission (RSM) there from 2015 to 2021.

Faced with new challenges and downward pressure on defense spending and investment after the global economic crisis in 2007-2009, NATO adopted a new Strategic Concept in November 2010 to justify its continued relevance in an evolving security environment. NATO reaffirmed its self-defined identity as an expeditionary security organization with a global responsibility and adopted an expanded interpretation of collective defense unrestrained by geography.

NATO mounted another “out of area” operation with the military intervention in Libya from February to October 2011. This exposed the deficiencies of many European NATO allies in crucial capabilities such as intelligence, logistics, and transportation. The operation culminated in NATO’s de facto support for regime change, after which the country descended into political chaos and civil war.

The cumulative effect of NATO’s activities in 2009-2014 meant that, intentionally or not, less attention was given to integrating Georgia into NATO as a full member. This was evident in the content of NATO’s statements about the country, which concentrated mostly on encouraging further reforms to alliance standards and pointing out Georgia’s shortcomings. Such statements appeared with less frequency than before the August 2008 war and immediately thereafter. This suggested the diminished importance of Georgia for NATO.

This chapter examines NATO’s strategic narrative of Georgia from early 2009 to 2014, culminating with Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March. While NATO continued to define Georgia as a future alliance member, its progress toward “full membership” became drawn out

because, in NATO's account, more reform progress needed to be made. This provided the official justification for denying Georgia the same swift conferral of membership that the other candidates had enjoyed in the previous expansions. Three overarching themes manifested in NATO's rhetoric. First, NATO sought to repair relations with Russia. This meant less emphasis was given on the issues which Russia perceived as especially harmful, such as NATO's expansion in the post-Soviet space. Second, and despite this, NATO recommitted itself to the longstanding open-door policy toward welcoming new members. Finally, NATO tried to reassure Georgia by repeatedly evoking the Bucharest decision as well as intensifying practical cooperation to prepare the country for eventual membership.

7.2 “Resetting” Relations with Russia

The U.S.-led “reset” of relations with Russia from early 2009 had relevance for Georgia's integration with NATO because the Obama administration was determined that U.S. relations with Russia's neighbors would not undermine repairing the U.S.-Russia partnership. This meant approaching the post-Soviet space by taking Russia's national security interests into account, such as the anxiety over the future NATO membership of Georgia, which could bring U.S. military infrastructure to Russia's borders. Faced with a choice between maintaining the existing U.S.-Georgia “special relationship” nurtured by the George W. Bush administration in 2001-2008, on one hand, and repairing relations with Russia on the other, a U.S.-Russia “reset” was a creative solution that eliminated the tradeoff for President Obama. From the U.S. perspective, the motivation for the initiative was not necessarily to change or disown existing policies but to set aside the resentment that accumulated during the preceding years and to make a “fresh start” with Russia (Hill, 2018, p. 285). Given U.S. influence and global reach, the U.S.-Russia reset inevitably involved NATO and European security. The European NATO members generally

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supported the U.S. initiative but were nonetheless split between the “Old Europe” allies, which favored more cooperation with Russia, and the newer allies that joined in 1999 and 2004, which were traditionally suspicious of Russian motives and actions.

In response to Russia’s invasion of internationally recognized Georgian territory, the NAC on August 19th announced its decision to suspend formal meetings of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC).⁸⁵ “We have determined that we cannot continue with business as usual” (NATO, 2008c, §6). This marked the first time either side suspended dialogue within the special institutional mechanism for facilitating relations between NATO and Russia.⁸⁶ The phrase “business as usual” was deliberately vague, indicating there was a weak alliance consensus on how to react to Russia’s actions. In the event, cutting off communication was mostly a symbolic gesture, showing solidarity with Georgia, as high-level interaction had already broken down between NATO and Russia. Indeed, despite having the NRC, both sides failed to instrumentalize it to de-escalate tensions leading up to the outbreak of war. One interviewee claimed, “the Russians never really appreciated” the special body and suggested it gave their country an elevated status it did not deserve.⁸⁷ NATO further announced conditions for a return to “business as usual.” Relations would only revert to the previous state of affairs once Russia showed “both in word and deed” its commitment to the principles of peaceful conflict resolution “upon which we agreed to base our relationship” (NATO, 2008c, §6). According to NATO, such principles

⁸⁵ The NATO-Russia Council was established in May 2002, replacing the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC). The NRC featured an “upgraded” decision-making mechanism whereby the NATO Secretary General chaired the Council and members acted in their national capacities, with no pre-coordination of NATO positions. Under the previous arrangement, the PJC was “chaired jointly” by a “troika” consisting of “the Secretary General of NATO, a representative of one of the NATO members on a rotational basis, and a representative of Russia.” See “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation,” May 27, 1997.

⁸⁶ In 1999 Russia temporarily withdrew from the PJC in response to NATO’s use of force in Kosovo, which Russia condemned. See Yost 2014, pp. 221-222.

⁸⁷ Interview S, former U.S. ambassador to Russia, by telephone, 10 July 2020.

were laid out in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, and the 2002 Rome Declaration, which both sides had endorsed (Ibid.). NATO's conditions specified that Russia withdraw its forces from positions in Georgia proper, as stipulated in the August 12th ceasefire agreement. NATO subsequently demanded that Russia reverse its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence from Georgia (2008b, §24).

By cutting off formal communication with Russia, NATO was trying to do two things at once. First, it sought to punish Russia's aggression toward Georgia for violating the norms of acceptable state behavior, as defined by the West. Second, it wanted to re-exert control in a relationship that was broken partly because of NATO's refusal to subject its enlargement decisions to Russia's consent. Recalling the 1995 study, the allies proclaimed that "NATO decisions...cannot be subject to any veto or *droit de regard* by a non-member state" (NATO, 1995, §27). The NRC thus gave the illusion of equality by affording Russia a voice to be listened to, yet expansion would proceed irrespective of what Russia said (Toal, 2017, p. 206). This illustrated how NATO-Russia diplomacy constituted a symbolic power struggle plagued by the perceived deficit between Russia's "ingrained dispositions" of great power status and the country's diminished position in the NATO-defined security order (Pouliot, 2010, pp. 229-230). As the dominated player, Russia was unable to combat a structure which it could not defeat. Meanwhile, Russia's invasion of Georgia showed NATO's own inability to impose the rules of the game on Russia.

Already by the end of 2008 NATO signaled a rapprochement with Russia. The December 3rd NAC foreign ministers meeting statement praised Russia for withdrawing its forces from Georgia proper in October—a pre-condition for resuming "business as usual" (NATO, 2008b, §24). The statement also laid out a gradual approach to restarting dialogue. This involved

resuming “informal discussions” within the NRC and instructing NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer to reengage Russian officials “at the political level” and then “report back to us prior to any decision to engage Russia formally in the NRC” (NATO, 2008b, §25). The phrase “at the political level” implied how NATO-Russia practical cooperation in some areas of overlapping interest had continued uninterrupted after the August 2008 war. Work on the ground in Afghanistan in counternarcotics and counterterrorism carried on despite the freeze of so-called formal interaction (Yost, 2014). This showed NATO’s capacity for pragmatism amidst the political fallout with Russia over Georgia.

The U.S.-Russia “reset” was formally announced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in March 2009. From the U.S. perspective, the major goals in resetting relations concerned bilateral and global issues, on which cooperation with Russia was essential, such as the Afghanistan war, transnational terrorism, arms control, and nuclear nonproliferation (Hill, 2018). The major achievement of the effort was the New START Treaty, which reduced limits for deployed strategic nuclear warheads of both sides and included a set of verification measures that added more transparency to the relationship (Stent, 2014). The pact went into effect in 2011. Logistics cooperation supporting U.S. and NATO forces was another highlight of the reset, as Russia provided crucial access to ground and air resupply routes to and from Afghanistan.

At NATO’s sixtieth anniversary summit in April 2009, the allies made clear their intent to fully resume formal communication and cooperation with Russia and within the framework of the NRC:

A strong, cooperative partnership between NATO and Russia...best serves security in the Euro-Atlantic area. We stand ready to work with Russia to address the common challenges we face (NATO, 2009b).

The alliance thus reaffirmed Russia's special role as its indispensable partner within the NATO-dominated security order. Security, the text asserted, was best established through the co-action of NATO and Russia as equal partners. The NRC gave that false impression. Russia was thus made equally responsible for creating and maintaining security and stability in Europe. The inherent conflict, however, was that NATO insisted on upholding the principle of its own independent decision-making and only affording Russia a voice—not a real vote. The summit's communique announced, "Russia is of particular importance to us as a partner and neighbor" (NATO, 2009d, §35). Defining Russia as a "neighbor" meant that NATO constructed the country as an outsider within the imagined European spatial order, which undermined NATO's repeated claim that it did not seek to create new dividing lines in Europe. NATO mobilized idealistic and well-known commonplaces, evocative of its traditional security community-building narrative, to appeal to Russia:

We are committed to using the NATO-Russia Council as a forum for political dialogue on all issues – where we agree and disagree – with a view towards resolving problems, addressing concerns and building practical cooperation. We are convinced that the NATO-Russia Council has not exploited its full potential (NATO, 2009d, §35).

By the end of 2009 the NATO-Russia reset was in full swing. On December 4th, NATO announced the formal resumption, at the foreign ministerial level, of cooperation and dialogue in the NRC. The allies thus officially ended the "no business as usual" policy caused by the August 2008 war. As a symbolic gesture of reassurance amidst the easing of relations with Russia, the United States in July 2009 sent Vice President Joe Biden to Georgia, who announced: "We, the United States, stand by you on your journey to a secure, free, democratic, and once again united Georgia" (Antidze and Robinson, 2009). This was a clear sign of where the United States stood on the issue of Georgia's lost territories.

Pursuant to the reset, the NRC agreed to launch a “joint review of NATO and Russia’s 21st century common security challenges,” a project proposed by the new secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen in September 2009 (NATO, 2009c). Reinstating the political dimension of the relationship triggered the formal resumption of NATO-Russia military ties in January 2010 (NATO, 2010e). The NRC endorsed the findings of the joint review in November 2010 and “identified concrete practical cooperation activities” involving ballistic missile defense, Afghanistan, counterterrorism, and counter-piracy (NATO, 2010c). NATO’s moves implied the tacit acceptance of the situation on the ground in Georgia, namely that Russian forces controlled nearly one-fifth of the country’s internationally recognized territory. The allies decided to overlook Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to resume “business as usual.”

With both the nature of the threats perceived by the allies and the scope of allied operations having changed significantly since the adoption of the 1999 Strategic Concept, NATO issued a revision of its statement of purpose. “Active Engagement, Modern Defence” was adopted at the November 2010 Lisbon Summit. The document confirmed the level of alliance consensus regarding core tasks, priorities, and operations, constituting “a renewal of vows” by each member (NATO, 2010d). It articulated a deterritorialization of the collective defense principle, entitling NATO to respond to threats regardless of the location from which a threat emanated (NATO, 2010a, §4). The Lisbon Summit marked the full reinstatement of NATO-Russia relations at the highest level, as reflected by the NRC meeting of all participating heads of state and government (NATO, 2010b).

NATO's new strategic concept was heavily influenced by the recommendations of the May 2010 "group of experts" report, which urged the importance of continued investment in the NATO-Russia partnership and more effective use of the NRC, basically maintaining the status quo (NATO, 2010d).⁸⁸ In a parallel effort, secretary-general diplomacy played a key role. In a July 2011 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Rasmussen envisioned NATO pursuing a "more inclusive dialogue" with "emerging powers on common challenges," such as Russia, to help prevent and manage crises across the globe (Rasmussen, 2011). The strategic concept claimed NATO posed "no threat to Russia" and instead desired to achieve "a true strategic partnership" (NATO, 2010a, §33). The self-presentation of non-threatening to Russia further institutionalized NATO's agency as the only one that mattered or was truthful within the Euro-Atlantic security order. While NATO recognized the value of cooperation with Russia due to the country's power and influence, it failed to acknowledge a second, and alternate, epistemic site from which the interpretation of threats and danger might look different. NATO never accepted Russia's claim that expansion posed a threat to Russia's national security interests.

Despite the progress in NATO-Russia cooperation after the temporary fallout caused by the Russia-Georgia war, the reset largely exhausted its agenda by 2011. Relations broke down again due to many issues, including U.S. plans to develop missile defense systems on European NATO territory, which Russia maintained undermined its own nuclear deterrent; the dismissal by Western powers of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's overarching European security treaty initiative, which could have challenged NATO's preeminence; and NATO's use of force

⁸⁸ The group, headed by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright and former CEO of Royal Dutch Shell Jeroen van der Veer, conducted an eight-month program of consultations and meetings in most NATO states and Russia. It was assisted by a high-level group of military and civilian advisors drawn from the United States and many NATO allies.

and eventual regime change in Libya (Tsygankov, 2018). The latter event may have convinced Vladimir Putin of NATO's unrestrained capabilities and intentions and to return to the presidency, said one observer (Hill, 2018). While the NATO-Russia reset did produce several practical achievements on military and technical issues at both the working and senior levels, it ultimately could not overcome the structural deficiencies in the relationship. NATO could not impose its geopolitical order on Russia, which in turn was unable to subordinate itself and play the role of junior partner.

7.3 “NATO’s Door Will Remain Open”

In 2009-2014, NATO categorically supported the longstanding open-door approach toward accepting new members, thus perpetuating a prevailing trope in the NATO enlargement discourse. This imparted a false impression that the expansion process culminated with a new member effortlessly striding through a door which had been always left open. This framing betrayed Russia's ability to act as a spoiler in the Georgia case as well as NATO's power to adjust the membership criteria at its own discretion to accelerate or elongate the process.

NATO's statements in the years following the Georgia war illustrated particularly well the enduring alliance consensus for the open-door policy, even if only in principle. Indeed, nothing could be done concretely to achieve the “full membership” of Georgia. NATO continued the practice of restating pre-approved language within various institutional settings, which signified the lowest common denominator shared among the allies over the policy. The April 2009 Strasbourg-Kehl summit communique announced:

In accordance with Article 10 of the Washington Treaty, NATO's door will remain open to all European democracies which share the values of our Alliance, which are willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of

membership, and whose inclusion can contribute to common security and stability (NATO, 2009d).

NATO sought to evoke the supposed authority of its founding charter to confer renewed legitimacy on the expansion process after Russia had successfully contested it. The stated criteria of eligibility for membership—sharing NATO’s values, assuming membership responsibilities, and contributing to enhancing security—were not new expressions, but rather adaptations of the older “principles of enlargement” as defined in the 1995 enlargement study (NATO, 1995, §4); They were subjective and intentionally vague. This maximized the current members’ freedom to judge whether a candidate had been sufficiently socialized into the Euro-Atlantic community’s beliefs and practices, as represented by NATO, to deserve an invitation to join. The intended target audience, “all European democracies,” indicated that aspirants must have already internalized a measure of NATO’s so-called norms and values to be considered viable candidates. This was an empty phrase however since NATO was always open to accepting authoritarian states, like Greece and Turkey, during the Cold War. This reflected NATO’s long running assertion, as was stated in the enlargement study, that expansion facilitated, though not necessarily caused, democratization (NATO, 1995 , §3-5). This was an important distinction because some early influential expansion advocates argued that membership was required for democracy to take place in ex-communist countries (Asmus et al., 1993; Reiter, 2001).

The Strasbourg-Kehl summit communique also announced Albania and Croatia’s accession to NATO, completed in April 2009, which encouraged a perception that the expansion process marched on despite Russia’s efforts to block it. This helped to boost NATO’s self-esteem after the Georgia setback.

NATO reiterated its general commitment to upholding the open-door policy in nearly all subsequent public statements. The December 2009 NAC foreign ministers meeting statement

recited in verbatim the ambiguous wording of the Strasbourg-Kehl text (NATO, 2009c, §4). Likewise, the November 2010 Lisbon Summit communique reiterated that NATO's door remained open to European democracies which shared the alliance's values, embraced the responsibilities of membership, contributed to enhancing NATO's security, and were ready to further the principles of the Washington Treaty (NATO, 2010b, §13). Thus, the candidates strove to meet criteria that was both fungible and up for interpretation by the current members. This enabled NATO to maintain a measure of long-term flexibility with its membership decisions.

In Georgia's experience, NATO's assertion in the 2010 Strategic Concept that "the prospect of further enlargement [had] advanced stability in Europe more broadly" was mistaken. Instead, the increasing likelihood of Georgia joining NATO following the Bucharest decision prompted the very attack that membership was supposed to deter. That Georgia was one of NATO's most-involved partners at the time compounded the issue. Georgia, by NATO's own account, was the second largest "non-NATO troop contributing nation" to the war in Afghanistan (NATO, 2012, §29). This represented a significant and disproportionate sacrifice as compared to many longtime NATO members. This fact helped bolster the pro-Georgia argument that it could "live up to" to the obligations of membership and contribute to NATO's security, presumably enhancing its candidacy for getting a MAP.⁸⁹

The May 2012 Chicago Summit was both the first NAC meeting of allied heads of state after Putin's return to the presidency as well as the last before Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. The allies unsurprisingly reiterated the pledge to uphold the open-door policy to

⁸⁹ Interview M, Italian NATO international staff officer in Tbilisi, by telephone, 30 June 2020.

“all European democracies” which met NATO’s membership standards and that “aspire to join the Alliance” (NATO, 2012, §25).

In the wake of Ukraine’s declaration of non-aligned intent in June 2010, NATO sought to recognize the group of remaining partners which did continue to “implement the necessary decisions and reforms” to advance their aspirations for NATO membership (NATO, 2012, §25). The allies praised “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,” Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, citing their “significant progress” toward meeting NATO’s standards. As for Georgia, NATO reiterated: “At the Bucharest Summit we agreed that Georgia will become a member of NATO and we reaffirm all elements of that decision” (Ibid. §29). NATO thus tried to show external audiences that it was serious about following through on previously made commitments, even if little could be done to deliver on the membership promise to Georgia at that time. Such statements sought to reinforce NATO’s self-image of being a credible and reliable partner.

NATO’s “open door” expansionist rhetoric was characterized by multivocality, which enabled the allies to pursue multiple agendas at once and maintain options for future moves. By declaring the membership door remained open, NATO asserted its independent decision-making. NATO wished to be seen as undeterred by Russia’s hostility. The allies also sought to encourage all aspirants to continue striving to meet NATO’s standards for new members. Concurrently, NATO aimed to reassure Georgia by reaffirming the original commitments laid out in NATO’s founding charter. In this manner, the direct support to Georgia was meant to reinforce the broader open-door policy, thus providing a concrete example of Article 10 in action.

7.4 Minding the “Special Relationship”

In the years after the August 2008 war, Georgia's determination to join NATO despite its deep concern over the loss of one-fifth of its internationally recognized territory continued to define how the country was presented in NATO's discourse. In 2009-2014 NATO constructed a strategic narrative of Georgia as a special partner and future alliance member. This reflected a strong continuity with the pre-war narrative themes. Nonetheless, the emergence of three new developments did begin to shape Georgia's integration process from 2009. First, there was an apparent deepening institutionalization of the relationship. NATO began to lay the groundwork for Georgia's quasi-membership in the alliance by introducing various practical activities, which would intensify further after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. This highlighted the crucial role of multivocal artifacts in the making of NATO-Georgia relations, whereby NATO sustained multivocality other than through utterances.

The second development in 2009-2014 was the unmistakable banality of NATO's statements about Georgia. By 2014, NATO's rhetorical commitment to upholding the Bucharest decision and to supporting Georgia's so-called territorial integrity had become rote—ceremoniously evoked at frequent intervals and with different audiences to maximize the allies' self-esteem. NATO lacked the consensus to push forward with Georgia's membership over Russia's opposition, due to its territorial divisions, and because strategic elites in large Western states saw it as a mistake, so it tried to make the best of the situation.

The third development which impacted Georgia's aspirations for membership in NATO and the EU was the rise of anti-Saakashvili forces within Georgia. In 2012, his United National Movement (UNM) party lost control of Georgia's parliament to a coalition led by the Georgian Dream party, which was founded by Bidzina Ivanishvili. Giorgi Margvelashvili, the Georgian Dream candidate, then defeated Saakashvili in the presidential election in October 2013.

Georgian Dream thereafter set out to improve relations with Russia, which had deteriorated sharply under Saakashvili. While the party has some pro-Russia supporters, the move to ease tensions was likely driven by economic and not geopolitical considerations as Russia has historically been a main trading partner and export market for Georgia. While Georgian Dream has officially followed a pro-Western foreign policy, its actions and rhetoric have generally suggested otherwise (Kakachla and Lebanidze, 2019).

The multivocal meanings characteristic of NATO's statements about Georgia also had relevance for the various institutional mechanisms which presumably brought depth and structure to the bilateral relationship. After NATO awarded Georgia an ANP in December 2008, the overall process of implementing the various reforms according to NATO's membership criteria was done under the ANP umbrella. From December 2009, NATO began overseeing a professional development program within the Georgian Ministry of Defense and other security institutions to bring their civilian workforce in line with the alliance's standards of "democratic management and oversight" (NATO, 2009a). In October 2010, NATO opened a "liaison office" in central Tbilisi, whose mission was to facilitate civil and military cooperation between allied and Georgian authorities in pursuit of the goal of Georgia "becoming a full NATO member" (NATO, 2022).

NATO in April 2011 announced further initiatives to reform Georgia's defense sector to enhance "interoperability" in military cooperation with NATO and modernize the country's armed forces. These included programs such as the "Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process," the "Military Committee with Georgia Work Plan," disposing stockpiles of obsolete weapons and munitions, and clearing mines and unexploded ordnance from the countryside (NATO, 2011a). In November 2011, the NGC announced additional "concrete measures" to

boost NATO-Georgia interoperability, including deeper cooperation on military education and training and integrating crisis management and civil emergency planning (NATO, 2011b).

Unlike with the MAP issue, there had always been firm consensus among the allies on pursuing such bilateral practical cooperation on the ground, pointed out an interviewee.⁹⁰

NATO's moves were rife with multivocality in many ways. First, from NATO's point of view, the moves enabled the allies to seem "invested" in Georgia's goal to meet the requirements for a MAP and ultimately NATO membership. The NATO "Trust Fund" program on "Explosive Remnants of War Clearance and Medical Rehabilitation Support" was a case in point (NATO, 2011a). Individual allies deposited funds into a trust from which money was withdrawn to pay for the project.⁹¹ This had the effect of disclosing the disparate—and somewhat unexpected—levels of allied support for Georgia. The United States, Germany, and France tended to be the largest contributors to these sorts of projects.⁹² By contrast, some other development programs were paid for by NATO common funding, a shared account among all allies.

Second, NATO-Georgia cooperation also showed that both sides were not deterred by Russia's attempts to limit NATO's future options. NATO again aimed to present itself as defending the liberal principle of national self-determination while simultaneously asserting its own prerogatives (NATO, 2011b). This helped to boost NATO's internal legitimacy and maintain a measure of external credibility with Georgia as well as other candidates which aspired to join the alliance.

⁹⁰ Interview R, Dutch NATO International Staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

⁹¹ Interview II, U.S. defense official at NATO, by telephone, 13 December 2021.

⁹² Interview R, Dutch NATO International Staff Officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

Lastly, by implementing the reforms to NATO's standards, and with the apparent active involvement of the allies, it gave the impression that Georgia was genuinely progressing toward achieving its goals. Whether that was the case was always difficult to tell, since ultimately the decision to award Georgia a MAP and eventually membership was political and not technical, only requiring the unanimous agreement of the allies. Nonetheless, from Georgia's perspective, NATO's material support demonstrated the allies were both in word and deed committed to following through on the previously made membership pledge.

Regarding the Bucharest decision, the allies reasserted their rhetorical commitment to the move in virtually all major public statements between 2009 and 2014, including NATO summit communiqués and NGC press releases. It became apparent that the NATO members valued the ritual of projecting political cohesion on the issue on grand stages. Yet, the November 2010 Strategic Concept did not make any specific reference to Georgia's future NATO membership. Instead, the text stated the allies only aimed to develop the partnership with Georgia, taking into account its geopolitical orientation and aspiration, which was telling (NATO, 2010a, §35). The concept figured centrally into articulating the state of alliance consensus on a wide range of issues, including expansion, and mapped out NATO's future direction. Thus, the omission showed that NATO's attention could be drawn away from the membership of Georgia in the coming years. Despite this, each of the three NATO summit communiqués from 2009 to 2014 restated a nearly identical version of the level of rhetorical support for Georgia within the alliance:

At the 2008 Bucharest Summit we agreed that Georgia will become a member of NATO and we reaffirm all elements of that decision, as well as subsequent decisions (NATO, 2009d, 2010b, 2012).

With that declaration, the allies explicitly recommitted themselves in public to following through on the consensus decision that Georgia would join NATO, at an undefined time in the future, and despite the central government's inability to exert full sovereignty over its territory. From Georgia's perspective, the unambiguous language was a clear improvement over NATO's earlier post-war statements in late 2008, which recoded "the Bucharest decision" as merely about supporting Georgia's ambitions, but not membership in the alliance. Nonetheless, the curious phrase within the above quote, "...we reaffirm all elements of that decision...", was an unspoken reference to the April 2008 text, which specified that a MAP was the "next step" for Georgia on the "direct way to membership" (NATO, 2008a, §23). The NAC thus reminded Georgia that it would not be granted membership without a MAP. This was consistent with the rules guiding NATO's 2004 expansion round and thereafter. By stipulating that MAP was a pre-condition of membership it allowed NATO to retain a crucial semblance of control over the process after "giving away the goods" to Georgia at Bucharest with the promise of future membership.

The lingering divisiveness within NATO over a MAP for Georgia was evident by its absence from public texts in 2009-2014. Any explicit reference to MAP was omitted from all NGC statements and nearly all summit communiqués during the period, which avoided drawing unwanted attention to an issue where there was well-known disagreement among the allies. There were two exceptions. The April 2009 Strasbourg-Kehl summit statement said that "without prejudice to further decisions which must be taken about MAP," the development of the ANP would help Georgia advance its reforms (NATO, 2009d). It was the first time since before the Bucharest decision that NATO reiterated in public the quasi-legal proviso. Later, the December 2009 NAC foreign ministers' meeting press release reiterated that summit statement language (NATO, 2009c). Afterwards, NATO did not bring up the MAP issue about Georgia in

any public statement until 2016, underscoring the sensitivity of the topic as a persistent source of dispute.

NATO also used the occasion of the NGC meetings in December 2009, April 2011, and November 2011, respectively, to restate the commitment to upholding the Bucharest decision. The latter session entailed the NAC visiting Georgia and consultations with President Saakashvili and Prime Minister Nika Gilauri. These were symbolic gestures of solidarity. The joint statement of the November 2011 meeting evoked Bucharest as well as the associated institutional mechanisms which presumably helped to facilitate Georgia's integration into NATO:

Allied Ambassadors, together with the Prime Minister of Georgia, reaffirmed the central role of the NGC and the Annual National Program in supervising the process set in hand at the Bucharest Summit (NATO, 2011b).

Taken together, NATO's framing and justification of enlargement in general, and specifically in the case of the Bucharest decision, had the effect of rhetorically entrapping itself. By presenting expansion as a policy that was based on the fundamental values of NATO member states and on the membership rules of the alliance, the allies made it difficult to back out of the previous commitment to Georgia without harming their own credibility as community members. Moreover, the allies could not question the stated values and norms on which the policy was based, for this would have meant rejecting the very values and norms on which their own legitimacy and authority rested, and unmasking NATO's public-facing identity as insincere. Reversing the Bucharest decision would also tacitly acknowledge that Russia had "won" veto power over NATO's membership decisions, claimed a U.S. officer on NATO's international

military staff.⁹³ NATO thus felt obligated to honor its commitments to protect its perceived reputation for credibility, irrespective of its ability to follow through on such commitments.

In a similar fashion, NATO's expressions of support for the so-called territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia had become ceremonial by 2009, as nothing could be done to make it a reality. Russian forces held full territorial control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which complicated Georgia's supposed right to join the alliance of its choosing. Despite this, NATO habitually restated its "strong" and "continued" support for Georgia's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity in nearly all public documents, including NATO summit communiqués and NGC meeting statements. In fact, the wording in the 2009 Strasbourg-Kehl summit, the 2010 Lisbon summit, and the 2012 Chicago summit declarations was identical: "We reiterate our continued support to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders" (NATO, 2009d, 2010b, 2012). The consistency with which NATO displayed here underlined the hollowness of its rhetoric. There was no practical pathway for either NATO or Georgia to restore the country's territorial integrity without risking a direct military confrontation with Russia.

Like NATO's rhetorical strategy from before the August 2008 war, the overriding theme of cautious optimism continued to permeate all statements about Georgia in 2009-2014. The allies praised the Georgian government for undertaking the reforms that they had directed and expressed optimism for continued progress in meeting NATO's standards for members. "We strongly encourage Georgia to continue implementing all necessary reforms...to achieve its Euro-Atlantic aspirations" (NATO, 2009d, §31). This was accompanied by hedging language to

⁹³ Interview P, U.S. military officer at NATO International Military Staff, by telephone, 3 July 2020.

convey uncertainty about Georgia's future. Overwhelmingly, any doubt that the allies harbored was articulated by wording which nonetheless implied that progress was being made. This was evident in the ambiguous phrase that "more work remains to be done," variations of which appeared regularly in NGC statements during the timeframe (NATO, 2009a, 2011b).

NATO made a concerted effort to publicly address what it understood as Georgia's achievements and setbacks. The December 2009 NGC meeting statement "welcomed" the beginning of talks about electoral and constitutional reforms in Georgia but urged the government to "demonstrate political will" in implementing such reforms (NATO, 2009a). The NGC expressed approval of the Georgian government's decision to conduct a review of its defense and security sectors yet nonetheless noted the "need for more effective" defense planning and financial management (Ibid.). Allied foreign ministers "welcomed the overall positive dynamic in Georgia's democratic development" but also called out the remaining deficiencies in electoral reforms, upholding the rule of law, and maintaining an independent judiciary and media (NATO, 2011a). With these statements, NATO sought to acknowledge Georgia's efforts to continue striving to meet NATO's standards, while simultaneously provide a rationale for dithering on giving Georgia a MAP. In NATO's account, Georgia was not yet sufficiently socialized into the Euro-Atlantic community's standards and values and so more learning needed to be done. This provided the convenient justification for postponing Georgia's accession to NATO, which allowed the reality of the country's territorial fragmentation to be excluded from the official narrative. Indeed, NATO had never openly stated that the Georgian government's inability to exert full control over its internationally recognized territory had prevented its membership.

7.5 Conclusion

In the years following the August 2008 war, while NATO continued to publicly support Georgia's ambitions for "full membership" in the alliance and helped the country move toward meeting the requirements for a MAP, it did not put a high priority on pushing the matter ahead with any urgency. Instead, NATO's attention was drawn to other matters, such as repairing relations with Russia, the "out of area" operations in Afghanistan and Libya, and adapting to an evolving strategic environment. NATO categorically recommitted itself to the open-door policy toward new members, which was meant to show that Russia's de facto veto of Georgia's likely membership would not deter NATO from expanding across Europe.

NATO constructed Georgia as a future alliance member, notwithstanding its own inability to follow through on the prior membership pledge to the country. NATO continued to rhetorically support the country's territorial integrity, reflecting the Georgian government's own concern. More importantly, NATO consistently evoked the Bucharest decision in various institutional settings and with multiple audiences, constituting moves in many games at once. This enabled the allies to display political cohesion, project resolve against Russia's violent opposition, exert autonomy in its decision-making ability, and above all, appear committed to the NATO membership of Georgia. In so doing, NATO was able to maintain its credibility with Georgia and the other aspirants as well as reinforce its political authority and legitimacy on the world stage. Thus, the private motivation of NATO's public rhetoric was undeniable.

NATO cultivated multivocality through both its rhetorical and material support of Georgia, which added complexity and ambiguity to the robust action strategy. In the coming years, the crucial role of multivocal artifacts would take on new meaning in the Georgia case as

Russia's actions toward Ukraine, and the NATO response which followed, opened new opportunities and challenges for Georgia's protracted integration with the alliance.

Chapter 8 - Georgia after Russia's Annexation of Crimea: Reinforcing NATO Integration

8.1 Introduction

In late February 2014 the government of pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich collapsed in what President Putin described as a Western-backed “fascist coup” in Kyiv. In response, Russian troops executed a discrete invasion of Crimea, while pro-Russian separatists destabilized eastern Ukraine. Pro-Russian forces seized power in Crimea on February 27-28 and then organized a referendum for union with Russia. Following a reported result of overwhelming support in favor of leaving Ukraine and joining Russia, Putin signed a treaty requesting annexation on March 18. The upper house of the Russian parliament ratified it on March 21 with only one dissenting vote. In contrast with Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states after the Georgia war, Putin opted to make Crimea a new part of the Russian Federation.

Despite this, NATO's strategic narrative of Georgia did not change because of Russia's aggressive actions toward Ukraine. Like before the Crimea annexation, the allies officially understood the aspirant as a special NATO partner and future alliance member. Georgia's identity was constructed principally according to its geographic circumstances, namely the territorial fragmentation, and as a perpetual learner of NATO's standards and values.

The consistency of NATO's positive and optimistic messaging about Georgia was puzzling given the perception that the Georgian Dream-led government had drifted from the West, sought closer ties with Russia, and not continued its predecessor's goal of gaining membership in NATO and the EU. According to a recent report by the European Council on Foreign Relations, a Berlin-based think tank, former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili bears much of the responsibility for this (Gente, 2022). Under his watch, the government has curtailed judicial and press freedoms and many state officials have expressed "anti-Western" rhetoric and gestures (Ibid.). It is plausible the current government is retaining an official pro-Western policy while simultaneously being pragmatic in engaging Russia.

An analysis of the enlargement discourse of Georgia from March 2014 to December 2020 produced three main findings. First, NATO continued to reiterate the commitment to the Bucharest decision and support Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Second, NATO reinforced rhetorical support by expanding security cooperation with Georgia, further exhibiting the material side of a robust action strategy. Finally, the cumulative effect of the various practical tools NATO developed over the years had diminished the functional relevance of MAP in Georgia's case. In 2020, Georgia had all the practical elements to ready itself for membership. This rendered MAP to holding mostly symbolic value, which the reluctant allies nonetheless exploited to block Georgia's accession. While the allies agreed in principle that Georgia should eventually obtain full membership, the unfolding Ukraine crisis once again exposed the practical flaws in incorporating weak states with unresolved territorial issues and polarized populations.

8.2 Institutionalized Rhetorical Support

By 2014, NATO's stated support for the eventual membership and territorial integrity of Georgia had been institutionalized to such an extent that it appeared to be operating on autopilot

and unaffected by external geopolitical shocks. Thus, following the Crimea annexation, one of the least surprising responses was that the allies continued to evoke the 2008 Bucharest decision and support the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Virtually all NAC statements about Georgia reaffirmed the allies' commitment to ensuring the country continued moving "forward towards eventual membership" in the alliance and according to its internationally recognized borders (NATO, 2014, §93; 2015a, §3). However, in terms of positioning in text, these items were subordinated to almost every other NATO concern and priority in 2014-2020, hardly a strong endorsement of the claimed importance the allies attached to the open-door policy of incorporating new members, particularly Georgia.

The United States continued a parallel effort alongside NATO of publicly reassuring Georgia. In August 2017, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence reiterated U.S. support for NATO's stated goal of bringing Georgia into the alliance. Speaking to a group of U.S. and Georgian soldiers participating in a U.S. Army-led exercise with several NATO allies and partners outside of Tbilisi he announced, "We stand with the nation and the people of Georgia and we will stand with you as you pursue membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" (U.S. Embassy, 2017). This might have been surprising given President Trump's desire to forge closer ties with Russia, though it showed the United States' ability to play multiple games at once.

NATO summit declarations were a reliable indicator of the level of consensus and relative prioritization shared within the alliance over the Bucharest issue. The summits were almost always attended by the heads of state and government of all NATO member countries and chaired by the secretary-general. Together this group comprised the NAC, NATO's supreme decision-making body. In each of the three summit communiqués from between the Georgia war and the Crimea annexation, the NAC reaffirmed its commitment to Georgia's future membership

within the first half of the text. Indeed, the references to Bucharest were made in paragraph 29 of 62 at Strasbourg-Kehl (2009), paragraph 21 of 54 at Lisbon (2010), and paragraph 29 of 65 at Chicago (2012) (NATO, 2009, 2010b, 2012).

Many causal factors likely contributed to the consistency and order. As a highly institutionalized international organization, NATO had developed deeply embedded standard operating practices and routines out of utility and to minimize transaction costs and improve information flow (Wallander, 2000). NATO international staff officers drafted the text in advance of a summit and used the preceding summit's communique as a reference.⁹⁴ Given that the specific language required the unanimous approval of the allies—which did take some time and effort to achieve—it made sense to recycle the preapproved boilerplate wording of earlier statements. There was also a perceived sunken cost dimension. A former U.S. military attaché to NATO headquarters explained that since reaching a consensus decision within NATO “is difficult,” once one is made it is virtually unbreakable due to the substantial political capital expended in the process. However, after NATO did decide, it “might not take action but might not fulfill it either” as external circumstances changed.⁹⁵ Finally, there was the inevitable influence of primacy bias in NATO's statements, which gave preferential attention to Bucharest in the initial years after the decision was made.

As memories faded and new events unfolded, the allies deemphasized maintaining the commitment to the Bucharest decision. Whether this was deliberate, Crimea's impact was nonetheless direct and abrupt. The September 2014 Wales Summit Declaration did not reference Bucharest until paragraph 93 of 113 (NATO, 2014). The subsequent Warsaw (2016) and

⁹⁴ Interview R, Dutch NATO International Staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

⁹⁵ Interview AA, U.S. military attaché, Washington, DC, 29 April 2021.

Brussels (2018) summit communiqués brought up the decision in paragraphs 111 of 139 and 65 of 79, respectively (NATO, 2016c, 2018a). Thus, in each of the three texts, Bucharest was not mentioned until the final fifth of the documents. This was a dramatic fall in the stated priority of delivering on the membership pledge versus before 2014. One interviewee stated NATO had become “more cautious” about reiterating Bucharest as time passed. Many insiders concluded that “beating the drum” about Georgia’s future membership “can only go so far,” given the lack of consensus on the issue.⁹⁶

NATO’s 2014 Wales Summit convened less than six months after Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The occasion provided the allies an opportunity to explicitly connect the deepening Ukraine crisis to the numerous existing, unresolved ethnoterritorial conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Consequently, following the Crimea annexation, the NAC ended the ritual mention of singling out Georgia’s permanent territorial divisions within NATO summit texts. This had been the standard practice articulated in all summit statements from 2009 to 2012 (there was no meeting in 2013). Instead, from the Wales Summit and thereafter, the allies offered a blanket statement supporting “the territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova” (NATO, 2014, §30; 2016c, §24; 2018a, §7). According to NATO, Russia’s “illegitimate occupation” of Crimea and subsequent destabilization alarmed NATO’s partners to the east, raising their “legitimate” security concerns (NATO, 2014). Though it was not made explicit, this presumably included Georgia, as well as the post-Soviet countries with existing territorial divisions.

⁹⁶ Interview R, Dutch NATO International Staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

The juxtaposition in the same paragraph of the Wales Summit Declaration text indicated NATO perceived the different and unique conflicts involving Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Crimea, and the Donbas as a single source of danger, seemingly united by the occurrence of Russia's malign and destabilizing role in perpetuating each of them. For NATO, the persistence of such conflicts were "undermining the opportunities for citizens in the region to reach their full potential as members of the Euro-Atlantic community" (NATO, 2014, §31). NATO here reiterated defining its partners to the east, which seemed to now exclude Russia, as perennial learners striving to achieve their manifest destiny as members of the West, as signified by their ultimate incorporation into the alliance. This marked the beginning of the end of NATO's longstanding integrationist rhetoric about Russia. While the allies continued hoping for "cooperative, constructive" relations with Russia, they lamented that the conditions for such a relationship "do not currently exist" (Ibid., §22). With this, it appeared NATO's stated goal of integrating Russia into a Europe "whole and free" was no longer a realistic outcome for the foreseeable future.

Despite the end of publicly singling out Georgia's geographic condition within NATO summit texts, the allies continued tailoring messages to specific audiences and depending on the situation. NGC statements reflected this tendency and further exemplified robust action as the rhetoric took on multiple meanings. Like the summit communiqués, NATO international staff drafted the text before the meetings based on a working knowledge of where the allies stood on a policy issue. It was then presented to the Georgians and the two sides went back and forth until they reached a compromise. Usually there was "a lot of horse trading behind the text," admitted an interviewee.⁹⁷ Concerning the Bucharest decision, "we are aware the allies don't want to steer

⁹⁷ Interview R, Dutch NATO International Staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

away from” the specific wording and “don’t want to commit to doing more or less.”⁹⁸ The allies did however understand that the commitment was “more than just about Georgia.” Crucially, it was also about “standing up” to Russia because many allies saw the developments in Georgia as a “bellwether” of Russia’s assertive foreign policy toward its neighbors.⁹⁹ Thus, even while NATO principally spoke to a Georgian audience through the NGC format, it simultaneously sought to exert its independent decision-making ability against Russia’s attempts to limit its future moves.

In the February 2015 joint statement of the NGC meeting at NATO headquarters, allied defense ministers reaffirmed their “strong support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders” (NATO, 2015a). The NGC met for the first time at a NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016, which in NATO’s telling, showed the “unique scope and depth of Georgia’s relationship with the Alliance” (NATO, 2016a, §1). Once again, the allies gave their “full support” to Georgia’s so-called territorial integrity. For his part, Georgian foreign minister Mikheil Janelidze reaffirmed his country’s “determination” to become a full NATO member, which was “a top foreign policy priority...” (Ibid., §5). The aspirational rhetoric betrayed Russia’s real ability to further incorporate Georgia’s breakaway territories into its own security architecture. On the ground Russian authorities had been erecting barriers along the de facto border with Georgia proper, a process called “borderization” by its critics (Toal, 2017). President Putin reached separate agreements with Abkhazia in November 2014 and South Ossetia in March 2015 to deeply integrate both de facto states’ militaries, economies, customs services, and border guards with those of Russia (Guardian, 2014; Soldatkin and Heritage, 2015).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

The NGC meetings in 2018 and 2019 reinforced Georgia's privileged status among NATO partners and further impressed that "substantial progress" had been made toward membership. On July 12, 2018, the NGC met in Brussels the day after the full NATO summit there, following the precedent set with the 2016 Warsaw meetings. The occasion marked the tenth anniversary of the NGC, highlighting the "enduring nature" of the relationship, according to NATO (NATO, 2018b). Already in the text's first paragraph, allied heads of state praised Georgia's determination to meet NATO's membership requirements:

Allies welcome the substantial progress on reforms in Georgia over the past decade in consolidating its democracy and achieving stronger economic development, more effective defense institutions and modernized armed forces. Georgia is committed to continue implementing these reforms (NATO, 2018b).

This passage illustrated a rhetorical strategy by which NATO defined Georgia's identity in terms of its convergence with Western values. While temporally differentiated from the West proper, as institutionally embodied by NATO, Georgia was nonetheless set on a steady, positive trajectory toward formally (re)joining the West. This was a transformation process that would eventually lead it to achieving NATO membership, signifying its homecoming to the West and ultimate manifest destiny. NATO, in its self-defined role as the teacher of the Euro-Atlantic community's beliefs and practices, publicly recognized the "substantial progress on reforms in Georgia over the past decade" and judged that the perennial learner had successfully developed a consolidated democracy, strong economy, effective defense institutions, and modernized armed forces. These were the requisite cultural attributes of NATO members and constituted the internalization of the community's practices into Georgia's domestic politics. NATO thus understood Georgia as having undergone the necessary international socialization to warrant membership. Despite this, the allies could not formally validate the aspirant's desire for

civilizational belonging to the West due to Russia's de facto veto over Georgia's accession. Georgia thus endured in a political and discursive in-between space, defined by NATO as an insider but nonetheless left on the outside.

At the October 2019 NGC meeting in Batumi, Georgia the allies echoed the rhetorical commitment to upholding the Bucharest decision and to supporting the country's territorial integrity. The meeting was held at the ambassadorial level with the participation of Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia. This marked the NAC's first visit to Georgia since 2011 and included engagements with President Zourabishvili and members of parliament. These gestures were meant to show NATO's appreciation for Georgia's "steadfast support" for the alliance and to "celebrate the achievements" of "the significant progress made since 2008" (NATO, 2019). The NAC again made clear its intent for Georgia's geopolitical future, stating plainly that the "allies reiterate their decision made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia will become a member of the Alliance..." (Ibid.). The text contained in the penultimate paragraph NATO's ceremonial expression of concern for the country's permanent fragmented territory. The deeply subordinated positioning in text however signaled a desire to firmly play down the issue, as both sides acknowledged their inability to change the situation on the ground. That statement was followed only by the customary show of gratitude for the hospitality extended by the Georgian hosts, typical of NATO's public documents.

8.3 Cultivating the Material Side of Multivocality

From 2014 to 2020, NATO continued showing novel ways to nurture robust action through actions instilled with multiple interpretations. The establishment of the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) in the months after the Crimea annexation brought the already existing special relationship to new heights. The timing of the move was meant to show that both

NATO and Georgia were undeterred by Russia's aggression toward Ukraine and remained dedicated to advancing Georgia's integration. The subsequent awarding of Enhanced Opportunities Partner (EOP) status further defined Georgia's identity as a model perennial learner among NATO's partners. To differing degrees, both moves represented important symbolic gestures in the upkeep of NATO-Georgia relations amid the deepening Ukraine crisis.

The United States also continued advancing bilateral security cooperation with Georgia through training, exercises, and weapons sales. Beginning in 2015, the United States invested \$202 million in foreign military financing, which enabled Georgia to purchase U.S.-made defense equipment and services (U.S. Department of State, 2020). In February 2017, the two countries launched the "Georgia Defense Readiness Program" (GDRP) to improve Georgia's military self-sufficiency and institutional capacity. The United States also approved Georgia to purchase dozens of javelin anti-tank missiles. The first delivery was received in 2018 with subsequent purchases approved in 2021 (CivilGeorgia, 2022). Such material support sought to reinforce the Western rhetoric by providing a tangible sign of commitment to Georgia.

8.31 The Substantial NATO-Georgia Package

At the September 2014 Wales Summit, the NAC announced the creation of the SNGP, a new set of initiatives to continue bringing Georgia's military forces and defense institutions to NATO standards. The stated goal was to "strengthen Georgia's defense and interoperability capabilities with the alliance, which will help Georgia advance in its preparations towards membership in the Alliance" (NATO, 2014). SNGP was intended to deepen the practical cooperation that NATO developed with Georgia in NATO-led operations and missions over the past decade. This included Georgia's "continuous and uninterrupted" contribution to the

Afghanistan war and regular participation in the NATO Response Force (NRF)¹⁰⁰ (NATO, 2016a). Taken together, the contributions showed Georgia’s “role as a contributor to our shared security” (NATO, 2014), which was one of the long-stated conditions of membership, as defined by the allies (NATO, 2010a, §27; 2015c). While the ultimate goal of membership was in fact articulated in the Wales statement, the sequencing in text suggested it was secondary to improving Georgia’s ability to operate with allied forces and according to NATO standards (NATO, 2014, §93). After creating SNGP, the NAC claimed, “Georgia’s relationship with the Alliance contains the tools necessary to continue moving Georgia forward towards eventual membership” (Ibid.). However, there was still no MAP.

SNGP’s development in 2014-2015 represented a major investment in Georgia’s military and defense modernization. NATO touted it as the largest capacity-building package ever given to a partner (NATO, 2022b). From February 2016, SNGP comprised 13 assistance initiatives across a wide range of defense and security functions, from air and cyber defense, to logistics, to strategic and operational planning (NATO, 2016b, 2017). Each initiative was supervised by an in-resident “project team leader” and staffed with “expert advisors” from NATO countries, who worked alongside Georgian counterparts in the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and other security institutions (NATO, 2016b). Thus, the SNGP enabled NATO to claim to staking a physical presence in Georgia, which both sides valued as a show of support after the Crimea annexation. A U.S. defense official said SNGP assured the Georgians “that we really care” about their future.¹⁰¹ Both the individual projects and the people overseeing them were

¹⁰⁰ The NRF was established in 2003 as a high-readiness force of land, air, maritime, and special operations forces units capable of rapid deployment for crisis management, disaster relief, and collective defense purposes. At the Wales Summit, the allies agreed to create a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) as part of the NRF. See “NATO Response Force,” <https://lc.nato.int/operations/nato-response-force>.

¹⁰¹ Interview DD, U.S. defense official at U.S. mission to NATO, by telephone, 14 May 2021.

paid for by the “voluntary national contributions” of individual members instead of NATO common funding, in which the allies collectively decided what activities were eligible for common funding and how much could be spent in a year (NATO, 2022a). SNGP thus lacked a measure of permanency since it was not backed by consensus.¹⁰² Indeed, there was no requirement that all NATO members had to participate in the program. At least six did not as of March 2017 but by the following July all allies were contributing, as well as Finland and Sweden (NATO, 2017, 2018b).

A “core team of experts” oversaw SNGP implementation, which was always led by a German colonel.¹⁰³ This was ironic given the common perception held by U.S. practitioners that Germany was the “biggest obstacle” standing in the way of Georgia’s membership.¹⁰⁴ It was for this reason the Georgians requested Germany be the SNGP core team leader. The rationale was that having a German in a position of authority in Tbilisi gave the hosts ample opportunity to make use of their well-known hospitality to “win over” the Germans “one supra at a time.”¹⁰⁵ Under the SNGP, NATO developed two so-called flagship initiatives capable of the lofty goal of “exporting stability to the country, region and beyond” (NATO, 2022b). The first was the Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC) staffed by allied and Georgian personnel, which provided tactical-level training to Georgian units headed to Afghanistan (NATO, 2015c). The other was the Defense Institution Building School, which gave Georgian officials “accredited NATO instruction” (NATO, 2017). In November 2016 Georgia began hosting annual NATO military exercises open to all allies and partners (NATO, 2022b). Several hundred U.S. soldiers

¹⁰² Interview II, U.S. defense official at NATO headquarters, by telephone, 13 December 2021.

¹⁰³ Interview M, Italian NATO international staff officer in Tbilisi, by telephone, 30 June 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Georgia interview F, U.S. foreign service officer, Tbilisi, 22 September 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Interview II, U.S. defense official at NATO headquarters, by telephone, 13 December 2021.

and marines stationed across Europe deployed to Georgia to participate. NATO commended the execution of the March 2019 exercise, which was the first time the Georgian General Staff and JTEC planned and led a simulated crisis response to NATO's standards (NATO, 2019).

Under the banner of SNGP, NATO sought to integrate Georgia's military acquisition activities into NATO procurement networks. Beginning in 2015, Latvia led an SNGP initiative aimed at establishing a modern defense procurement system interoperable with NATO and allied procedures. As a complementary effort, this acquisition initiative paved the way for a 2016 cooperation agreement on procurement between Georgia and the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NPSA). In 2022-2023, the Georgian government adopted a new law on defense and security procurement in line with both NATO and EU standards. With its implementation, NATO closed out the acquisition initiative in 2023, hailing it as a successful achievement for Georgia (NATO, 2023).

SNGP's meaning varied and transformed over time, which lent to the multivocal character of the move. While the allies said at Wales it would help Georgia prepare for joining NATO, SNGP was simultaneously understood as created with the intent of sidestepping the MAP issue, on which there was still no agreement within the alliance. Privately, there were differing interpretations of the move. A NATO core team deputy asserted SNGP was not a substitute for a MAP since it involved only defense and security reforms and not on offering a formal political pathway to joining NATO: "it helps [Georgia] prepare for membership, but not membership itself."¹⁰⁶ Another interviewee agreed that while SNGP did not replace a MAP, it was nonetheless implemented with the goal of membership in mind.¹⁰⁷ Overall, the prevailing

¹⁰⁶ Interview C, U.S. defense advisor in Tbilisi, by video call, 28 May 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Interview M, Italian NATO international staff officer in Tbilisi, by telephone, 30 June 2020.

trope among interviewees was that SNGP constituted a so-called consolation prize to Georgia in lieu of a MAP.¹⁰⁸ This evoked perceptions of the past instruments NATO had doled out after the August 2008 war—namely the NGC and ANP—which marked the start of the special relationship. Taken together, while these structures were presented as helping Georgia meet the membership criteria, whether it would be invited to join once such criteria were met was always a separate matter. Ultimately, granting membership was a “political decision” needing the unanimous agreement of the allies.¹⁰⁹ Technical qualifications mattered, though not to the extent that Georgia’s advocates wanted them to.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the Atlantic Council continued pushing the claim that Georgia had a “strong case” for membership due to its military contributions to NATO missions, economic competitiveness, and favorable business climate (Courtney, et. al, 2018). Nonetheless, since no consensus existed anyway on membership, some allies had instead “dumped more on the reform issue” over the years because it was a “convenient reason to put off” the membership question.¹¹¹ At the 2016 Warsaw summit, NATO added two new SNGP initiatives, crisis management and counter-mobility, bringing the total number of areas of cooperation to 15 (NATO, 2022b).

Opponents have pointed to Georgia’s deficiencies as the reason for denying accession, specifically the inability to fully implement the political reforms directed by the allies. Although there had been a peaceful transfer of power following the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2012 and 2013—which ended Mikheil Saakashvili’s presidency—there was an

¹⁰⁸ Interview E, British defense advisor to Georgian MoD, by telephone, 9 June 2020; Interview R, Dutch NATO international staff officer by telephone, 8 July 2020; Interview P, U.S. military officer at NATO international military staff, by telephone, 30 July 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Interview C, U.S. defense advisor in Tbilisi, by video call, 28 May 2020.

¹¹⁰ Georgia interview C, former Georgian diplomat, Tbilisi, 30 August 2017.

¹¹¹ Interview R, Dutch NATO international staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020.

underlying sense that Georgia had not firmly embraced “democratic values” in its domestic politics.¹¹² In public, NATO expressed this concern through a blend of praise, encouragement, and warning, asserting that the “significant progress on reforms” which Georgia had made “must continue” if it hoped to ever join NATO (NATO, 2018a, §65).

Privately however, there was a growing feeling among U.S. officials that Georgia was “not ready” due to the perceived illiberal practices of the Georgian Dream-dominated government from 2012-2013.¹¹³ Yet, in the military dimension, there existed a perception that the requirements for membership had been met by 2019, according to a former U.S. ambassador to Georgia.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, there was also the reality of the divided territory, which NATO unsurprisingly never raised publicly as making accession practically impossible under the conditions of the 1995 enlargement study. As a result, it was understood that the “membership bar [was] higher for Georgia in every way” in contrast with other candidates, a U.S. advisor to the Georgian Ministry of Defense acknowledged.¹¹⁵

The preferred Georgian argument was that this amounted to a double standard. The claim was that some earlier candidates were allowed to join before completing the reforms set out in the enlargement study.¹¹⁶ And it was that perception which led NATO to creating the MAP after the incorporation of Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic in 1999. More recently, Albania’s 2009 accession showed how a supposedly flawed candidate’s shortcomings could be overlooked, which coincidentally enabled NATO to claim the membership door remained open despite

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Interview HH, U.S. defense advisor in Tbilisi, by video call, 15 November 2021.

¹¹⁴ Interview S, former U.S. ambassador to Georgia, by telephone, 10 July 2020.

¹¹⁵ Interview GG, U.S. defense advisor in Tbilisi, by telephone, 15 September 2021.

¹¹⁶ Interview FF, Georgian diplomat, Washington, DC, 3 September 2021.

Russia's violent reaction to the Bucharest decision.¹¹⁷ However, Georgia was indeed an outlier case among NATO aspirants in the post-Cold War era, given that a hostile, nuclear-armed neighboring power held de facto control over part of its territory. Nearly all Georgians interviewed neglected this fact.

Despite NATO's early public assertions that SNGP would aid Georgia in its preparations for membership (NATO, 2015b, §2), any direct linkage between the initiative and the country's eventual accession was played down in the following years. A February 2016 "media backgrounder" paper omitted any reference to membership, stating only that SNGP sought to enhance Georgia's defense capabilities and develop more interoperability (NATO, 2016b). An "SNGP Implementation Process" briefing from March 2017, which was not released publicly, did not include the words "member" or "membership" even once. Instead, the stated "common goal" of SGNP was articulated opaquely as only "more NATO in Georgia, [and] more Georgia in NATO" (NATO, 2017).

While NATO claimed Georgia had been given all the necessary tools for membership, the terms of its accession were still ambiguous. Irrespective of the country's ability to fulfill the stated membership requirements, it was possible that NATO would eventually add more to delay accession. The October 2019 NGC statement announced as much. At the occasion of the fifth anniversary, allied ambassadors declared SNGP would be "refreshed and updated" but did not offer a reason for the decision (NATO, 2019). The move was presented as a positive step aimed at building on the "success" of the last five years and to "further enhance" NATO-Georgia cooperation (Ibid.). At the same time, some SNGP projects, such as logistics, were closed out as

¹¹⁷ Interview AA, U.S. military attaché, Washington, DC, 29 April 2021.

Georgian forces achieved a degree of competency in independently sustaining units deployed in the field.¹¹⁸ NATO later said the so-called refresh aimed to better align existing initiatives to Georgia's needs and identified three new areas for cooperation: English language training, medical capability development, and standardization and codification (NATO, 2022b). The process was completed in December 2020, raising the number of SNGP projects to 18. This was the second increase in five years, prompting a growing negative perception that NATO was continually "moving the goalposts" on Georgia.¹¹⁹ Such tactics underscored the power imbalance in the relationship. NATO could concurrently claim to be helping a willing partner continue striving to meet the membership criteria while also prolonging the process by adding new requirements to the mix.

8.32 The "Enhanced Opportunities Partner" Program

Besides the SNGP, the decision to designate Georgia an "Enhanced Opportunities Partner" was another multivocal move which helped foster a perception of elite partner status and yet did little to advance its membership bid. At the 2014 Wales Summit, allied defense ministers decided to launch the "Partnership Interoperability Initiative" (PII) with a small group of partner countries who had demonstrated "particularly significant contributions to NATO operations" (NATO, 2014, §88). This move contributed to a broader attempt to continue deepening interoperability between NATO allies and partners as the Afghanistan war wound down. By the time of the 2016 Warsaw summit, the NAC formally announced the creation of the

¹¹⁸ Interview P, U.S. military officer at NATO international military staff, by telephone, 3 July 2020.

¹¹⁹ Interview E, British defense advisor to Georgian MoD, by telephone, 9 June 2020.

Enhanced Opportunities Program (EOP) under the PII, although the program had been in the works since shortly after Wales. Five countries—Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, and Sweden—were initially offered “enhanced opportunities for cooperation” in recognition of their “significant operational contributions” to NATO missions over the years (NATO, 2016c, §101). Georgia stood out in the crowd as the largest troop contributor to the Afghanistan war, which NATO regularly acknowledged (NATO, 2018b, 2019). It was also the only EOP country wanting membership and which NATO explicitly said would join. The timing of EOP was meant to show the allies still cared about Georgia. At the same time, the NAC announced an “Enhanced Forward Presence” of four multinational battalion-sized battlegroups would be deployed to the Baltic States and Poland to deter possible future Russian aggression (NATO, 2016c, §40). The EOP countries were afforded special access to training and exercises, defense capacity-building funding, and intelligence sharing (NATO, 2016c). However, the collective effect of the existing bilateral structures meant Georgia already had such privileges—and much more. The SNGP involved over a dozen military- and defense-related initiatives. Meanwhile, the ANP and NGC provided individualized feedback on reform progress and an official forum for political dialogue, respectively. No other EOP country enjoyed such special attention. Nonetheless, NATO understood EOP as mostly a “label” to be displayed outward, without much substance behind it.¹²⁰ The designation did not imply any further commitment to following through on the Bucharest decision. Despite further constructing Georgia as a special partner, EOP made little difference to moving it closer to membership.

¹²⁰ Interview K, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 24 June 2020.

8.4 The Meaning of MAP

No other issue has illustrated NATO's robust action in Georgia's case like the MAP. Officially, MAP was the formal institutional mechanism which guided select candidates toward membership. In the two decades since the first post-Cold War enlargement, NATO had promoted the expectation that MAPs would be awarded to aspirants which successfully internalized the membership standards, as judged by the allies. After 1999, only one country, Finland, had joined without completing a MAP first, though it was a special case. By virtue of having EU membership and close partnership with NATO, Finland already met the alliance's membership criteria. The EU had more stringent political, legislative, and economic admission requirements than NATO. Moreover, Finland's military was already interoperable with NATO forces in many respects. In all other cases in the expansion process, having a MAP was the key which unlocked the NATO membership door.

Whether Georgia would be offered a MAP was the major point of contention in the Bucharest summit compromise between the U.S. and European pillars of NATO. Though it declined to provide a practical pathway to membership by extending a MAP, the NAC nonetheless declared Georgia would join the alliance. Yet, fissures persisted for many years between Georgia's advocates and opponents behind closed doors.¹²¹ As of 2020, there were at least five "hold outs" against membership: France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal.¹²² And U.S. support, which had long been assured, was waning as of late 2021,

¹²¹ Interview GG, U.S. defense advisor in Georgia, by telephone, 15 September 2021.

¹²² Interview C, U.S. defense advisor in Georgia, by video call, 28 May 2020.

admitted an American SNGP official.¹²³ The allies looked to possibly postpone membership indefinitely and use the country's lack of a MAP as the excuse.

Ultimately the question was whether NATO was willing to risk further violence and confrontation with Russia over Georgia. In the years after Bucharest, NATO excelled at sending mixed signals with its answer. While many actions suggested an intent to follow through on the membership pledge, its unrelenting refusal to issue a MAP indicated the opposite. In the circumstances, to speak about it became taboo. NATO removed the issue from public view to prevent unwanted attention to the fact the allies did not agree. There was no reference to a MAP for Georgia in any statement between December 2009 and July 2016.

After Russia's annexation of Crimea, the NAC brought the issue back into the open even though there was still no consensus. Whether this was deliberate, the move reflected a general desire to exert control over what it could: "Decisions on enlargement are for NATO itself; no third party has a say in that process" (NATO, 2018a, §62). The 2016 Warsaw summit communique asserted, "at the 2008 Bucharest Summit we agreed that Georgia will become a member of NATO with MAP as an integral part of the process..." (NATO, 2016c, §111). Thus, while NATO's recent material support to Georgia had given the impression of quasi-membership and that perhaps it was on the cusp of being invited to join, its rhetoric served as a reminder that accession was always beyond reach without a MAP. The communique subsequently announced: "Georgia's relationship with the Alliance contains all the practical tools to prepare for eventual membership" (Ibid.). The juxtaposition of the two lines in the text exposed the paradox of the situation. At the same time, NATO claimed MAP was both an "integral part" of the membership

¹²³ Interview HH, U.S. defense advisor to Georgian Ministry of Defense, by video call, 15 November 2021.

process and yet suggested without stating it was not a “practical tool” to aid Georgia’s integration. The statement confirmed what had been long assumed but never said publicly: MAP had taken on a mostly symbolic meaning in Georgia’s case. The cumulative impact of the so-called practical tools Georgia had been given over the years—namely the NGC, ANP, and SNGP—had stripped MAP of any substantive value. It had instead become an item with little intrinsic worth and intended primarily for presentation.

MAP was in fact laden with multivocal meaning. While it retained an official meaning as the bureaucratic procedure triggering the accession process, it was at the same time a crucial, performative speech act in NATO’s construction of Georgia for two reasons. First, conferring MAP does something to Georgia; it puts it in a special category connoting the allies’ collective stamp of approval. Secondly, NATO’s status as a powerful actor hypothetically meant that it was able to make Georgia’s dream come true. And judging from the precedent of past expansions, in which MAP always preceded membership, accession was highly unlikely without it. MAP could thus be interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives. For Georgia, it was an object of desire, relentlessly pursued but always elusive. NATO, on the other hand, understood it as a treasured artifact which must be carefully guarded and leveraged so it could hold a semblance of control over eager aspirants. “It is a carrot that we keep dangling out there” to make candidates reform to NATO standards, admitted a U.S. military officer at NATO headquarters.¹²⁴

NATO’s insistence that MAP was the next step for Georgia on its way to membership amounted to a delaying tactic. By 2020, Georgia’s relationship with the alliance had attained a level of intimacy in which there was little left to give it besides an invitation to join. But since

¹²⁴ Interview P, U.S. military officer at NATO international military staff, by telephone, 3 July 2020.

there was still no agreement on MAP, NATO used it as bureaucratic cover to retain as much flexibility as possible for future moves without locking in a deeper commitment to Georgia.

8.5 Conclusion

One of the least surprising responses to Russia's annexation of Crimea was NATO's continued public commitment to following through with Georgia's membership and supporting its so-called territorial integrity. Russia's aggression had little bearing on the official narrative about Georgia, though it did have the effect of consolidating allied hostility against Russia. States were free to choose their own security arrangements, no outside country had a veto over NATO's decisions, and the alliance was open to welcoming new members, so went the narrative. Such assertions were the building blocks of the liberal democratic community-building narrative which NATO had long promoted.

NATO continued to define Georgia as a special partner and future member—rhetoric which aimed to be robust across multiple situations. NATO could be seen by outsiders as a reliable alliance partner that stood up for its friends' interests. This resonated not only with Georgia and Ukraine but the multitude of other current and prospective NATO partners across the globe. Alliances with positive reputations were far more capable of attracting partners because their reputations for honoring commitments appealed to alliance seekers. The partnership storyline coexisted side-by-side with a legitimacy storyline. Being recognized as a “partner” and “friend” of Georgia was one but not the sole method of legitimation. Recognition as the institutional embodiment of Western civilization was another. The narrative of a steady and secure NATO, navigating the changes in its security environment and standing up for its beliefs and practices, in the face of a revanchist, adversarial Russia, also had important purchase within the alliance. By presenting NATO enlargement as a policy that was rooted in the

fundamental values of the allies and on established membership rules, the allies made it difficult to renege on the Bucharest pledge without harming their credibility as Euro-Atlantic community members. And the allies could not openly question the stated values and norms on which the policy was based, for this would have meant rejecting the very values and norms on which their own legitimacy rested. NATO thus felt compelled to publicly uphold its past commitments to protect the community identity, regardless of its ability to make such commitments a reality. In this light, the private self-interest was clear to see. NATO's moves were driven by a fear that backing out of Bucharest would cause significant reputational damage with Georgia and a serious rift within the alliance.

Beyond the rhetoric, the SNGP exemplified particularly well the material side of multivocality. While presented as bolstering Georgia's ability to defend itself from a renewed Russian attack, the move was also a reaction to Crimea and the destabilization of eastern Ukraine. It enabled NATO to claim to have skin in the game in Georgia while at the same time avoided further provocation with Russia by not targeting its response directly at Ukraine. SNGP was thus a single action in multiple agendas. It accomplished the short-term goal of displaying solidarity with a small Westernizing country whose possible future incorporation into NATO Russia perceived as threatening. This helped uphold NATO's reputation of reliability. In addition, the move was intended to show that both NATO and Georgia would not be cowed by Russia, which helped boost NATO's self-esteem after its failure (again) to prevent an attack on a country which it said would join the alliance. The SNGP also allowed NATO to claim it was helping Georgia ready itself for membership, and thus directly supported Bucharest's intent. But NATO nonetheless preserved long-term options for future moves by not directly linking SNGP to accession. And the allies could calibrate the pace and scope of SNGP at their discretion, much

to Georgia's frustration. It was always conceivable that NATO would impose new requirements to keep membership just out of reach. Like the earlier gestures of awarding the ANP and NGC, SNGP represented a consolation prize for Georgia since the allies could not agree on extending a MAP.

NATO's repeated assertions that Georgia had all the tools necessary to continue moving it toward membership rendered MAP as having no practical meaning in Georgia's case. But NATO still stipulated that obtaining a MAP was a crucial waypoint on the membership track. This amounted to a confusing doublethink wrapped in a veneer of cool restraint. NATO seemed to believe in MAP as the procedural institutional mechanism to facilitate the membership process for proven candidates but altered its standards to suit its own convenience. MAP was in this case manipulated to conceal the fact the allies lacked the political will to follow through on Bucharest.

Chapter 9 - Ukraine, 2007-2008: A NATO-Ukraine “Distinctive Partnership” Already in the Works

9.1 Introduction

In 2007-2008, NATO constructed and projected a strategic narrative of Ukraine as a model alliance partner on an upward trajectory toward obtaining an invitation to join the alliance. By the time of the April 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO and Ukraine had established a deeply institutionalized relationship, highlighted by a special bilateral political framework for consultation, military cooperation in NATO expeditionary operations, and various practical initiatives on the ground inside Ukraine. With these structures already in place, the NAC’s decision that Ukraine would become a member of the alliance can be interpreted as a plausible “next step” in a long process of outreach and engagement that began in the early 1990s.

Three key themes were evident in the analysis of NATO’s discourse of Ukraine before the August 2008 War. First, Ukraine’s apparent eagerness to ready itself for possible NATO membership by taking on far-reaching reforms of its political, defense, and security sectors defined the way the country was presented in NATO’s statements. This was not remarkable nor unique to the Ukraine case, as it mirrored NATO’s understanding of Georgia over the same timeframe. What was different, however, was that Ukraine had a clear and organized anti-NATO political force within the country. This factor always complicated NATO’s claim to be supporting the principle of national self-determination in the Ukraine case.

Second, and as with Georgia, the allies offered an alternate rationale of security than the traditional NATO enlargement narrative, which claimed the cultural and civilizational belonging of the earlier aspirants to the West and Europe. Yet, whereas NATO’s presentation of Georgia

considered that country's territorial fragmentation as a central issue, Ukraine's identity was instead constructed principally according to its "strategic" geopolitical location. Indeed, NATO understood Ukraine as a vital geostrategic actor with a central role in the stability and security of the Euro-Atlantic space. It was implicit that Ukraine's security could only be assured by its assent to NATO's membership standards. The country's cultural attributes were always secondary to its spatialization.

Lastly and unsurprisingly, NATO defined Ukraine as a perennial learner of the Euro-Atlantic community's beliefs and practices, and thus casted itself as the central moral authority of the security order. In this manner, NATO treated Ukraine and Georgia equally, as both were portrayed as eager and attentive students whose shortcomings and differences were meant to be overlooked and minimized.

The following chapter consists of three sections. It begins with setting the NATO-Ukraine relationship in historical and geopolitical context. A review of the events shows that NATO had developed a more institutionalized partnership with Ukraine than with any other post-communist country excluding Russia. The second section examines the construction of Ukraine in NATO discourse from early 2007 to the August 2008 War. The chapter ends by returning focus to the April 2008 Bucharest Declaration, which, as in the Georgia case, fundamentally changed NATO-Ukraine relations by publicly committing NATO to the country's eventual membership in the alliance.

9.2 Origins

NATO and Ukraine have a long history of engagement. Even before the Soviet breakup, Ukraine joined the NACC in 1991. In 1994, Ukraine then joined the PfP, the first former Soviet

republic to do so. Ukrainian forces served in the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR) in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995 and in the subsequent Stabilization Force (SFOR) there in 1996-1999. In 1997, Ukraine and the United States began co-hosting the annual Sea Breeze maritime exercise in the Black Sea, open to NATO allies and partners. All of these earlier contributions foreshadowed the participation in many later NATO-led operations, such as Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Operation Active Endeavor in the Mediterranean, and off the coast of Somalia in Operation Ocean Shield (Wolff, 2017). Ukraine was also the first partner country to provide forces to the NRF (Yost, 2014). Taken together, the efforts helped to construct Ukraine's image as a loyal and cooperative partner who was committed to "help shoulder shared security responsibilities" with NATO (NATO, 2008b).

In the late 1990s, NATO sought to institutionalize its relationship with Ukraine, though offering membership was not yet part of the plan. In July 1997, a Charter on a Distinctive Partnership was established, which defined the guiding principles of the relationship and areas for cooperation. In this document the allies affirmed their commitment to the "inherent right" of states to choose their own security arrangements. They also expressed concern with safeguarding Ukraine's autonomy and territorial integrity (NATO, 1997). Under the Charter, the NUC was created, a Joint Working Group on Defense Reform (JWGDR) was proposed, and NATO opened two offices inside Ukraine to promote itself. Since 1999, the NATO Liaison Office has supported Ukraine's reform programs in cooperation with government agencies. A NATO Information and Documentation Center (NIDC) opened in 1997, the first such center established by NATO in any partner country (Yost, 1998). This sought to improve the public's lack of awareness—with reportedly only two percent of ordinary Ukrainians being sure they knew what NATO was about by 2005 (Tsygankov, 2015). Historically, popular support for joining NATO was weak and

geographically dispersed. In general, Ukrainians in the center and west wanted stronger ties with the West and supported NATO membership while those in the south and east preferred closer association with Russia and opposed joining NATO (Toal et al., 2020).

Unlike Georgia, Ukraine's path toward NATO membership has zigged and zagged between two policy positions: maintaining neutrality or seeking to join the alliance. The struggles over its geopolitical orientation reflected the country's regional ethno-linguistic differences, its unique geographic position, competing views of national history and identity, and the multiple conceptions of Ukraine in Russian geopolitical culture (Toal, 2017, pp. 199-205). In this context, Ukrainian state leaders often sought to play Russia and the West off each other to fortify their positions and wring concessions from both sides. Outsiders often framed this as a zero-sum choice (Charap & Colton, 2017). President Leonid Kuchma announced the country would pursue the goal of NATO membership at the November 2002 Prague Summit. NATO and Ukraine subsequently approved an "Action Plan" to achieve ultimate "full integration" (NATO, 2002). Earlier that year, Kuchma promised Putin Ukraine would become an associate member of the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Community (Toal, 2017). Kuchma also agreed to sell Russia parts of Ukraine's natural gas transit system in exchange for debt relief (Tsygankov, 2016). By 1998, Ukraine was the third-largest recipient of U.S. aid. And by 2004 the EU was the country's largest donor (Charap & Colton, 2017).

The November 2004 Orange Revolution marked the start of a sharper Western geopolitical turn in Ukraine's foreign policy as the West-backed Viktor Yushchenko defeated Viktor Yanukovich, the Kremlin's chosen candidate. Soon after becoming president, Yushchenko proclaimed his commitment to joining NATO. As it had in Georgia, the Bush administration saw NATO expansion as a powerful tool to advance the freedom agenda by

anchoring Ukraine to the West (Bush, 2011). Yushchenko joined the schemes of Georgian President Saakashvili to push Euro-Atlantic integration in their countries and beyond (Toal, 2017). Bush administration officials urged Ukrainian authorities to become more actively involved in educating the public about the perceived benefits of joining NATO (Charap & Colton, 2017, p. 84). This went well beyond supporting any pre-existing geopolitical aspirations. In April 2005, NATO began an Intensified Dialogue to accelerate Ukraine's membership plans. In December 2006, Ukraine's defense minister declared the country's foreign policy direction was irreversible (Tsygankov, 2015). Russia increasingly perceived the Ukrainian leadership's ambitions as threatening and cultivated other political forces in the country to exploit the existing internal divisions over joining NATO. The split between pro-NATO and pro-Russia forces within Ukraine was evident in a March 2006 petition for a referendum on NATO membership. The pro-Russia Ukrainian opposition claimed it had garnered 4.5 million signatures against joining the alliance (RFE/RL, 2006).

Yanukovich was elected president in February 2010. In his tenure, Ukraine-Russia ties improved. He reversed the NATO membership course and extended the lease on Russia's Black Sea Fleet for 25 years in exchange for reduced gas prices. In June 2010, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law proposed by Yanukovich adopting a military non-aligned status (Pop, 2010). While still allowing cooperation with NATO, this in effect nullified NATO's earlier decision that Ukraine would become a member. The sequence of events marked the only time a country decided joining NATO was no longer a goal after being previously designated a future member. Even so, Yanukovich's move reflected the prevailing domestic attitudes at the time, with a slim majority of Ukrainians opposed to pursuing membership (Sprehe, 2010). Russia meanwhile continued to try to strengthen its presence in Ukraine's economy to counter the ongoing

integration with the EU. While Yanukovich rejected Putin's invitation to join a Customs Union, he accepted an offer of another gas price discount and financial aid (Tsygankov, 2015). In November 2013, Yanukovich announced his decision to suspend a proposed Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU. The deals excluded closer economic ties with Russia. Instead, they would have deeply integrated Ukraine with the EU both economically and legislatively—just like NATO's MAP and ANP in the military-political sectors.

The decision led to Yanukovich's downfall. In response to what was perceived as the leadership's reversal of the drive toward full EU membership, mass demonstrations took place in Kyiv. Led by the political opposition and backed by the EU and the United States, the protests intensified and reached an unprecedented level beyond which the Ukrainian state could manage (Hill, 2018). While the protests did not initially call for Yanukovich to step down—only a change in policy—the government's repressive, violent response only exacerbated the crisis and deepened political polarization across the country (Wilson, 2014). In February 2014, an EU-negotiated deal with Russia keeping Yanukovich in power thereafter immediately collapsed. Likely fearing the wrath of radicalized protest mobs who showed a capacity for violence, Yanukovich fled Kyiv, creating a power vacuum (Toal, 2017). While Putin saw Yanukovich's ouster as a coup orchestrated by external forces, Western state leaders generally viewed the so-called Euromaidan and the events leading to Yanukovich's flight as an indigenous popular revolt (Sakwa, 2016). Nonetheless, the events culminated in the violent overthrow of the democratically elected president of Ukraine.

Amid the political upheaval and instability that ensued, Putin authorized a stealthy Russian invasion of Crimea. Russian forces quickly seized numerous strategic sites across

Crimea, including the Black Sea Fleet facilities at Sevastopol and Simferopol, to gain military control of the peninsula. Pro-Russian authorities organized a hasty referendum for union with Russia, in which the population of Crimea was reported to vote overwhelmingly for secession and joining Russia (Wilson, 2014). On March 21, 2014, the Russian parliament ratified a treaty of annexation incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation. Putin later blamed the perceived threat of NATO expansion as a motivation behind the move. In an April 2014 televised broadcast, he asserted:

But it was also our understanding that if we did nothing then they [NATO] would, at some point, drag Ukraine into NATO and tell us it's none of our business (RFE/RL, 2014).

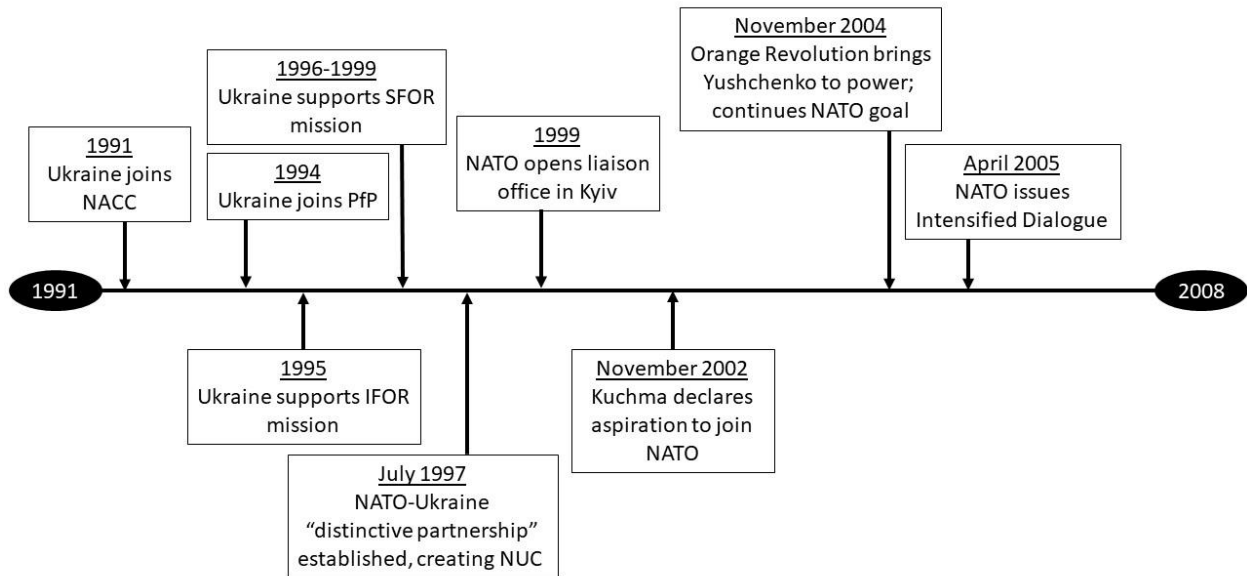
Thus, through its seizure and subsequent annexation of Crimea, Russia had rendered Ukraine a territorially fragmented state. This imperiled the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO, irrespective of the geopolitical ambitions of its leaders.

As compared with Georgia, two main points stand out in Ukraine's long history with NATO. First, while obtaining NATO membership had been a foreign policy priority for successive Georgian governments since the early 2000s, Ukraine's stated goals have oscillated between seeking full membership on one hand, and maintaining formal neutrality, on the other. Unlike Georgia, Ukraine was never part of the Russia-dominated CSTO. Yushchenko continued his predecessor's efforts of gradual yet deliberate integration with the alliance. This culminated in the April 2008 Bucharest decision that Ukraine would join NATO. Under Yanukovich, however, the membership course was reversed and relations with Russia improved, though not to the extent Russia wanted, as the Ukrainian president sought to preserve good relations with the West. After Yanukovich's removal, the new government altered the neutrality position yet again and declared its intent to work toward closer integration with NATO (Herszenhorn, 2014). The

back and forth between pro- and anti-membership showed that Ukraine was not like Georgia—or other candidates in prior expansion rounds—which were able to maintain a formal pro-membership stance despite changes in government. Ukraine’s lack of consistency has complicated NATO’s ability to sustain a pro-expansion narrative continuity over the long term, as the alliance wanted to look supportive of Ukraine’s aspirations, as it often claimed.

Second, there existed a lack of firm consensus among the Ukrainian people about joining NATO. Public opinion varied drastically between the country’s macro-regions and did not always follow elite opinion. To the extent this was evident in the Georgia case—with popular attitudes diverging between the breakaway regions and Georgia proper—the issue never surfaced in NATO’s statements about the country. The lack of consensus within Ukraine contravened NATO’s stated standard requiring high domestic popular support for joining the alliance as a criterion for membership. NATO’s public diplomacy effort sought to “fix” this situation, albeit with limited success. Russia also sought to bolster anti-NATO feelings in Ukraine. Both factors showed that Ukraine’s geopolitical context drove its ability to navigate its relationships with external powers. Figure 3 illustrates NATO’s engagement with Ukraine from the time of its independence to the 2008 Bucharest summit.

Figure 3. NATO's Engagement with Ukraine, 1991-2008.



9.3 Defining Ukraine in NATO's Discourse before the August 2008 War

In 2007-2008, NATO presented Ukraine as an extraordinary partner who was already on the inside track toward joining the alliance. While there were threads of the civilizational discourse woven into NATO's identification of Ukraine, the country appeared primarily as an important geostrategic actor on both the global and regional stages. NATO offered a distinct line of circular geopolitical reasoning about the country's place in the security order: the security of the Euro-Atlantic community depended on Ukraine, whose own security relied on it assenting to the community's norms and values, as specified by NATO. This logic helped prepare the ground for pressing forward with future alliance expansion to Ukraine, despite Russia's stern opposition, weak domestic popular support, and disagreement within NATO. The alliance focused on Ukraine's so-called reform progress and security contributions and downplayed the country's own concern for its sovereignty and national unity.

As a first move, the allies took stock of the current relationship and signaled an intent to take things to the next level. The June 2007 NAC defense ministers meeting communique stated:

We continue to attach great importance to the NATO-Ukraine Distinctive Partnership. We welcome the progress achieved by Ukraine over the past year in implementing defense reforms....We also appreciate Ukraine's continued contributions to our common security... (NATO, 2007b, §23).

Appealing to a Ukrainian audience at the NUC meeting held on the same day, allied defense ministers invoked feelings of honor, status, and commitment by expressing their "determination" to further advance the "distinguished" and "strategically important" partnership (NATO, 2007a). On July 9, 2007, at the occasion of the "landmark" tenth anniversary of the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership, NUC ambassadors anticipated "the prospects for the further development" of the relationship (NATO, 2007d).

Virtually all public statements were laced with words of encouragement. "Ukraine has made significant progress in implementing security, defense, and military related aspects of the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan" (Ibid.). We "appreciate Ukraine's substantial contributions to our common security" and "encourage its continued efforts to promote regional cooperation," said NAC ministers at the end of 2007 (NATO, 2007c). Earlier that year the allies "welcomed" the recent adoption of Ukraine's first National Security Strategy and "encouraged" a comprehensive national security sector review (NATO, 2007a). And lest Ukraine be tempted to rest on its laurels, NATO "stressed the need to continue to implement wide-ranging reforms" (NATO, 2007a), particularly those "aimed at transforming its entire security sector." (NATO, 2007b). Over the course of 2007, Ukrainian officials made clear the country's "strategic course of Euro-Atlantic integration aimed at achieving full membership in the Alliance" (NATO, 2007d, 2007e). In response, NATO sought to manage expectations while remaining supportive of Ukraine's aspirations. The allies "welcomed" the lofty goal of membership but cautioned that Ukraine

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joining NATO would “depend primarily upon concrete, measurable progress” in implementing “key reforms and policies,” as NATO directed (NATO, 2007e). That was misleading. While NATO wanted to give the impression of dispassionate objectivity in its decision-making process, the choice to offer membership was fundamentally political. Technical qualifications mattered, but not to the extent the allies led on.

By the April 2008 Bucharest Summit, the NATO-Ukraine relationship was already highly institutionalized. Ukraine had attained a level of intimacy with the alliance at the bilateral institutional level which Georgia would only experience in the years after the August 2008 war.

The July 2007 NUC ambassadorial meeting marked the tenth anniversary of a formalized NATO-Ukraine partnership, under which the NUC had been created as a bespoke bilateral forum with a mandate to meet at least twice a year. Both sides considered the NUC a “valuable framework” for developing “mutually beneficial” practical cooperation and implementing Ukraine’s reforms (NATO, 2007d). The meeting’s statement re-impacted the teacher-learner hierarchy into the narrative, proclaiming the NUC format had “allowed Ukraine to benefit from NATO’s experience and assistance in the conduct of ambitious reforms” (Ibid.).

The frequency with which allied and Ukrainian officials met under the NUC framework at the various levels of government underscored the potential the two sides envisioned in further developing relations. The NUC met a total of six times between June 2007 and June 2008—much more often than the biannual minimum. Such meetings followed a familiar script. Both sides reaffirmed the “strong commitment” to the “distinguished partnership.” NATO praised Ukraine’s progress in striving to meet the membership standards and yet advised that more work needed to be done. In response, Ukraine reiterated its determination to being a good student through confident statements like “Ukraine will do its utmost to continue this positive trend in

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the future” (NATO, 2008c). NATO then thanked Ukraine for the “substantial contributions” to allied military operations and finally commended its authorities’ public information campaign about the benefits of joining NATO.

The April 2008 NUC heads of state meeting was a momentous event, held in conjunction with the Bucharest Summit and with President Yushchenko himself in attendance. The NUC marked the occasion by parroting the assertions of the summit declaration the previous day. The statement recalled the NAC’s decision that Ukraine “will become a member of NATO” with MAP being the “next step” on its “direct way” to accession (NATO, 2008d, §2). As with Georgia, the allies made clear they supported Ukraine’s MAP application, which put a positive spin on the fact that they could not agree the country should be awarded a MAP. To avoid the embarrassment of bringing the disagreement into the light, the NAC announced the MAP decision was postponed until the end of the year. This allowed NATO to enter a period of “intensive engagement” with Ukraine “to address the questions still outstanding pertaining to its MAP application” (Ibid.). The move was designed for self-promotion. The allies concealed the MAP disagreement by presenting the delay as an opportunity for a thorough review of Ukraine’s candidacy.

The institutionalization of NATO-Ukraine relations went well beyond regular NUC meetings. Numerous joint bodies and practical activities brought structure to the relationship by shaping expectations, increasing information flow, and promoting predictable patterns of behavior. Principally, these efforts were aimed at reforming Ukraine’s political, defense, and security sectors to NATO’s standards. The NATO-Ukraine Action Plan, created in 2002, provided an overarching roadmap of the far-reaching reforms that Ukraine would need to undertake to prepare for membership. It included the development of an “Annual Target Plan”

(ATP) which outlined the specific measures that Ukraine would implement and present annually to the allies for advice and feedback (NATO, 2002). It was understood that Ukraine would submit to such a plan without question. In practice, the ATP amounted to an ANP in all but name, which was at that time reserved for only those aspirants who had been given a MAP. In December 2007, allied foreign ministers pushed for Ukraine's "prompt adoption" of an "ambitious" 2008 ATP, "and its timely and determined implementation." Worried that its student could stumble, the allies vowed to "keep Ukraine's progress under review" (NATO, 2007e, §7).

NATO invited Ukraine to begin an Intensified Dialogue in 2005 on the country's aspirations for membership. While the move appeared to be a step toward closer integration, it did not give Ukraine any access or privileges it did not already have under the NUC and ATP. This was just another talking shop. It was presented primarily as a gesture of goodwill to Yushchenko, who had declared his intent to continue Ukraine's membership quest (NATO, 2005). In December 2007, the allies praised the "fruitful cooperation" within the format and yet warned that Ukraine must show more reform progress (NATO, 2007e, §6). At the NUC meeting in Kyiv in June 2008 with the Ukrainian defense and foreign ministers, the allies proclaimed the Intensified Dialogue was "instrumental in contributing to Ukraine's progress thus far" in meeting NATO standards (NATO, 2008c, §5). The meeting coincided with a NAC "outreach visit" to Ukraine, the first since 2005, intended to signify a solid commitment following the flawed Bucharest decision (Ibid., §1).

Within the framework of the JWGDR, launched in 1997, the allies sought to professionalize Ukraine's defense civil service and strengthen civilian control over the intelligence and security agencies (NATO, 2007a). By June 2008, the allied defense ministers

commended the apparent progress made in implementing such “critically important” initiatives and yet cautioned that more work needed to be done in this regard (NATO, 2008e).

Another NATO-led practical activity entailed disposing Ukrainian Armed Forces’ Soviet-era weapons, which did not conform to alliance interoperability standards. The June 2007 NUC defense ministers’ meeting text claimed without evidence that this was the “world’s largest destruction project for surplus munitions, small arms and light weapons, and man portable air defense systems...” (NATO, 2007a). Such efforts helped to eventually clear the path for Western defense firms to sell arms and kit to Ukraine.

From NATO’s perspective, there was a clear functional benefit to the increased cooperation with Ukraine. It became the only partner country in 2007-2008 to “actively support” all NATO-led expeditionary operations and missions, including in Afghanistan and Iraq. Ukraine also contributed to a NATO-wide initiative to improve helicopter pilot training, joined an aircraft data-exchange program, and allowed for the overland transit of equipment and supplies for the ISAF (NATO, 2008e, §3). The allies publicly acknowledged these efforts many times both before and after Bucharest. Public statements trumpeted Ukraine’s willingness to take on work typically done by the member states. NATO declared, “through such contributions, Ukraine is demonstrating its commitment to help shoulder our shared security responsibilities” (NATO, 2008d, §5). The moves were meant to display Ukraine’s loyalty to NATO through its military participation and cooperation.

Beyond the various institutional structures, NATO perceived Ukraine’s ultimate incorporation into the alliance as a necessary condition for establishing security both within the country and beyond. In the December 2007 NUC statement, allied foreign ministers “underscored the importance of the NATO-Ukraine Distinctive Partnership for security and

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stability throughout the Euro-Atlantic area” (NATO, 2007e). Likewise, President Yushchenko and the allied heads of state declared in April 2008, “we value our joint efforts to promote regional cooperation including Ukraine’s continued contributions to security in its region” (NATO, 2008d). Such cooperation could have far-reaching implications. “We value highly the substantial contribution of the NATO-Ukraine partnership to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area and beyond,” proclaimed NUC defense ministers in June 2008 (NATO, 2008e).

Such assertions elevated Ukraine’s role and importance within the NATO-dominated security order. According to a senior Ukrainian military officer, NATO believed “Europe would be in big trouble if Ukraine was destabilized.”¹²⁵ European security was thus established through the cooperation of NATO and Ukraine as partners, though it was understood it was not an equal partnership. Instead, the value of the partnership was defined in terms of Ukraine reforming itself to alliance standards and supporting its missions and operations. And while it was assumed that Ukraine’s security was enhanced by cooperating with NATO, that security could only be assured in conjunction with it fully internalizing the Euro-Atlantic community norms and values. This was a radical policy ambition for Ukraine, but in line with a broader approach. NATO seemed motivated by a lack of doubt in the positive value of alliance expansion and irrespective of geographical factors.

A concern with the apparent lack of knowledge about the alliance among the Ukrainian people was another prevalent theme in NATO’s statements. This factor supposedly contributed to the proliferation of “myths and stereotypes” over the years about NATO’s intentions (NATO, 2017a). All statements about the country in 2007-2008 referenced the ongoing efforts to increase

¹²⁵ Interview N, retired Ukrainian senior military officer, by telephone, 30 June 2020.

public awareness about the alliance and promote NATO within Ukraine. The July 2007 NUC meeting statement said the allies “reiterated their willingness to support Ukraine in informing the Ukrainian people about NATO-Ukraine cooperation in an accurate and positive way” (NATO, 2007d). In June 2008, the allies commended Ukraine’s recent adoption of the “State Program on Informing the Ukrainian Society on Euro-Atlantic Integration,” a public information campaign aimed at “improving perceptions about NATO” (NATO, 2008c, §8). Of course, not knowing what NATO was about and harboring so-called misconceptions, or legitimate policy concerns and objects, were two different things. NATO was principally concerned with public diplomacy—the popular storytelling of foreign policies to ordinary Ukrainians—aimed at promoting an image as an attractive alliance partner and an open community of democracies. This is precisely where the NIDC came in, which was in effect NATO’s public relations shop inside the country responsible for convincing ordinary Ukrainians why it was in the “national interest” to gain membership.

While NATO officials portrayed the information campaign as an altruistic public service (NATO, 2017b), there was a clear external legitimacy-seeking angle behind trying to shape Ukraine’s preferences. Without domestic popular support for closer integration and eventually joining NATO, it would be difficult to claim that Ukrainian membership was in keeping with the stated values of the NATO members and on the membership rules on which the open-door policy was based. NATO had long asserted that enlargement conformed to the liberal principles of national self-determination and the freedom of choice in seeking security arrangements, including treaties of alliance. Thus, the allies could not ignore the lack of popular support among Ukrainians and still seek to incorporate the country into the alliance without jeopardizing their own self-perceived reputations as liberal democracies and Euro-Atlantic community members.

From this angle, NATO's push for approval should be understood mainly in terms of its search for validation as the institutional embodiment of "the West." The self-interested motivation was thus apparent. There existed a disconnect between the aspirations of Ukrainian elites and parts of the public that NATO never reconciled. The opposition to joining NATO was interpreted as a cognitive problem, attributed to the ignorance of the Ukrainian people. It was rendered as symptomatic of the country's continual learner status.

To the extent that Ukraine worried about national unity or its sovereignty the issue rarely manifested in NATO's discourse. The only time it did was the NUC heads of state meeting statement of April 4, 2008, which immediately followed the NAC's Bucharest Summit announcement that Ukraine would eventually become a NATO member. "We recalled our conviction that Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity are key factors for ensuring stability in Europe" (NATO, 2008d, §3). It is plausible however that this statement was mostly a direct response to Putin's assertion at Bucharest that Ukraine would disintegrate if it were to join NATO and less of an acknowledgement of any issues which might delay its accession (Toal, 2017, p. 199). NATO thus again presented Ukraine as a geostrategic entity whose physical location and national security were integral to achieving a Europe that was "whole, free, and at peace." And while NATO's self-appointed role was to defend "freedom" and "shared values" and spread "peace and stability," Ukraine's responsibility was to fully internalize such beliefs and practices so "security" could take root. A focused conflation was at work here in making "NATO" synonymous with enhanced security.

9.4 Ukraine and Bucharest

There are three main points which stand out about Ukraine's integration with NATO in the context of the Bucharest Declaration. First, the way Ukraine and Georgia were presented

together in the same paragraph of the document gave the impression that their membership trajectories had moved on parallel tracks: “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members...” (NATO, 2008a). With this assertion, the two countries’ geopolitical fates were bound together. They were to accede to the alliance as a “package deal” or not at all. Subsequent references to “the Bucharest decision” or simply “Bucharest” thus implied both Ukraine and Georgia’s futures, not one or the other. This was purposeful conflation, giving the illusion of identical “progress” being made in two different geopolitical contexts at the same time. The reality however was that NATO’s relationship with Ukraine in the years before the 2008 Bucharest Summit was much more institutionalized than Georgia’s, providing the former more opportunity and time to conform itself to the membership standards. While such standards were always fungible in the eyes of the NATO allies, there was a crucial distinction between the two countries which impacted the viability of their respective candidacies. By 2008, while the Ukrainian government enjoyed full control over its internationally recognized territory, notwithstanding the ethnoterritorial polarization in Crimea, the Georgian government did not. Abkhazia and South Ossetia had gained de facto independence from Tbilisi in the early 1990s, though that depended on Russia’s support to ensure their survival. NATO’s enlargement study had made clear that resolving territorial disputes factored into deciding whether or not to invite a state to join the alliance (NATO, 1995).

Second, NATO made a membership pledge to Ukraine even though there was no broad consensus for membership within the country at the time. This went against NATO’s stated criteria for membership requiring strong popular support. It also inadvertently fed into the Russian government’s storyline that the country was being “dragged” into the alliance against

the will of its people. The Ukrainian government and NATO's public diplomacy efforts failed to arouse broad support for the move among ordinary Ukrainians. Thus, the timing of the announcement in April 2008 was premature, indicating that its main purpose was to serve as the Bush administration's victory lap for the freedom agenda before it left office in January 2009.

Lastly, the longstanding presence of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, which dated back to the eighteenth century, was bound to complicate Ukraine's geopolitical ambitions. The alliance's charter prohibited a NATO member from having or undertaking any international agreement with a non-NATO state that was "in conflict with this Treaty"—though the wording was intentionally vague and thus subject to interpretation (NATO, 1949, §8). The agreement in place at the time between Ukraine and Russia allowed the latter to lease the port facilities until 2017 (Krushelnycky, 2008). According to Trenin (2011), the Black Sea Fleet employed nearly 20,000 Crimean residents, some of which were Russian passport holders. Despite the agreement, the issue of Crimea's status as part of internationally recognized Ukrainian territory irritated many Russian nationalists, both in Russia and Crimea. And pro-Russian sentiment remained a "latent lever of influence" in Russia-Ukraine relations (Toal, 2017, p. 203). Russia was not going to leave Sevastopol so Ukraine could join NATO. While the Bucharest decision did not trigger Ukraine's accession, the status of the Black Sea Fleet had to be resolved before NATO membership became a reality.

9.5 Conclusion

Ukraine's long and intimate relationship with NATO began as the Soviet Union was in the final throes of its existence. It deepened in the late 1990s with the introduction of numerous structures and matured to the point where Ukraine expressed its intent to eventually become a NATO member. That goal survived the transfer of power between Ukrainian governments in the

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early 2000s, as had taken place in Georgia. In the years leading up to the Bucharest Summit, Ukraine and its supporters within NATO nurtured an image of the country as fundamentally part of Europe. They claimed Ukraine's independence and progress was vulnerable to attack from many sides and stressed that its loyalty to the NATO cause made it worthy of acceptance by the alliance. These arguments were irresistible to many Western state leaders because they appealed directly to NATO's self-defined identity and purpose.

In 2007-08, NATO constructed a narrative of Ukraine as a model learner of the alliance's norms and values. Ukraine was lauded for taking on an ambitious reform agenda and for contributing to all "out of area" operations. These efforts ingratiated Ukraine with NATO, which had constructed an identity of Ukraine as an important geostrategic player in European security. In so doing, NATO broke with the dominant narrative of the earlier expansion rounds which asserted that bringing former-communist countries into the alliance was warranted due to their intrinsic cultural and civilizational belongingness to "the West." The irony in all of this was that NATO had simultaneously declared that the open-door policy would not be restricted by geography and had nonetheless used Ukraine's geographical location within the Euro-Atlantic space as justification for its incorporation into the alliance.

With the Bucharest decision, NATO became committed to Ukraine's eventual membership. While the decision exposed the country to increased Russian pressure, it would be several years before Russia would pull its levers of influence within Ukraine to violate its territorial integrity and torpedo the goal of joining NATO.

Chapter 10 - Ukraine from the Georgia War to the Crimea Annexation: Navigating U-turns and Neutrality

10.1 Introduction

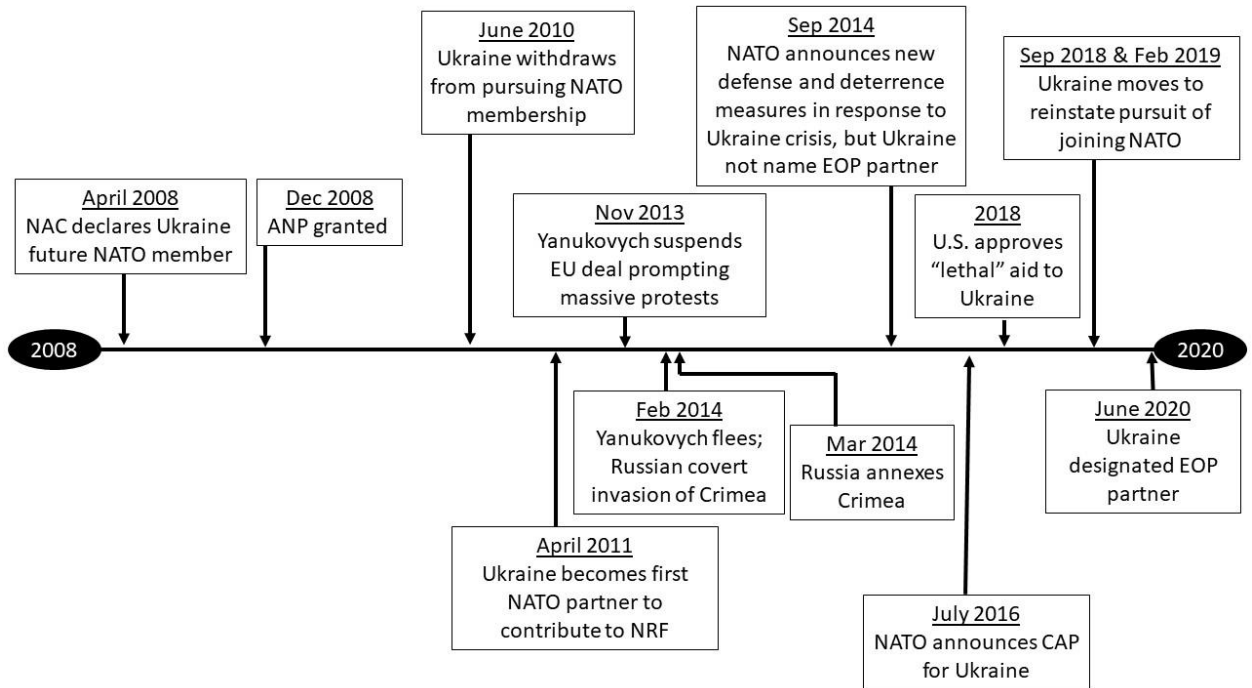
In the months after the August 2008 war, NATO publicly admonished Russia for invading Georgia and its subsequent foot-dragging on the conditions of the ceasefire agreement ending the open fighting. According to NATO, there could be “no business as usual” until Russia had proven its ability to comply with the norms of acceptable state behavior, as defined by powerful Western countries. However, the arrival of the Obama administration in January 2009 promptly changed the plan, as the new U.S. president set out to reset relations with Russia, focusing on improving security cooperation on a range of bilateral and global issues. The United States’ hegemonic influence within the alliance resulted in NATO calling off the “no business as usual” approach by the end of 2009, with Russia paying no immediate price for violating Georgia’s territorial integrity and recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Simultaneously, NATO sought to reassure Georgia, at first through expressions of concern over its territorial fragmentation and then by reaffirming support for its “membership aspirations,” thereby temporarily recoding the Bucharest decision. The allies also began following an unconventional strategy to further integrate Georgia into NATO other than through full membership. This manifested in creating the NGC and allowing the country to develop an ANP, “consolation prizes” in lieu of the highly sought after MAP. Taken together, the moves showed how NATO could cultivate multivocality both rhetorically and materially.

As had taken place in the Georgia case, the NATO-Ukraine relationship laid mostly dormant in the time between Russia’s invasion of Georgia and its annexation of Crimea.

Allowing Ukraine to create an ANP, which showed how the Bucharest decision bound its geopolitical fate together with Georgia's as well as how the allies desired to maintain a modicum of fairness in treating the two countries, was the only new initiative that NATO started in the years following the 2008 war. The attempt at resetting relations with Russia in 2009-2011 was a major cause of the inactivity, with the United States being determined that its engagement with Russia's neighbors would not jeopardize any rapprochement—though that was not the only factor. Ukraine's 2010 decision to declare neutrality and reject joining NATO eliminated any need to carry on with preparing the country for eventual membership.

This chapter examines NATO's strategic narrative of Ukraine in the years leading to Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and subsequent destabilization of eastern Ukraine. NATO continued to understand Ukraine as a model partner whose physical location had rendered it a crucial geostrategic actor both within Europe and on the global stage. It was due to the latter factor that NATO appeared keen on further cultivating the so-called distinctive partnership with Ukraine, irrespective of its membership intentions. A shortage of primary sources presented a methodological challenge for the analysis of NATO's discourse during the timeframe, as the Yanukovich-led government met less often with NATO officials, which resulted in less publicly released documents. There were only two texts concerning Ukraine released between mid-2012 and late 2013. Even so, NATO's statements showed how it could take ambiguous actions to afford itself flexibility in the future. NATO retained a rhetorical commitment to upholding the Bucharest decision, which not only supported the overarching open-door policy toward new members, but also left the door open to a future, pro-Western Ukrainian government to potentially restore its NATO membership ambitions. Figure 4 depicts a timeline of NATO's engagement with Ukraine from 2008 to 2020.

Figure 4. NATO’s engagement with Ukraine, 2008-2020.



10.2 “We reaffirm all elements of the decision”

After the war, NATO worked to strike a balance between appearing committed to the Bucharest decision to save face while remaining ambiguous to afford itself flexibility in making future moves. The allies’ December 2008 decision to allow Ukraine to develop an ANP without a MAP constituted a consolation prize meant to reinforce the country’s integration process while at the same time standing up to Russia’s aggression toward Georgia, albeit through an indirect approach. It was a stealthy way in proceeding with bringing Ukraine closer to the alliance outside of the normal MAP process.

NATO got off to a rough start in providing public reassurance to Ukraine and Georgia after the August war. The earlier decision that the two countries would join NATO was recoded as being mainly about supporting their ambitions and not membership itself. In the August 19th

NAC meeting press release, its first statement since the war, the allied foreign ministers reiterated the commitment to supporting Georgia's geopolitical "aspirations" but refrained from saying anything about upholding the membership pledge (NATO, 2008e). Likewise, in the press release of the August 27th NUC meeting at the level of ambassadors with Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister Yeliseyev, the first NUC meeting after the war, the "Allied Ambassadors reiterated the decision taken by NATO Heads of State and Government at the Bucharest summit regarding Georgia's and Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations" (NATO, 2008b). Once again, this left out the fact that the decision dealt with the two countries becoming members, even if they were not given the practical tools to do so through MAPs. On December 3rd, the NAC foreign ministers reaffirmed "all elements of the decisions regarding Ukraine and Georgia...in Bucharest" without identifying what those elements were (NATO, 2008d). Presumably, they were referring to the two countries' MAP applications as well as the promise of future membership, which were two sides of the same coin (NATO, 2008a). Indeed, no country had joined NATO after the 1999 expansion without first having a MAP. The omission reflected NATO's tendency to deliberately leave things vague in public statements so they could be interpreted in multiple ways. In addition, the line's positioning in the middle of text, at paragraph 18 of 39, suggested a desire to downplay the matter (NATO, 2008d, §18). By this point, NATO had already started constructing the ex post facto rationale for its decision to forego extending MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia. While they were seen as model partners, demonstrated by their readiness to take on many political and military reforms and contribute to NATO missions, both had "significant work left to do," according to NATO (Ibid.). Consequently, the allied foreign ministers "decided to provide further assistance...in implementing [the] needed reforms as they progress towards NATO membership" (Ibid.).

Such “further assistance” involved three moves toward Ukraine. First, NATO decided to amend the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership to give the NUC oversight of “the process set in hand at the Bucharest Summit” (NATO, 2008c). This was an inevitability, as the NUC already was the primary structure for implementing the relationship. It was implausible for any other body to have such a task anyway. Second, NATO announced it would “reinforce” the two existing outreach offices in Ukraine, the NIDC and the NLO, though it did not immediately explain what this meant in practice (Ibid.). These two moves were mostly symbolic. It was unclear they would have much impact on the situation on the ground. Finally, both Ukraine and Georgia were permitted to develop ANPs, the official institutional mechanism to report reform progress to the allies annually. This move was in fact unprecedented. Previously, the ANP was only given to those special aspirants who also had been given a MAP to help advance their reforms. It represented a substantive decision which enabled NATO to proceed with integrating both countries despite not having MAPs.

In response to Russia’s invasion of Georgia that August, NATO’s decision to award an ANP in December 2008 represented the initial multivocal enlargement move toward Ukraine. The decision was made to demonstrate that NATO would not be intimidated by Russian aggression and to assert its decision-making independence while also reassuring a loyal partner. By NATO’s own account, the ANP constituted the MAP instrument, which was what Ukraine really wanted to take away from Bucharest (NATO, 2022a). The MAP in effect “creates” the ANP, explained a U.S. State Department official, giving a candidate the mandate to lay out an annual reform agenda to elicit the allies’ advice and feedback.¹²⁶ According to a Ukrainian diplomat, the country was apparently “mentally ready” for the MAP and left Bucharest feeling

¹²⁶ Interview EE, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 16 July 2021.

disappointed, perceiving MAP as synonymous with conferring membership.¹²⁷ Yet, presuming MAP fast tracked NATO accession was a generous interpretation of the mechanism. While the first MAP awardees had obtained membership in a few years' time, that Bosnia and Herzegovina had been given one in 2010 and yet still was not a member by 2023 showed the membership pipeline could be long and that individual experiences varied (NATO, 2022b). Nonetheless, there existed an unofficial understanding between NATO and Ukraine that the ANP was “essentially a MAP...[but] without an ‘M’,” for membership, admitted a NATO international staff officer.¹²⁸ The former was thereby awarded as consolation since the allies could not agree on the latter. This allowed NATO to claim it could still strike a consensus, even on a sensitive topic, which helped to boost its self-esteem after the failure to prevent Russia's invasion of Georgia. As a result, by the end of 2008, NATO signaled that “for now there will [only] be ANP,” even though Ukraine preferred the so-called stamp of approval that came with a MAP.¹²⁹ This statement reflected an attitude which suggested both an openness to revisit the MAP issue in the future and a desire to appease an aspirant member, lest it stray from striving to meet the MAP requirements and keep a Western geopolitical orientation.

The April 2009 Strasbourg-Kehl Summit was both the first NAC meeting of allied heads of state after the August 2008 war as well as following the announcement of the reset with Russia. The occasion provided NATO the first opportunity on a grand stage to define how it intended to manage integrating the two countries it had expressly said would join the alliance while repairing the fractured relationship with its most important European partner, who was vehemently opposed to such expansion. Faced with the tradeoff between differing policy

¹²⁷ Interview BB, Ukrainian official, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021.

¹²⁸ Interview T, German NATO International Staff Officer, by telephone, 10 July 2020.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

options—namely pursuing the open-door approach toward new members or extending an open hand to Russia—NATO favored a solution that hypothetically could do both. It would pay lip service to the Bucharest decision while in parallel try to tackle the “common security threats and challenges” it shared with Russia, such as arms control, counterterrorism, nuclear counterproliferation, and stabilizing Afghanistan (NATO, 2009d, §33, 35). This evoked President Clinton’s ill-fated balancing act in the 1990s in trying to bring the CEE states into NATO while simultaneously integrating Russia into the West (Goldgeier, 2020). The NAC thereby vowed to normalize relations by reviving the NRC, from which it withdrew at the “formal level” after the Georgia war. The NAC concurrently declared, “At Bucharest we agreed that Ukraine and Georgia will become members of NATO and we reaffirm all elements of that decision....” (Ibid., §29). This was meant to be a clear sign of NATO’s intent with both Russia as well as the aspirants as the target audiences.

The NAC also issued a “Declaration on Alliance Security” alongside the customary, lengthy summit communique. While the Bucharest decision was not expressly mentioned in this document, the allies sought to implicitly justify the move by situating it on the broader narrative arc of NATO enlargement:

NATO’s door will remain open to all European democracies which share the values of our Alliance, which are willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership, and whose inclusion can contribute to common security and stability (NATO, 2009b).

In this manner, the allies sought to reinforce the membership pledge to Ukraine and Georgia by invoking the supposed authority of the longstanding open-door policy. While such a pledge was fraught with tension, it was nonetheless warranted because “NATO’s enlargement has been an historic success in bringing us closer to our vision of a Europe and free” (Ibid.). In NATO’s

reading, the ends justified the means. Universal goals and specific policy proposals were mutually supportive and reinforcing.

Reaffirming the Bucharest decision at a NATO heads of state summit was a welcome sign for the two aspirants. NATO had apparently shed the faulty pretense the decision was merely about supporting membership aspirations. However, while the statement did unequivocally signal an intention to follow through on the decision, it was also true that the membership pledge was never tied to any specific timeline, only the conditions subject to NATO's discretion. It could conceivably prolong the integration process indefinitely if it thought Ukraine and Georgia were not sufficiently conforming to the member standards and values as set by the allies. At the same time, NATO could reiterate the Bucharest decision in perpetuity, enabling it to say it was keeping the promise to the two countries, but without following through with an invitation to begin accession talks. The ambiguous action here was apparent.

After what seemed a firm rhetorical commitment at Strasbourg-Kehl to upholding the Bucharest decision, NATO thereafter returned to talking ambiguously in public. This was surprising given the subsequent opportunities to demonstrate such a commitment were before a Ukrainian audience, where a resounding reaffirmation would have been a plausible move. In the August 21st "Declaration to Complement the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership," the allies again endorsed "all elements of the decisions regarding Ukraine...in Bucharest," but refrained from using the word "member" anywhere in the text (NATO, 2009c). Likewise, the December 3rd NUC foreign ministers' meeting statement reiterated the obvious fact that the NUC played a "central role in supervising the process set in hand by the Bucharest Summit...pertaining to Ukraine's aspirations for membership" (NATO, 2009a). However, saying "aspirations for membership" was not the same thing as asserting that Ukraine will join NATO. The deliberate

omissions and loose talk showed the NATO allies disagreed on how to interpret Bucharest after the Georgia war in the context of Ukraine. Leaving the language intentionally vague was a creative way to hide the tension while playing multiple games simultaneously. NATO could pursue rapprochement with Russia on one hand, and appear to want to integrate Ukraine, Georgia, and other aspirants, on the other. Meanwhile, the diluted language gave the impression of a unified front. In this situation, the new Ukrainian government's choice to abandon the goal of joining NATO seemed to preempt the need for keeping a rhetorical commitment to the Bucharest decision.

10.3 Yanukovich's U-turn

In June 2010 the Ukrainian parliament approved a measure adopting military non-alignment. The new president Viktor Yanukovich submitted the bill. The law provided a legal block to the possibility of NATO incorporating Ukraine. While still allowing cooperation with NATO, it withdrew Ukraine's interest in becoming a NATO member. With the move, Yanukovich had followed through on two of his campaign promises—keeping Ukraine out of NATO while seeking to improve relations with Russia, which had deteriorated under the previous government (Illmer, 2010). The decision signaled a preference to pursue a more pragmatic foreign policy, attentive to Ukraine's geographic constraints as well as the functional benefits of NATO partnership.

In the aftermath of Ukraine's U-turn, the biggest challenge for NATO was how to show respect for the decision while minimizing the humiliation. No one likes being rejected, not even the world's strongest military alliance. The sequence of events had in fact been extraordinary. No partner country had ever expressed interest in joining, subsequently received a NATO

membership pledge, and then unexpectedly changed its mind. Unlike in Georgia, the goal of NATO membership did not survive the transfer of power between rival governments.

NATO's new "Strategic Concept," its latest since 1999, was the first public document released after Ukraine's reversal. The order of tasks and priorities in the text reflected the allies' desire to highlight the blossoming U.S./NATO-Russia reset and, for that reason, downplay expansion. The topic was relegated to the second half of the text, at paragraph 27 of 38, following sections on wide-ranging issues such as the allies' core principles, the security environment, defense and deterrence, crisis management, arms control, and nuclear non-proliferation (NATO, 2010a). Despite this, the allies still made a categorical commitment to keeping NATO's door open:

NATO's enlargement has contributed substantially to the security of the Allies; the prospect of further enlargement and the spirit of cooperative security have advanced stability in Europe more broadly. Our goal of a Europe whole and free, and sharing common values, would be best served by the eventual integration of all European countries that so desire into Euro-Atlantic structures (Ibid., §27).

The Strategic Concept thus contained the clearest expression of the level of alliance consensus and understanding that existed on the open-door policy at the time, if only in principle.

"Security" emanated from the inside out through NATO enlargement, which enabled the spread of democracy and "common values." The allies confidently asserted their collective vision to expand NATO to incorporate "all European countries" and until an unknown point in the future. "Euro-Atlantic structures" here was code for NATO itself, which was meant to take the edge off the bold expansionist ambition.

The hopeful rhetoric showed how NATO sought to put a positive spin on apparent setbacks and follow multiple agendas at once. The qualifying phrase "that so desire" was a subtle nod to Ukraine's about-face, conveyed discretely and buried within a towering passage asserting

the indisputable virtues of enlargement. NATO framed the reversal in terms which supported its own self-assigned identity and values. Ukraine's decision was therefore not interpreted as rejection, but instead as an opportunity to recommit to the idealized principle of national self-determination and further nurture the liberal democratic community-building narrative that NATO had long projected. The November 2010 Lisbon summit declaration thus stated, "recognizing the sovereign right of each nation to freely choose its security arrangements, we respect Ukraine's policy of 'non-bloc' status" (NATO, 2010b, §22). Similarly, the May 2010 "NATO 2020" report announced, "it should go without saying that NATO is an entirely voluntary organization" (NATO, 2010c). All states had an inalienable right to choose their alliance partners, even if that meant not NATO, so went the narrative. Through multivocal utterances, there was scope for creativity, and so problems could be turned into opportunities. By exhibiting respect for Ukraine, NATO could also work to protect its self-perceived identity and reputation. The self-interest here was clear to see.

NATO's formal interpretation of Yanukovych's U-turn on membership reflected the consensus among many interviewees regarding enlargement: the process was guided by the preferences of the potential candidates and not by NATO's. "I don't know that NATO really wants to incorporate them," doubted a U.S. military officer at NATO headquarters about Ukraine and Georgia's prospects.¹³⁰ Rather, expansion depended on the aspirants to "show interest" in joining the alliance.¹³¹ In this reading, NATO represented a patient teacher waiting for an eager student to rise to the head of the class. It was passive and reactive and refrained from asserting itself until such desire was expressed. Therefore, reaffirming Bucharest "has nothing to do" with

¹³⁰ Interview P, U.S. military officer within NATO international military staff, by telephone, 3 July 2020.

¹³¹ Interview I, U.S. military officer at NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 17 June 2020.

NATO wanting to enlarge the alliance, claimed a German military officer.¹³² Instead, the allies were principally, if not wholly, interested in demonstrations of its own conviction and strength. “NATO has an enduring interest in upholding [Ukraine and Georgia’s] sovereign right to seek membership in western political institutions,” declared a NATO international staff officer.¹³³ Another interviewee said the behavior was motivated by a desire to exert NATO’s ability to make its own decisions free from opposing forces trying to limit them. “NATO’s interest is based on the Washington Treaty; no outside country has a veto on the arrangements.”¹³⁴ These statements were important for what they implied. NATO’s expansion was justified because it was an alliance structure that member states must choose to join. “Choice, not coercion,” was the underlying theme (Toal, 2017, p. 27). Moreover, the alliance espoused to represent “an unparalleled community of freedom, peace, security, and shared values,” and thereby a positive force (NATO, 2010a). It was either unwilling or incapable of seeing itself as anything other than a benign, virtuous actor on the world stage.

10.4 Navigating Ukraine’s Neutrality

We can tell the enlargement process was impacted by the preferences of outsiders seeking to join the alliance by how NATO responded to Ukraine’s declaration of neutrality. After the country said it was not interested in membership, NATO stopped publicly articulating the commitment to follow through on the Bucharest decision for it. The goal of Ukraine joining NATO was omitted from all official statements. According to an internal report, NATO thereafter focused on “the process” of reform and modernization “rather than the end goal”

¹³² Interview X, German military officer in Georgia, by email, 20 July 2020.

¹³³ Interview T, German NATO international staff officer, by telephone, 10 July 2020.

¹³⁴ Interview G, U.S. military officer posted at NATO, by telephone, 15 June 2020.

(NATO, 2011c). This was now partnership only for partnership's sake, like NATO's relationship with Australia for example, which also had no desire to join.

Ukraine's declaration of neutrality however did not stop NATO from invoking Bucharest to exert its independent decision-making ability and reinforce the open-door policy. Regarding material action, Ukraine's integration into NATO stalled, as the Yanukovich government dragged its feet on implementing any new measures to promote political reform and military interoperability in the years following the decision. Despite the change, the fundamental characteristics of Ukraine's identity remained intact. In NATO's understanding, the country still represented a vital geostrategic actor on both the global and regional stages, and, for that reason, an important alliance partner.

The Lisbon summit declaration marked the beginning of a revised official strategic narrative of Ukraine, reflecting the reality of the Yanukovich era in which partnership itself became the principal aim of the relationship. Undeterred, NATO nonetheless strove to demonstrate its commitment to fostering constructive relations and that the Bucharest decision remained valid if the country had second thoughts:

We welcome the Ukrainian Government's commitment to continue to pursue fully Ukraine's Distinctive Partnership with NATO, including through high-level political dialogue in the NATO-Ukraine Commission, and reform and practical cooperation through the Annual National Program, and in this context, we recall that NATO's door remains open, as stated in the Bucharest Summit decision (NATO, 2010b, §22).

This passage typified NATO's robust action strategy of making ambiguous actions and following many agendas. Simultaneously, NATO sought to provide reassurance despite the reversal on membership, highlight two of the well-known structures constitutive of a "special relationship,"

signal a reciprocal interest in further cooperation, and, as important, shore up the overarching open-door policy toward prospective members. Irrespective of Ukraine's current preferences, the Bucharest decision remained officially, if hypothetically, in play. Ukraine was welcome to recommit when its western geopolitical ambitions had been restored. NATO here was trying to make the best of an awkward situation as it found itself in unfamiliar territory. After the U-turn, Ukraine became the only partner country to have an ANP, a tool expressly meant to prepare candidates for membership, without the associated desire to join NATO. The Yanukovich government hollowed out the ANP by not using it as a mechanism to further reform Ukraine's political and defense sectors to NATO's membership standards. In fact, it went as far as renaming it the "cooperation on mutual benefits" program because of the policy of not pursuing NATO membership.¹³⁵

After Ukraine rejected NATO membership the allies felt it necessary to draw attention to the other partners who still had membership aspirations or were at least keen on further integration. The Lisbon Summit Declaration recognized North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine for their varying levels of political engagement and practical cooperation with NATO, respectively (NATO, 2010b). The order within the text signaled a desire to marginalize Ukraine, with it being listed last. NATO here reiterated its preferred "hub and spokes" strategy to the partnership network by referring to each country individually in separate paragraphs (Behnke, 2013). This aimed to discourage cooperation between the partners while maintaining itself as the central point of authority and emphasis.

¹³⁵ Interview T, German NATO International Staff Officer, by telephone, 10 July 2020.

NATO continued to define Ukraine principally as a crucial geostrategic actor in Europe and the world. Nearly all public statements proclaimed its purported importance, irrespective of its membership intentions. Ukraine still aspired to “strengthen its position as an active foreign policy actor, both in this region and beyond”, claimed the NATO Secretary General (NATO, 2011d). The April 2011 joint statement of the NUC foreign ministers’ meeting reaffirmed that “an independent, democratic and prosperous Ukraine is key to Euro-Atlantic security” (NATO, 2011b). The May 2012 Chicago Summit and the December 2013 NATO foreign ministers’ meeting press releases made similar claims. A “sovereign” and “stable” Ukraine, “firmly committed to democracy and the rule of law,” was significant for transatlantic security (NATO, 2012, 2013). The references to the rule of law, sovereignty, and stability in latter statements reflected NATO’s growing uneasiness and concern over what it perceived as the Ukrainian government’s democratic shortfalls in 2012-2013 (NATO, 2013, 2014). This referred above all to the former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, one of the architects of the Orange Revolution, who had been imprisoned since October 2011. The 2012 Chicago Summit provided a stage to spotlight the apparent injustice:

...We are concerned by the selective application of justice and what appear to be politically motivated prosecutions, including of leading members of the opposition, and the conditions of their detention (NATO 2012, §35).

This was a rare example of NATO publicly criticizing Ukraine. It showed the allies were not willing to let their democratic values be flouted by a partner who until recently wanted to become a member.

Even with joining NATO off the table, the allies still wanted Ukraine to continue striving to meet its membership standards and values. The Lisbon and Chicago Summit communiqués rearticulated the criteria, using identical wording for both texts:

...NATO's door will remain open to all European democracies which share the values of our Alliance, which are willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership, which are in a position to further the principles of the [Washington] Treaty, and whose inclusion can contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area (NATO 2010, §13, 2012, §25).

NATO became intent on highlighting anything that could be taken as an achievement, however small, to give the impression that Ukraine remained a model partner on the right track. The May 2011 statement by the co-chairmen of the NATO-Ukraine Joint Working Group on Defense Reform, a subordinate forum underneath the NUC since 1998, outlined a laundry list of security and defense issues of cooperation (NATO, 2011a). Ukraine's consultation with allies on key strategy and planning documents remained a bright spot of constructive engagement. The allies hailed the implementation of the results of the Ukrainian government's "Strategic Defense Review," which allowed it to draw on the allies' "advice on defense planning and budgeting" (NATO, 2011d). The Chicago Summit text highlighted the elimination of highly enriched uranium in March 2012, demonstrating Ukraine's "proven commitment to non-proliferation" (NATO, 2012, §35). Though laudable accomplishments, these actions were quite modest given the robust institutionalization of the NATO-Ukraine partnership, which provided plentiful opportunities for such cooperation. In fact, the NUC convened only twice between 2010 and 2013. Previously it had met on an annual basis and at multiple levels of government. The shift underlined the extent to which the Yanukovich government sought to slow down Ukraine's NATO integration.

The allies praised Ukraine and made blanket statements to urge its continued cooperation. The April 2011 NUC meeting press release exemplified the effort. Allied ministers “welcomed” the government’s focus on “strengthening democracy, including revised electoral legislation, the rule of law, and human rights and freedoms” (NATO, 2011b). Moreover, they expressed their “high appreciation” for Ukraine’s security contributions, recognizing it as the first partner to contribute to the NRF and participate in “almost all NATO-led operations and missions” (Ibid.). Ukraine was in fact the only partner country in 2011 contributing to the main expeditionary missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, as well as navy patrols in the Mediterranean, reflecting how the political decision to reject joining NATO had not spilled over into the security cooperation arena. Ukraine’s loyalty here enabled it to maintain its reputation as a “very active” NATO partner (NATO, 2011d). The allies “encouraged” Ukraine to accelerate reforms across the defense and security sectors and “welcomed progress” on a joint project to destroy excess small arms weapons—the latter being offered as concrete evidence of a specific achievement amidst a sea of aspirational statements. Finally, NATO “encouraged further efforts” to improve its public image within the country, a long running endeavor having limited success (NATO, 2011b).

Secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s February 2011 speech at the Taras Shevchenko National University in Kyiv incorporated all the traditional building blocks of the pro-enlargement narrative about Ukraine (NATO, 2011d). Given to a likely Western-leaning audience, he appealed to liberal principles such as the freedom of expression and the right of self-determination, as well as to Ukrainian national pride.

As a first move, he began by restating how important NATO believed Ukraine’s geographic location to be. “We have a particular interest in strengthening our partnership with

European countries like Ukraine, because they are closest to us.” In so doing, Ukraine was explicitly identified as fundamentally part of “Europe” in the geographical sense—an insider just barely on the outside, as “partnership” meant a less intimate relationship than that the metaphor of “family” constructed. The expression “closest to us” also had a different connotation, referring to an ideological affinity or a shared cultural belonging. He proclaimed, “We all know that Ukraine today is determined to integrate fully into the European family of nations – which is where it clearly belongs,” thus anchoring the country firmly inside Western, specifically European, civilization. The framing reintroduced the “family” and “home” metaphors into the narrative, imparting a naturalness to the pursuit of European integration. Contrary to the dominant NATO narrative, which prioritized Ukraine’s spatialization over any cultural features, in this situation, the country assumed both geostrategic and civilizational characteristics equally, showing there was room for “play” in the discourse.

In a second step, the secretary-general argued that numerous transnational challenges could threaten Ukraine’s “path into the European mainstream,” coded language for democratization and reform. This included terrorism, weak states, and cyber and energy security. The timing of the speech in early 2011, amid the reset, explained Russia’s omission from the list. Predictably, “the only way to meet these challenges” was through “constructive partnership with NATO.” Ukraine’s security could only be assured through partnership with, and integration into, NATO structures, which implied its conformity to alliance values and standards. The logic reflected NATO’s self-perception as the security guarantor of the Euro-Atlantic space. Expanding the alliance had spread “freedom, democracy, peace and prosperity across the continent.”

Finally, Ukraine was worthy of NATO's acceptance not only because of its European identity and therefore democratic character but also because it had been a loyal partner "throughout the past twenty years." Ukraine participated in "all our operations" and "we highly value those contributions," exclaimed the secretary-general. This served as the rationale for deepening the partnership with Ukraine and helping it to fulfill its "European aspirations."

The occasion of giving the speech in front of a large crowd offered the chance for self-promotion as well. Accordingly, the secretary-general framed NATO as an "alliance of democracies" forming a "unique community of values, committed to the principles of individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law...." Regarding the Ukrainian government's decision to forsake membership, he stated, "I want to make clear that we in NATO fully respect that decision." This echoed the Lisbon summit declaration of the previous year while reiterating support for the principle of national self-determination. However, "our door remains firmly open to European democracies that wish to join us, and that meet our standards," letting it be known that NATO stood ready to accept Ukraine and other qualified applicants.

The secretary-general's speech represented a near mirror-image of the argumentative strategy followed by the advocates of Ukraine's membership, both in NATO and by outsiders, in the years before the 2008 Bucharest decision. As the narrative went, Ukraine was always Western, specifically European, so it naturally embraced democracy after gaining independence. However, myriad threats and challenges endangered the country's westernization process, as well as its autonomy. Ukraine had internalized Western values and supported NATO missions across the globe. As a result, it was a loyal partner and worthy of acceptance into NATO to protect democracy and the liberal norms of international conduct. Thus, the rhetorical action was

resilient. And it had the apparent strength and resonance to overcome unexpected political events, as in Yanukovich's U-turn on pursuing NATO membership.

10.5 Conclusion

NATO paid only lip service to following through on the Bucharest decision after the August 2008 war, as its focus shifted to seemingly more important priorities. These included the pressure on defense budgets because of the global economic crisis, operations in Afghanistan and Libya, and crucially, the U.S.-led reset with Russia. Russia made it clear it was dead set against NATO's expansion to Ukraine and Georgia and so the allies did not exert much effort in pressing forward with the matter. Besides, the new Ukrainian government had withdrawn its interest in pursuing membership by passing legislation adopting military non-alignment. While this did not stop either side from continuing the partnership, Ukraine's integration into NATO took a major hit, as no new initiatives to promote political reform or military modernization were undertaken after mid-2010. Despite this, Ukraine continued to be an active participant in all major NATO "out of area" missions and operations, displaying an ability to compartmentalize aspects of the relationship while maintaining its image within NATO as a so-called security contributor and loyal partner. What NATO perceived as democratic shortfalls under the Yanukovich-led government unsettled the favored narrative that Ukraine was a model partner who had internalized the alliance's espoused beliefs and practices.

NATO navigated Ukraine's neutrality by continuing to follow a robust action strategy of acting ambiguously and affording itself flexibility. The allies publicly supported the Yanukovich government's decision, a diplomatic face-saving move, which showed respect for a valued partner while supporting the idealized principle of national self-determination. The alliance had long pointed to the latter to justify its outreach to, and eventual incorporation of, interested

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aspirant countries. NATO also categorically committed to upholding the open-door policy toward welcoming new members, even if no new candidates emerged after Albania and Croatia joined the alliance in April 2009. Indeed, with Russia effectively blocking Georgia's possible accession through its invasion and Ukraine's political u-turn on joining in 2010, the process of alliance expansion to the east stalled. Nonetheless, NATO retained a rhetorical commitment to the Bucharest decision, which provided reassurance to a beleaguered Georgia while at the same time exerted its autonomy and independent decision-making ability. While NATO claimed "no third country" would have a say over the enlargement process, it became apparent that it prioritized resetting relations with Russia. This meant not pursuing policies that its most important European partner found particularly harmful, such as expanding the alliance.

Changes to Ukraine's domestic political situation and foreign policy preferences did not alter NATO's official understanding of the country. Before the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in late 2013, the allies still defined its partner principally according to its geographic location, rendering it a crucial geostrategic actor in Europe and beyond.

Chapter 11 - Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia's Crimea Annexation: NATO and Crisis Response

11.1 Introduction

In November 2013 President Yanukovich abruptly suspended the ongoing negotiations with the EU over Ukraine's AA and DCFTA, surprising European state leaders and the Ukrainian public. The following month, President Putin made public a Russian-backed bailout for Ukraine, with Yanukovich previously unable to secure a loan package from the EU (Hill, 2018). Many interpreted this as a geopolitical about-face, with Ukraine veering off the route toward future possible EU membership and instead forging closer ties with Russia. The reversal provoked major anti-government unrest, a harsh and violent reaction by the Ukrainian authorities, and a subsequent radicalized counter-response by the public. On February 21, 2014, demonstrators rejected an EU-brokered deal with Russia keeping Yanukovich in power. The president then fled the capital and the country overnight on February 21-22. By midday on February 22, an interim, Euromaidan-inspired government had emerged to lead Ukraine.

In reaction to what had been perceived as political chaos across Ukraine, Putin organized a hasty but targeted military operation directed at Crimea. On or around February 25, Russian special forces and paratroopers deployed with remarkable speed to infiltrate the peninsula with naval infantry forces, already stationed in Crimea under an existing agreement with the Ukrainian government. Aided by these troops, pro-Russian interior and paramilitary forces seized power on February 27, deposing the local government and passing a motion to secede "at gunpoint" (Wilson, 2014, p. 110). The new Crimean authority initially scheduled a referendum for May 25 but brought it forward to March 16. Voters were asked whether they preferred to join

Russia or remain part of Ukraine with enhanced autonomy. It then claimed that 97 percent of voters allegedly supported the option to join Russia (Charap & Colton, 2017). Russia then moved quickly to incorporate the peninsula. On March 18, Putin and Crimean leaders signed a formal request for Crimea to join the Russian Federation. The Russian parliament dutifully ratified the treaty three days later. This marked the first time since the Second World War that a European state had seized and annexed the territory of another European state by using force (Hill, 2018). The next act of drama took place in eastern Ukraine, specifically the Donbas, where Russia began capitalizing on a wave of separatist sentiment and encouraged destabilization. Russian forces meanwhile continued a large-scale military build-up along the Ukrainian border.

Russia's annexation of Crimea was not a direct response to Ukraine possibly joining NATO. By then, the country had not yet reinstated its membership aspirations. That came later, following parliamentary elections in October 2014, when the new pro-Western government led by President Petro Poroshenko made joining NATO a priority once more (RFE/RL, 2014). However, Russia did fear losing the Black Sea base after the new government took power and thus did what it could to prevent it.

This chapter examines how Russia's annexation of Crimea and its ensuing destabilization of eastern Ukraine played out in NATO's discourse from March 2014 to early 2015. In the analysis, two main themes were apparent in the emerging post-Crimea narrative.

First, the allies interpreted the conflict in Ukraine as a broader geopolitical crisis between Russia and the West. According to the allies, this justified a reordering of NATO's priorities, with the principle of collective defense returning to prominence. The allies announced numerous initiatives to defend alliance territory against external threats. In so doing, NATO was able to

exercise its own prerogatives, but in ways that managed to not further entangle itself in the Ukraine conflict.

Second, Ukraine became re-defined as a special NATO partner whose loyalty and value to the alliance were measured by its willingness to recommit to an aggressive reform program on the one hand, and its “important” geopolitical location within Europe, on the other. By the end of 2014, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine’s parliament) had renounced the country’s non-aligned status, ending four years of official military neutrality (Shchetko & Cullison, 2014). The move helped clear the path for resuming and intensifying the integration with NATO in the following years.

11.2 The Initial Response: Upscaling the Conflict

NATO’s initial, rhetorical response suggested a perception that Russia’s actions posed a serious threat not only to Ukraine’s autonomy and independence, but to NATO’s dominance in the European security architecture. In the ensuing weeks and months after the annexation, NATO worked to invoke the presumptive legitimacy of international law and norms to denounce Russia’s actions. The April 1 allied foreign ministers’ statement was unequivocal:

We, the Foreign Ministers of NATO, are united in our condemnation of Russia’s illegal military intervention in Ukraine and Russia’s violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. We do not recognize Russia’s illegal and illegitimate attempt to annex Crimea (NATO, 2014d).

The NUC press release issued the same day contained identical language, in line with customary NATO practice to reuse vetted language, showing how through repetitive performances constructions can begin to appear “natural.” NATO framed Russia as a rogue actor in contravention with the established rules of acceptable state behavior and in breach of previously

made international commitments, including with Ukraine, NATO, and other security institutions such as the UN and the OSCE (NATO, 2014c, 2014g). For their part, NATO and Ukraine vowed to “work together to reach a political and diplomatic solution which respects international law and Ukraine’s internationally recognized borders” (NATO, 2014e). This framed their own actions in concert with the multilateralist norms and democratic values the allies themselves had long projected. Continuing to define Ukraine as a “long-standing and distinctive partner of the Alliance,” (NATO, 2014g, §29) the NAC said it would unquestionably support the country’s “sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, and the right of the Ukrainian people to determine their own future, without outside interference” (NATO, 2014c). NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen expressed solidarity, declaring that NATO “stood by Ukraine and it stood by the international system of rules that had developed” since the end of the Cold War (BBC, 2014). These were well-established and familiar commonplaces in the discourse, appealing to Western-defined liberal values and order and the country’s traditional, special status within the alliance’s partnership network. NATO repeatedly characterized Russia’s actions as “fundamentally” challenging its goal of a “Europe whole, free, and at peace” and demanded that Russia “reverse the illegal and illegitimate ‘annexation’ of Crimea” (NATO, 2014e, 2014g). On April 1, the allies announced their decision to “suspend all practical civilian and military cooperation between NATO and Russia,” but kept the door open to “political dialogue” within the NRC at the ambassadorial level and above (NATO, 2014d). NATO later set out the conditions for returning to “business as usual.” This involved Russia reversing the Crimea annexation, ending support for separatism in eastern Ukraine, withdrawing troops from internationally recognized Ukrainian territory, respecting the rights of the local population, and refraining from further aggression (NATO, 2014b).

NATO's reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea was very different from how it responded to the invasion of Georgia in August 2008 in many ways. First, the allies interpreted the Ukraine crisis as a much more serious challenge to NATO's authority over the European security order. Whereas they characterized the earlier conflict as a "disproportionate" military action on Russia's part, dividing blame evenly between Georgia and Russia while refraining from openly condemning the latter, the allies described the Crimea annexation as an illegal and illegitimate action (NATO, 2008c, 2008d, 2014d). Indeed, this was the first annexation of territory in Europe by a major power since World War II. NATO in fact sought to focus attention on the term "annexation" in this situation, with it repeatedly appearing inside inverted commas in public documents (NATO, 2014e, 2014g). This was meant to highlight the implausibility of Russia's claim that the March 16 referendum resulted in overwhelming popular support for leaving Ukraine and joining Russia (Wilson, 2014, pp. 113-114). On one hand, NATO understood Russia's actions toward Ukraine as tantamount to criminal behavior, as in breaking international law, though against Georgia in 2008 as a minor infraction, merely "inconsistent" and "incompatible" with normal state behavior and acceptable conflict resolution principles, on the other (NATO, 2008a, 2008d). Inevitably, the differing interpretations of the events were due in part to the effect of accumulated meaning. NATO's understanding of the crisis in Ukraine accrued onto its own pre-established conceptions of earlier Russian behavior as new information became available. Nonetheless, in both instances, NATO unsurprisingly cast Georgia and Ukraine as victims of Russian aggression.

Second, unlike with Georgia, NATO's rhetorical response did not have to address how Russia's actions impacted the April 2008 Bucharest decision for Ukraine. This was because the Yanukovich-led government had previously suspended the pursuit of joining the alliance in

2010, thereafter making NATO's membership pledge in the context of Ukraine a moot point. In the subsequent months after the August 2008 war, NATO worked to recode "the Bucharest decision" as only having to do with allied support for Georgia's membership aspirations, rather than with advocating for membership itself. By contrast, the issue never surfaced in NATO's statements at the start of the Ukraine crisis, as the prospect of the country obtaining membership had not yet resurfaced in public pronouncements.

The final difference between the response to Russia's intervention in Ukraine versus Georgia was the robustness of NATO's material action. In the following months after the Russia-Georgia war, NATO's multivocal moves were limited to providing the country with the NGC and an ANP, a special bilateral framework for security consultations and the formal institutional mechanism for feedback on reform implementation, respectively. These were meant to reinforce Georgia's integration with the alliance while showing Russia that NATO would not be deterred from doing so. Having an ANP and the NGC put Georgia's NATO partnership institutionally on par with Ukraine's, as the latter already had a joint commission together with NATO since 1997 and its own annual reform feedback mechanism, awarded simultaneously with Georgia in December 2008 (NATO, 2008b). The way in which the allies responded to Russia's invasion of Georgia did not suggest NATO, as a whole, perceived a broader shift in prevailing threat perceptions or a changing security environment. The August 2008 war was seen as an isolated incident rather than a major threat to the NATO-dominated geopolitical order. Nevertheless, there was a propensity in both cases to escalate small-scale conflicts into broader geopolitical struggles between Russia and the West.

By contrast, in 2014 NATO responded with country-specific, regional, and alliance-wide initiatives principally designed to boost its own conventional deterrence and territorial defense.

The April 1 NUC statement said that “concrete measures” would be taken to strengthen “Ukraine’s ability to provide for its own security,” but did not offer any specifics other than announcing a reinforcement of the NLO in Kyiv with “additional experts” (NATO, 2014e). The exact wording here, specifying Ukraine needed to “provide for its own security,” showed how through discourse the country was identified as an “insider” within the NATO-dominated security order but nonetheless left on the “outside” of the article five security umbrella. While NATO had long constructed Ukraine as a Western-actor-in-training, the country lacked official standing as a treaty ally, meaning there was no legal obligation to defend it. NATO sought to drive this point home, with nearly all statements about the country from April 2014 to May 2015 reiterating it. In response to Russia’s actions, NATO’s foreign ministers stated that “a package of measures aimed at deepening our cooperation with other NATO partners in Eastern Europe,” would be implemented (NATO, 2014d). It was however also short on specifics. Despite this, the latter announcement suggested NATO was at least keen to follow a multi-faceted approach to respond to Russia’s intervention in Ukraine from the outset.

NATO’s early moves seemed ambiguous. They were meant to exert alliance autonomy and independent decision making, reassure individual allies on the “frontline,” all while standing up to Russia. But they were not specifically designed to advance Ukraine’s NATO membership bid since the new government had not yet formally reinstated the goal.

11.3 Wales Summit Outcomes

The response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and fomentation of war in eastern Ukraine clarified with the September 2014 Wales Summit. NATO’s actions signaled the prioritization of collective defense and deterrence of existing alliance territory, not protecting Ukraine. This implied a dramatic upscaling of a localized conflict between Russia and Ukraine

as a broader, civilizational standoff between NATO, as the guardian of the West on one hand, versus a dangerous and backwards Russia, on the other. Regarding Ukraine, NATO did not introduce any new institutional structures to the bilateral relationship. Yet, both sides appeared to recommit to the existing ANP as a mechanism to resume Ukraine's reforms in line with NATO standards. Meanwhile, NATO at Wales announced a major investment in Georgia's military forces and defense institutions through the SNGP. Taken together, the moves showed how NATO could take multiple actions at once to strengthen ties with both partners.

The NAC announced its decision to create several "assurance measures" to fortify the alliance's military posture against external threats (NATO, 2014g). The "Readiness Action Plan" (RAP) was an overarching set of military activities in and around the eastern part of alliance territory, reinforced by recurring exercises focused on collective defense and crisis management (NATO, 2022). Under the RAP banner, the allies agreed to triple the size of the existing NRF, from 13,000 to 40,000 troops, to improve the ability to react more quickly and decisively to emergencies (Deni, 2017). The allies also approved creating a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) as part of the RAP, a rapidly deployable force comprised of air, land, maritime, and special operations forces to respond to unspecified "challenges" on the "periphery of NATO's territory" (NATO, 2014g, §8). Rotational command and control elements and prepositioned equipment and supplies would be brought to the territory of some allies to enhance "interoperability." In addition, an enhanced program of exercises was to be developed, both for reassuring some worried allies, namely the Baltic States, and as a visible presence on the ground (Hill, 2018). The United States was a key driver of NATO's early military response, deploying rotational forces to Poland and the Baltic States, naval vessels to the Black and Baltic Seas, and committing new funding to enhance existing military infrastructure on European NATO territory

(Belkin et al., 2014). Secretary-general Stoltenberg later explained to the EU parliament, somewhat ambiguously, that these measures were a direct response to “what we have seen in Ukraine,” refraining from uttering the word “Russia” in his statement (NATO, 2015a). That may have reflected a desire to remain diplomatic given the differing prevailing threat perceptions of the NATO members in the early post-Crimea years.

Successive U.S. administrations have publicly criticized European NATO members for what has been perceived as insufficient commitment to defense spending and burden-sharing. While President Trump was a loud proponent of this “naming and shaming” style of pressure, it was a longstanding complaint from U.S. officials (Becker et al., 2023). Speaking in June 2011, Robert Gates, President Obama’s first secretary of defense, warned that NATO risked “collective military irrelevance” unless the European allies halted and reversed the decline in military spending and capabilities (Alexander & Brunnstrom, 2011). Stoltenberg declared in an April 2019 address to the U.S. Congress that “NATO allies must spend more on defense. This has been the clear message from President Trump. And this message is having a real impact” (NATO, 2019). Some observers claim the disagreements over burden-sharing have eroded political cohesion and contributed to a perceived “transatlantic divide” between the U.S. and European pillars of NATO (Becker & Malesky, 2017).

To address the issue, the Wales Declaration announced: “We agree to reverse the trend of declining defense budgets,” and charged allied defense ministers with annually checking up with implementing this pledge (NATO, 2014g, §14). The allies agreed to pursue a standard of two percent of gross domestic product devoted to defense spending by 2024. Those allies who currently spent less than 20 percent of their annual defense budget on equipment, research, and development would aim to increase this portion of their expenditures within the same timeframe.

Lastly, all allies agreed to ensure their militaries met NATO standards for readiness and maintenance and could work together effectively (Ibid.). Attaining “interoperability” had been a long-stated ambition unevenly achieved in practice. The Anglophone allies (and partners) always had a baked-in advantage, with communication a vital factor in successful military operations. It was difficult to discern whether all these commitments responded principally to Russia’s aggression or to other contemporaneous, perceived threats, such as the Islamic State, says Deni (2017). Nonetheless, they were articulated in unusually stark terms for a NAC summit statement issued by the allied heads of state, more traditionally characterized by well-rehearsed platitudes.

“The Wales Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond,” a brief statement of purpose and intent, accompanied the longer, conventional summit communique. In the first document, the allies lamented how their vision of a European continent united by democracy and stability faced “multiple challenges” from many angles (NATO, 2014f, §2). This included Russia’s “illegal self-declared annexation of Crimea and...aggressive acts in other parts of Ukraine” as well as the Islamic State’s “spread of violence and extremism in North Africa and the Middle East” (Ibid.). This reflected the allies’ varied threat perceptions, which complicated collective action (Béraud-Sudreau & Giegerich, 2018). According to a German military officer posted to a NATO position, not all members shared an understanding that Russia’s actions constituted “hostilities.” Some so-called Old Europe allies, namely France, Italy, and Germany, favored a more balanced approach toward Russia, emphasizing diplomacy. The eastern European allies on the other hand, particularly Poland, favored more assertive measures, including extending the U.S.-led alliance defenses and military infrastructure far to the east. This reflected their own collective perception as being vulnerable to a possible Russian attack. The lack of NATO consensus explained the April 1 compromise decision to cut off “practical” communication but nonetheless retain open

lines at the highest levels of the NRC (NATO, 2014d, §6). Crucially, the allies also announced a recommitment to collective defense, a defining feature of a military alliance, which had been named along with crisis management and cooperative security as NATO's three core tasks in the 2010 Strategic Concept, but not prioritized in practice (NATO, 2014f). According to Stoltenberg, juggling such tasks simultaneously presented a new and unprecedented challenge to the NATO allies, warranting the need for increased cooperation with the EU. Now "we have to do both collective defense in Europe and crisis management out of area at the same time," he asserted to a group of EU parliamentarians in March 2015 (NATO, 2015a).

The longer Wales Summit Declaration indicated a collective perception among the allies that the global and regional security environment had fundamentally changed. The language of the text was carefully balanced, reflecting a desire to retain a measure of diplomatic restraint. Russia was described as a "challenge," and not a "threat," a stronger term which either explicitly or implicitly signified an "enemy." While it was a lengthy document, longer than each of the three previous summit texts in 2009, 2010, and 2012, respectively, the communique mentioned the term "threat" over 50 times (Sloan, 2017). However, most of the instances had to do with the Islamic State and related "transnational and multi-dimensional threats" like terrorism (NATO, 2014g, §32). Yet several direct and indirect references to threats posed by Russia appeared.

According to the allies, these included:

...Russia's pattern of disregard for international law...violation of fundamental European security arrangements and commitments...[and] use of military and other instruments to coerce its neighbors. This threatens the rules-based international order and challenges Euro-Atlantic security (NATO, 2014g, §8).

Nonetheless, the many sections of the document focused on Russian aggression contained few uses of the term. Though the allies characterized the behavior as threatening, Russia itself was not labeled a “threat.” According to a U.S. military officer at SHAPE, this showed the disagreement within NATO over what constituted the “real threat” to the alliance, namely whether it be Russia, terrorism, or instability in the Middle East and North Africa. However, “if it is published [in an official document] then it has been agreed to by the allies.”

While NATO did not explicitly abandon the long-held open-door policy under Article 10 of the founding charter, there was a tacit admission with the Wales documents that enlargement had probably reached its eastern territorial limits. This was a turning point in the history of NATO’s post-Cold War expansion. The “Transatlantic Bond” statement contained a ritual mention of keeping the alliance’s door open, though it omitted the word “membership” in the text (NATO, 2014f, §8). This was instructive. Similarly, in the summit declaration, the allies relegated the open-door statement to paragraph 92 of 113, after raising almost every other issue. This was hardly a testament to the importance previously attached to incorporating new members, says Hill (2018). On the contrary, reprioritizing the task of collective defense implied a measure of alliance introspection, not necessarily projection and growth. It was apparent with the Wales statements that NATO’s future focus and direction might begin to shift from extending its reach further into the post-Soviet space to protecting existing territory against external “risks and challenges.”

Taken together, the two Wales documents reveal how NATO had begun to come to grips with its inability to impose its version of geopolitical order on Russia and how the latter rejected both its perennial junior partner status and being subjected to the Western-defined rules governing state behavior. Russia had once again shown its ability to take decisive, violent action

to defend its perceived national security interests near its borders. This time round, NATO's interpretation of events was different. There appeared a collective perception of a possible permanent shift in the dynamics of the European security environment. While the initial post-August 2008 war NAC summit statement optimistically announced a readiness to cooperate with Russia to address shared security concerns (NATO, 2009), there was no indication of an attempt to pursue another "reset" with Russia in 2014 after the Crimea annexation.

11.4 Reaffirming Ukraine's Special Status

Russia's annexation of Crimea did not appear to immediately change how NATO understood Ukraine. NATO nonetheless regarded the country as a special partner whose role and place with the Euro-Atlantic area were linked to its perceived geostrategic location, while the so-called territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine emerged as particular issues of concern. The post-Crimea narrative about Ukraine contained all the usual elements of the argumentative strategy previously used by the advocates of the country's incorporation into the alliance.

As an initial step, the allies continued to present Ukraine as fundamentally European. The December 2 NUC statement asserted the country was "an inseparable part" of Europe (NATO, 2014e). The phrase had dual connotations, implying both geographical and cultural belongingness. Moreover, it insinuated two things: Russia was trying to detach Ukraine from "Europe," and, conversely, that NATO did not view Russia itself as part of "Europe." The allies reaffirmed what they perceived as Ukraine's important role in stabilizing Euro-Atlantic security and firmly situated it within "a Europe where each country freely chooses its future" (NATO, 2014g, §22-23). The last comment implied Russia was to blame for stopping Ukraine from

selecting its own path while once more expressing a maximalist view of the principle of national self-determination.

In a second move, the allies asserted that Russia was threatening Ukraine's democracy and independence. This was done to reaffirm the need for NATO to protect the country. NATO lauded "the people of Ukraine for their commitment to freedom and democracy," which had endured "under difficult conditions," namely "a concerted campaign of violence by Russia" (Ibid., §24-25). The allies saw Ukraine's "determination" to pursue its chosen "foreign policy course free from outside interference," as impressive, which referred to the June 27 signing of the EU Association Agreement. NATO welcomed the presidential elections on May 25, characterized as "free and fair," a trite conception which apparently showed how the new government had internalized "Western" norms into the domestic political processes. Taken together, the two developments testified "to the consolidation of Ukraine's democracy and its European aspiration" (Ibid., §25). The "European" and "democratic" qualities that they gave Ukraine played directly into NATO's self-described role as the supreme guardian of democracy, both in Europe and beyond. The Wales communique duly declared: "We stand ready to act together...to defend freedom and our shared values..." (Ibid., §2).

Lastly, NATO cited Ukraine's European identity, democratic values, and loyalty to the alliance as reasons to support the country, but not yet cause for incorporating it as an alliance member.

We highly value Ukraine's past and present contributions to all current Allied operations...and will continue to support Ukraine's implementation of wide-ranging reforms through the Annual National Program (Ibid., §29).

Likewise, Stoltenberg himself continued to advocate for Ukraine, saying that since the country had “chosen to move on the path towards Europe, sharing our values,” NATO should therefore work more closely with it” (NATO, 2015a). Thus, NATO’s self-perception as a security community of Western liberal democracies, historic track record of outreach to transitioning countries to the east, and long running stated commitment to an open-door policy, obliged it to help aspiring community members, such as Ukraine. Any other course of action was regarded as a betrayal of its own principles, a breach of commitment, and a violation of the ideals it promoted. NATO had backed itself into a rhetorical corner.

After the Crimea annexation, an older rhetorical strategy reappeared in which NATO defined Ukraine in terms of its conformity to so-called Western values. The new, pro-Western government’s apparent willingness to carry out the required political and defense reforms, as specified by NATO, shaped how Ukraine was presented in NATO’s statements. The allies praised the Ukrainian authorities’ ongoing efforts to implement “key constitutional reforms,” such as countering corruption and promoting an inclusive political process based on democratic values, respect for human rights, minorities, and the rule of law. NATO deemed such measures necessary for anchoring Ukraine’s place among the “European democracies committed to common values” (NATO, 2015). Both sides sought to reinvigorate the country’s ANP, established in December 2008, which had been sent to the “back burner” under Yanukovich, claimed a U.S. advisor to the defense ministry.¹³⁶ The September 4 NUC joint statement announced new military-specific initiatives within the ANP, focusing on command and control, logistics, cyber defense, strategic communication, and facilitating career transitions for existing military service members (NATO, 2014b). NATO also credited itself for strengthening existing

¹³⁶ Interview B, U.S. defense advisor, by telephone, 30 April 2020.

programs on defense education and scientific cooperation. All these efforts would apparently help Ukraine “better provide for its own security” (Ibid.). This once more drew an official dividing line between the allies, who were protected under the article five security umbrella, and mere partners, who were not. The rhetoric situated Ukraine in a political, discursive in-between space, defined by NATO as an insider but nonetheless left officially on the outside. Even so, NATO could claim to be supporting Ukraine in the face of external pressure, signaling to many audiences at once, including Russia, as well as to Georgia and other aspirants, that it was a reliable alliance partner who stood up for its friends.

Ukraine’s previous concern for its independence and territorial integrity reemerged under the new pro-Western government and after the Crimea annexation. This also defined the way the country was identified in NATO’s discourse as the crisis deepened in the ensuing months. All public documents about Ukraine between March and December 2014 contained the customary rhetorical support of these principles. This characterized NATO’s statements about Georgia as well, both before and after the 2008 war. On April 1, the allied foreign ministers asserted NATO’s position in universal terms: “We support the sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity of *all states* within their internationally recognized borders” (NATO, 2014d). This was a sweeping generalization that laid bare a maximalist interpretation of state sovereignty. Such a statement called to mind President Putin’s January 2006 remark about applying universal principles to settling “frozen conflicts.” Rejecting the prevailing Western view that Kosovo’s disputed independence from Serbia represented a unique case, Putin said “Any proposed solutions should be universal in nature. If someone takes the view that Kosovo should be granted independence, then why should we withhold the same from Abkhazia and South Ossetia?” (RFE/RL, 2006). And yet, Kosovo promptly gained widespread Western

support. As of 2014, most NATO members (24 of 28), including the United States, had formally recognized it. The Western argument was that such a move was warranted since Kosovo had built effective democratic institutions, which in effect imparted a degree of conditionality on conferring external recognition. Nonetheless, the inconsistency here exposed the selective application of NATO's universal claim to support the territorial integrity of "all states."

The following statements struck a more measured tone by focusing on Ukraine. The September 4 NUC meeting press release, which took place in conjunction with the Wales Summit and attended by the new Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, asserted "We, the Heads of State and Government of the NATO-Ukraine Commission, stand united in our support of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders" (NATO, 2014a). This was an unsurprising show of solidarity with the leader of an embattled partner. Likewise, the December 2 NUC foreign ministers' meeting statement called on Russia to abide by the September 4 "Minsk I Agreement" and facilitate an ultimate political solution to the crisis which "respects Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and internationally recognized borders" (NATO, 2014e). With the Wales Summit Declaration, the allies declared that "An independent, sovereign, and stable Ukraine...is key to Euro-Atlantic security," a familiar refrain indicative of NATO's perception of the country as a key geostrategic entity (NATO, 2014g). "At a time when Ukraine's security is being undermined, the Alliance continues its full support for Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity..." (Ibid.). "Security" in this instance was synonymous with "democracy," another example of purposeful conflation at work by NATO.

11.5 Conclusion

Already by the end of 2014, it was apparent that the territorial fragmentation brought on by the loss of Crimea and the violence and instability of the war in the Donbas had not altered NATO's narrative of Ukraine. The country was still constructed principally as a crucial geostrategic actor in Europe, whose civilizational attributes were secondary to its spatialization. Yet, the perceived threats to democracy and freedom in Ukraine became dramatized as a broader assault on "the West," institutionally represented by NATO. In this manner, Ukraine was constructed as a proxy in a geopolitical standoff between NATO and Russia. NATO's statements indicated a concerted effort to upscale the conflict in Ukraine. NATO's interpretation of the events unfolding in the country became clearer with the measures announced at the 2014 Wales Summit. These involved fairer burden sharing, military command structure and force posture changes, and conventional deterrence, thus focusing on alliance self-care. The moves signaled a shifting of NATO's attention toward the collective defense of alliance territory. Conversely, Ukraine was repeatedly told that it needed to be able to provide for its own defense. According to NATO, Ukraine's security nonetheless could only be assured by conforming to alliance standards and values, irrespective of its aspiration for membership.

Ukrainian territorial integrity and sovereignty unsurprisingly emerged as issues for NATO after Crimea, reflecting the pro-Western government's own concern. The allies expressed rhetorical support for these principles, but they were either unwilling or unable to garner the necessary consensus to respond with direct military assistance to Ukraine. Differing threat perceptions among the allies rendered a robust collective response improbable. In addition, NATO's early post-Crimea support to Ukraine was likely impacted by the fact that the country had unilaterally withdrawn from the membership pipeline in 2010. That said, there were indications even before the end of 2014 that the Ukrainian government was going to reverse the

neutral status. Nonetheless, whereas the August 2008 war spurred the beginning of a NATO-Georgia “special relationship,” this did not take place in the Ukraine case. Whether this was because the allies already considered Ukraine a “unique” and “distinctive” partner or that it had previously renounced pursuing joining NATO was not clear. But both factors likely played a part in shaping the NATO response to the annexation and ensuing war in the Donbas.

NATO continued to follow a robust action strategy whereby its rhetorical and material moves could be interpreted coherently from many angles at once. By fortifying the alliance’s defenses, NATO exerted its autonomy and reassured those allies who perceived Russia’s actions as threatening. Meanwhile, the rhetoric showed an intent to both stand up for Ukraine while standing up to Russia.

Chapter 12 - Ukraine 2015-2020: Renewed Ambitions

12.1 Introduction

The Ukrainian government reinstating the objective of achieving NATO membership, on the one hand, and the growing realization that being a warzone and a territorially fragmented state made such a goal impractical, on the other, were the greatest developments in the NATO-Ukraine relationship between 2015 and 2020. In this difficult situation, NATO tried making the best of things. It continued following a robust action strategy of taking ambiguous actions to preserve long-term flexibility in making future moves. The allies responded favorably to Ukraine's renewed commitment to joining NATO by continuing the pattern of established behavior of covertly integrating the country into NATO's structures outside of the MAP process. The United States led the way in strengthening the security cooperation relationship with Ukraine, which helped to show a tangible sign of support through the provision of both "lethal" and "non-lethal" military aid to the country.

U.S. security cooperation with Ukraine in 2015-2020 facilitated the country's further NATO integration by fostering interoperability and incorporating Ukraine's military acquisition into Western procurement networks. As the leader of NATO, U.S. material support was another way that NATO could demonstrate commitment to Ukraine other than through mere rhetoric.

12.2 Supporting "Ukraine's Restated Aspirations"

Under the new president Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine's pro-Western government quickly restored the goal of NATO membership. This put the issue back on NATO's agenda, with the

allies wanting to appear responsive to favorable expressions of national self-determination and state sovereignty, despite the dim prospect of Ukraine joining NATO anytime soon.

Following snap parliamentary elections in October 2014, the new governing coalition made joining NATO a foreign policy priority. By the end of the year, the Rada publicly renounced the country's non-aligned status, in effect since 2010. In June 2017, the Rada passed legislation prioritizing cooperation with NATO to "achieve the criteria needed to gain membership" in the alliance (RFE/RL, 2017). Next, the Rada in September 2018 adopted a law introduced by President Poroshenko amending Ukraine's constitution, putting the country on a "strategic course" for obtaining "full-fledged membership" in both NATO and the EU (Ukrinform, 2018). Finally, in February 2019, Poroshenko signed a constitutional amendment, confirming the "irreversibility of the European and Euro-Atlantic course of Ukraine," committing the country to join both institutions (Rada, 2019).

Thus, in the space of a decade, Ukraine went from being named a future alliance member at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, to rejecting that designation in 2010 by declaring neutrality under Yanukovich, to renouncing non-alignment and reviving the NATO membership goal from 2014, at first verbally and ultimately through a 2019 constitutional amendment. These changes reportedly frustrated some Western officials, especially U.S. diplomats, according to a Ukrainian military attache, and the prevailing perception was that Ukraine's efforts to join NATO lost momentum and support from within the alliance since the route to membership had not been "continuously paved" after Bucharest.¹³⁷ Nonetheless, amending the constitution legally bound the Ukrainian government to pursue joining NATO, while also providing future governments

¹³⁷ Interview BB, Ukrainian military attaché, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021.

less flexibility in making foreign policy decisions. Consequently, obtaining alliance membership has remained the official Ukrainian policy following the April 2019 surprise victory of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the presidential election.

NATO publicly acknowledged Ukraine's renewed ambitions with the July 2018 Brussels summit declaration, announcing that "In light of Ukraine's restated aspirations for NATO membership, we stand by our decisions taken at the Bucharest Summit and subsequent Summits" (NATO, 2018a, §66). This statement represented the formal recognition of a renewed foreign policy trajectory that had been building within Ukraine for several years. This did not signify a "revolutionary moment" in the making of NATO-Ukraine relations, but simply NATO's public acknowledgement of an "obvious fact," said the Ukraine desk officer at the NATO international staff.¹³⁸ Given the tense atmosphere surrounding the summit, however, the endorsement of Ukraine's intent to join NATO was significant.

The 2018 Brussels summit took place during the climax of President Trump's active hostility towards the alliance over his demands for greater transatlantic burden sharing and calls for better relations with Russia. During the presidential campaign he repeatedly floated the idea of withdrawing from NATO. While president, he withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear deal, the Paris climate agreement and UNESCO, and undermined the WTO, WHO, UN Refugee Agency and Green Climate Fund from within. His "America First" rhetoric had been particularly acute immediately before the NATO summit and in June he refused to sign the G7 statement. He also was due to fly to Helsinki for a bilateral meeting with Putin directly after the summit.

¹³⁸ Interview T, German NATO International Staff Officer, by telephone, 10 July 2020.

While in Brussels, the summit almost broke down when Trump hijacked a working meeting originally aimed at advancing Ukraine and Georgia's integration with NATO and threatened fellow allied state leaders that the United States would "go its own way" if his burden sharing demands were not met (Emmott, et. al., 2018). Sensing the danger, NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg deftly applied personal leadership and diplomacy to the situation to salvage the summit. He used his procedural powers as the NAC chair to turn a Ukraine and Georgia-focused meeting into an impromptu session on defense spending and burden sharing (Schuette, 2021). Regarding Russia, Stoltenberg and other senior NATO officials worked behind the scenes with diplomats from allied capitals both before and during the summit to maintain allied political cohesion. These efforts succeeded at overcoming Trump's opposition. A shorter declaration on "transatlantic security and solidarity," released alongside the traditional summit communique, was unequivocal in criticizing Russia and supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and aspirations to join NATO (NATO, 2018). Stoltenberg's actions exemplified the importance of NATO's institutional actors, particularly the secretary-general role, in adapting to "hegemonic contestation" from the United States, argues Schuette (2021).

The timing of the Brussels Summit in mid-2018 enabled the allies to take advantage of the direction of the prevailing geopolitical winds within Ukraine. NATO had waited to announce in public its commitment to fulfilling the Bucharest decision for the country only after the Ukrainian government had re-made joining NATO official state policy. Thus, the allies took their rhetorical queues from their partner. While it was understandable for the allies to want to appear to be supporting the goals of an important partner like Ukraine, there was also a very clear legitimacy-seeking element at play. The Brussels statements helped support the democratic community-building narrative that NATO was a voluntary organization whose expansion was

driven by those wanting to join the alliance, rather than by the allies themselves. In addition, by proclaiming to “stand by” the earlier commitments made to Ukraine, NATO could bolster its self-image of a reliable partner who kept its promises, regardless of how unrealistic they were. Responding positively to Ukraine’s restated aspirations was in concert with the long running open-door approach toward new membership. The following spring, Stoltenberg cited North Macedonia’s impending accession, which was completed in 2020, as proof that “NATO’s door remains open.” NATO was “an Alliance that others strive to join,” he pointed out to members of the U.S. Congress (NATO, 2019). This was a way for NATO to exhibit its independent decision making ability on membership in one context, North Macedonia, while at the same time appearing committed to supporting Ukraine’s membership aspirations.

Taken together, the Brussels announcements of July 2018 represented NATO’s first public expressions of the possible future NATO membership of Ukraine since the previous Ukrainian government adopted the policy of military non-alignment in June 2010. Crucially, however, the allies did not introduce any new reform initiatives or institutional mechanisms to help make its partner’s dream a reality. Instead, Ukraine was instructed to stay the course despite its territorial fragmentation and unresolved conflict and make “full use” of the current “tools available” to it, such as the ANP, which had been in place since December 2008 (NATO, 2018a, §66; 2018b, §2). According to a senior Ukrainian official, while earlier Ukrainian governments saw ANP as only being about cooperation, the present administration saw it as the most crucial strategic planning and guidance tool for getting the country ready for membership.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Interview D, senior Ukrainian government official, e-mail, 1 June 2020.

The October 2019 NUC visit to Kyiv was the first bilateral meeting since NATO reaffirmed its rhetorical commitment to the Bucharest decision for Ukraine in Brussels in July 2018. Allied ministers met with new President Zelenskyy, members of the Cabinet of Ministers, and members of the Rada. The visit was trumpeted as a tangible show of support to Ukraine against Russia's "aggressive" and "illegal" actions toward the country (NATO, 2019b, §1; §4). The subordinated positioning within the Kyiv statement might have indicated a desire to downplay the issue, given the apparent unlikelihood of Ukraine's membership under the challenging geopolitical circumstances. Russia's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of the Donbas had made joining NATO impossible. The precedent of the Georgia case demonstrated that NATO would be unable to implement the Bucharest decision if territorial divisions were created. Regardless of the country's desire for NATO membership, that was obvious. "Practically speaking," admitted a U.S. military officer in NATO's International Military Staff, there was "no way we could let the countries in" while they both had unresolved conflicts.¹⁴⁰ Doing so, so went the argument, could result in triggering an article five response against Russia. Given the situation, it was "far-fetched" Ukraine would become a NATO member, admitted an official at the U.S. mission to NATO.¹⁴¹ This sentiment spoke to the games being played by different actors at multiple levels. NATO said publicly that Ukraine would join the alliance and yet behind the scenes many practitioners within the NATO organization and in the member states believed there was no way this could happen.

The downward trend of NATO deemphasizing Ukraine's membership ambitions continued with the December 2019 London Declaration for the allied heads of state NAC

¹⁴⁰ Interview P, U.S. military officer at NATO Headquarters, by telephone, 3 July 2020.

¹⁴¹ Interview DD, U.S. defense official at U.S. Mission to NATO, by telephone, 14 May 2021.

meeting, marking the seventieth anniversary of the alliance. The text was uncharacteristically brief for a NAC statement and did not even once address Ukraine. Some attributed this to NATO wanting to avoid contentious topics in public since President Trump was constantly criticizing numerous allies, particularly Germany, over unfair burden sharing (Economist, 2019).

The communique contained only a dull reference to the prospect for future alliance expansion, midway through the text. “We are committed to NATO’s Open Door policy, which strengthens the Alliance and has brought security to millions of Europeans” (NATO, 2019a, §5). Invoking the open-door policy nonetheless remained an important symbolic gesture meant to exert the alliance’s independent decision-making in the face of Russia’s attempts to limit NATO’s options. Allied foreign ministers issued a special statement on the topic in December 2015 (NATO, 2015b). While that statement did not contain a single reference to Ukraine either, it otherwise said membership remained open to all European democracies who met NATO’s standards. The concurrent announcement that Montenegro had been invited to begin accession talks was cited as an example that “decisions on enlargement are for NATO itself” (Ibid., §2).

12.3 Institutionalized Rhetorical Support

NATO’s discourse about Ukraine became further cliché-ridden in the years after the Crimea annexation and as the conflict in the eastern part of the country simmered. Ritual expressions of support for the country’s so-called territorial integrity and sovereignty characterized the trend. Virtually all public statements from 2015 to 2020 contained variations of tropes stressing the alliance’s power and strength, though in reality there was little the allies could do to restore these principles for Ukraine. Russia’s actions had rendered the country a territorially fragmented state, even though it denied its involvement there, which unquestionably

weakened its authority to carry out independent policy choices. Initially, the allies “stood firm” in supporting Ukraine’s “sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders” (NATO, 2015a, 2016b). The personification then evolved into “standing united” with Ukraine (NATO, 2016a). In July 2017, the allies marked the twentieth anniversary of the NATO-Ukraine “Distinctive Partnership” by reiterating “strong support for Ukrainian sovereignty...” (NATO, 2017, §1). This was relatively watered-down wording given the occasion and as compared to the previous displays of verbal solidarity with Ukraine. Nonetheless, the performance soon came to a dramatic climax, with the allies expressing “unwavering support” (NATO, 2018b) for their longtime partner and ultimately, by 2019, doubling down with a “strong demonstration of NATO’s unwavering support” (NATO, 2019b, §1). The latter statement described the NAC’s October 31 visit to Ukraine for meetings with President Zelenskyy and other government officials.

In a parallel vein, the allies continued giving verbal support to restoring Ukrainian autonomy. The July 2017 NUC statement contained the clearest expression of NATO’s backing, asserting that Ukraine held the “inherent right to decide its own future and foreign policy course free from outside interference, as set out in the Helsinki Final Act” (NATO, 2017, §1). The qualifying phrase “as set out in the Helsinki Final Act” proved an ineffective attempt to invoke the supposed authority of international agreements to delegitimize Russia’s actions and induce its compliance. Both the Warsaw (2016) and Brussels (2018) summit declarations used nearly identical verbiage in describing Ukraine’s so-called right to choose foreign partners (NATO, 2016b, §117; 2018a, §66). Taken together, the statements reflected NATO’s long-held liberal bias for national self-determination and state sovereignty—that all states were entitled to do what they wanted, regardless of how their actions were interpreted by others. Ironically, however,

such principles apparently did not apply to Russia, with it asserting its independence and autonomy, albeit violently, in response to its own perception of insecurity and uncertainty about the future.

NATO's contention that Ukraine's further integration with the alliance was "key" to Euro-Atlantic security constituted another enduring theme of the strategic narrative. Each of the NUC press releases in 2016, 2017, and 2019, respectively, contained a nearly identical version of the line. However, in terms of positioning in text, this item was always subordinated to the concerns with Ukraine's territorial integrity and independence, implementation of reforms in line with NATO standards, and Russia's aggressive behavior (NATO, 2016a, §13; 2017, §10; 2019b, §10). In fact, the line about integrating Ukraine within NATO did not appear in the NUC statements until either the penultimate or last paragraphs, hardly a sign of collective fervor for the process. In the 2016 statement, however, the allies made it a point to highlight just how institutionalized their rhetorical support for Ukraine's integration had become, regardless of the changes in the country's geopolitical aspirations or to the strategic environment.

As noted at previous NATO Summits, including in Madrid, Bucharest, Lisbon, Chicago, and Wales, an independent, sovereign and stable Ukraine, firmly committed to democracy and the rule of law, is key to Euro-Atlantic security (NATO, 2016a, §13).

With this statement there was a tacit admission that the allies valued maintaining the appearance of political cohesion about Ukraine's future with NATO. Whether there was genuine feeling behind the appearance or that it was merely a pathway followed because the opposite course of action could be seen as giving in to Russian pressure was always difficult to parse.

In April 2019, NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg addressed both houses of the U.S. Congress, the first leader of any international organization to do so. The speech was a key

moment in Stoltenberg's strategic communication efforts aimed at President Trump, whose ambivalence toward NATO set off alarm bells, prompting concern among NATO and allied state leaders that Trump would reduce U.S. investment in Europe and undermine NATO initiatives. The secretary-general took the opportunity to praise Trump's supposed positive impact on the alliance and European allies' defense spending (NATO, 2019). That January, Stoltenberg had claimed on Fox, Trump's favorite news channel, that the president's "tough talk" encouraged the allies to commit an "extra \$100 billion" to defense (Re, 2019). While the prospect of NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia was not raised during the April speech, it nonetheless could have been seen as being implicated. Stoltenberg included NATO's "stepped up support for our close partners, Georgia and Ukraine," as a part of an overall allied defense and deterrence response to Russian aggression (NATO, 2019). Presumably, he was referring to the SNGP and CAP defense-capacity building packages, among other things, that were given to both countries after Crimea. Otherwise, bolstering the appearance of transatlantic political solidarity, particularly over burden sharing and towards Russia, seemed to be the main purposes of the address to Congress.

12.4 Cultivating Multivocality through Material Support

To complement the rhetoric, the allies continued making other moves to impress that Ukraine's integration with NATO was advancing despite the ongoing conflict in the Donbas. Between 2016 and 2020, NATO awarded its "distinctive partner" two main defense-related consolation prizes for continuing to strive to meet the requirements for a MAP and for holding a Western geopolitical orientation. The first one was the "Comprehensive Assistance Package," created in 2016, a so-called capacity-building initiative to bring the country's military and

security institutions to NATO standards. Designating Ukraine an “Enhanced Opportunities Partner” in 2020 was the second move. This supposedly opened new doors for exercises and training to enhance Ukraine’s interoperability with allied forces. In a parallel effort, the United States enhanced its current security cooperation relationship with Ukraine, which both led and reinforced NATO’s engagement with the country during this period.

12.41 The Comprehensive Assistance Package: “Ukraine’s SNGP”

At the July 2016 Warsaw Summit, the NAC announced a Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine, which brought over 40 separate defense and security reform initiatives under one umbrella. CAP’s stated goal was to “consolidate and enhance” NATO’s support to help Ukraine “...to become more resilient [and] to better provide for its own security...” against “a wide array of threats, including hybrid threats” (NATO, 2016a, §10; 2016b, §117-118). Thus, without explicitly saying it, the official justification indicated CAP was meant to improve Ukraine’s capacity to counter Russian aggression by modernizing its military forces. Ukrainian officials supposedly held a different view, believing that enacting such reforms helped prepare the country for NATO membership, according to a senior U.S. military officer at European Command, the organization which oversaw bilateral security cooperation in the region.¹⁴² The conflicting readings of CAP served as an example of the general ambiguity that pervaded NATO’s relations with Ukraine after 2014. Was it intended to prepare the country to join NATO or to better defend itself against Russia? A U.S. State Department official offered

¹⁴² Interview F, U.S. military officer at U.S. European Command, by telephone, 12 June 2020.

one perspective on the issue, emphasizing that whether Ukraine obtained membership was “...not the most immediate problem...” but rather “...that Ukraine is not ready for membership,” because it still needed to implement reforms. “We tell the Ukrainians: ‘you’re not ready, it doesn’t matter the Russians are on your front door.’”¹⁴³ Under these circumstances, CAP was a multivocal solution which enabled the allies to claim to be pursuing both goals at once. Pointing out how Ukraine’s membership was held up due to its inability to fully internalize NATO standards became an artful way for the allies to avoid the issue.

According to the official pronouncements it was unclear whether CAP represented a new endeavor or was merely a repackaging of existing NATO-supervised activities under a new name to appear innovative. The wording of the Warsaw announcement suggested the latter: “NATO will continue to provide strategic advice and practical support...as set out in the Comprehensive Assistance Package which we are *endorsing* together with President Poroshenko...” (NATO, 2016b, §118).¹⁴⁴ The joint statement of the NUC meeting of the heads of state and government, held in conjunction with the NAC summit, also used the word “endorsed” in a separate press release (NATO, 2016a, §1). The word choice here brought to mind NATO’s 2008 endorsement of the U.S. bilateral efforts with Poland and the Czech Republic, respectively, as its own comprehensive ballistic missile defense system. Stritecky and Hynek (2010, p. 183) called this an example of “successful NATO-ization.” Equally, with the CAP move, NATO was simply expressing retroactive official approval of ongoing practical activities on the ground.

The CAP move nonetheless helped to promote a perception of fairness and equality between NATO’s partnership with Ukraine on the one hand, and that with Georgia, on the other.

¹⁴³ Interview EE, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 16 July 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Emphasis added.

The latter already had a similar bespoke institutional arrangement with the alliance through the SNGP, created in 2014 and subsequently “refreshed” many times thereafter to give the appearance of progress. Like the SNGP, CAP dealt exclusively with implementing defense and security sector reforms to NATO’s standards. The allies generally considered these initiatives less controversial and easier to achieve than reforming the two countries’ domestic political systems. As with SNGP, the CAP had similar periodic “reviews.” By 2019, the NUC declared it had undergone a third such update, further aligning it to incorporate NATO’s “best practices and standards” (NATO, 2019b). In addition, the introduction of CAP in July 2016 was probably timed to reassure Ukraine as well, with the allies’ attention focused elsewhere on territorial defense. At Warsaw, NATO also announced the establishment of the EFP multinational ground forces to enhance conventional deterrence in the east.

12.42 The Enhanced Opportunities Program: A “platinum card” for partnership

EOP was the second important move showing how NATO could nurture multivocality other than through utterances. In June 2020, the NAC designated Ukraine an “Enhanced Opportunities Partner,” upgrading the country to an official exclusive status in NATO’s partnership network. Ukraine became one of six countries to be recognized as such, alongside Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, and Sweden. Ukraine also joined Georgia as being the only EOP partners who NATO had previously designated future members of the alliance. No others even held membership aspirations at the time. NATO claimed the new status afforded Ukraine privileged access to the alliance’s so-called interoperability toolbox, including exercises, information exchange, and training (NATO, 2023). The aim of EOP was to improve partner capacity, deepen military cooperation, and achieve interoperability between allied and partner

forces. According to the official announcement, the decision recognized “Ukraine’s strong contributions to NATO missions...” and showed the alliance’s “...continued commitment to its partnerships despite the COVID-19 pandemic,” said NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu (NATO, 2020a). EOP was thus offered to Ukraine as a reward for its continued loyalty to NATO. However, that was not what it really wanted. The announcement later explained that “Ukraine’s status as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner does not prejudice any decision on NATO membership” (Ibid.). Like the CAP move, the line suggested an intent to merely rebrand the ongoing cooperation with Ukraine, rather than substantively elevate the relationship. Ukraine desired a MAP but was unable to get one because there was still no allied consensus on the matter.¹⁴⁵ The EOP was really a consolation prize. Besides, the decision that Ukraine would join NATO had been made way back at the 2008 Bucharest Summit.

Designating Ukraine an EOP partner constituted a multivocal move for many reasons. The decision was interpreted coherently from multiple angles. Some observers thought it was a “great breakthrough” for Ukraine, with its formal integration into NATO stuck in neutral for years due to domestic and external factors.¹⁴⁶ According to a Ukrainian official, corruption, bureaucratic resistance, and a lack of resources held back the implementation of the NATO-directed structural reforms needed to achieve membership.¹⁴⁷ Awarding EOP status therefore gave reform-minded officials a measure of validation of their efforts. Former NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow called the decision “long overdue but still an important milestone” in Ukraine’s integration. He claimed the country had been “unfairly passed over” when the program was conceived in 2014 due to reluctance to upgrade Ukraine’s status at a time

¹⁴⁵ Interview EE, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 16 July 2021.

¹⁴⁶ Interview X, German military officer, by email, 20 July 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Interview D, Ukrainian government official, by email, 1 June 2020.

when hostilities with Russia were intensifying (Dickinson, 2020). Ukrainian officials had made their interest in EOP known for years, which NATO first publicly acknowledged at the July 2016 Warsaw summit (NATO, 2016a).

In addition, there were differences of opinion within NATO regarding giving Ukraine EOP status, which required a unanimous decision. The United States and the United Kingdom were the main proponents of the move and spearheaded the effort to build consensus.¹⁴⁸ Other allies, like Hungary, France, Greece, and Italy, were “dragging their feet,” for various reasons.¹⁴⁹ The latter three generally sympathized with the notion that recognizing Ukraine as an EOP partner of NATO only aggravated Russia more.

The Hungarian government, on the other hand, argued that a 2017 Ukrainian law violated the rights of ethnic Hungarians to use their native tongue.¹⁵⁰ It used its veto in NATO to ostensibly punish Ukraine. Hungary’s opposition was also likely attributed to the strong personal ties between Orban and Putin and that Russia supplies all of Hungary’s oil.

The EOP disagreement mirrored the broader divide among the allies over pursuing Ukrainian membership altogether. As of early 2020, Germany, France, Italy, and Hungary were perceived as the “biggest roadblocks.”¹⁵¹ Conversely, the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland, and the Baltics remained supportive.¹⁵² However, the U.S. position had reportedly “softened over the years” admitted a former U.S. military attaché in Ukraine, to a feeling that if

¹⁴⁸ Interview B, U.S. defense advisor, by telephone, 30 April 2020; Interview O, British defense advisor, by telephone, 1 July 2020.

¹⁴⁹ Interview O, British defense advisor, by telephone, 1 July 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Interview EE, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 16 July 2021.

¹⁵¹ Interview A, U.S. military attaché, by telephone, 18 March 2020.

¹⁵² Interview CC, U.S. defense official, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021.

France and Germany changed their minds in favor of incorporating the country, the United States might follow their lead.¹⁵³

Some believed the EOP move was largely symbolic without much substance behind it. It amounted to a “political badge,” declared a former British advisor to the Ukrainian defense ministry, just recognizing Ukraine’s “closer political alignment with NATO” and little more.¹⁵⁴ Besides, it was thought that Ukraine had already “met the military criteria” for EOP in 2017, according to an internal 2020 U.S. government memorandum not released to the public (Kyiv, 2020). This revelation suggested political considerations drove NATO’s hesitation. A U.S. military officer at NATO headquarters referred to EOP as a “platinum card” for partnership, likening having EOP status to having a premium credit card that provided privileged access and benefits.¹⁵⁵ At NATO SHAPE, another U.S. military officer played down EOP, saying it was “just a status” that nonetheless gave Ukraine “extra opportunities” for military training and exercises.¹⁵⁶ A Ukrainian military attaché saw things differently, asserting that having EOP “does not give us much more in terms of access or relations.” As a result of the change in status, Ukraine reportedly had to pay to take part in exclusive “article five exercises” that simulated NATO’s collective response to an armed attack against an ally, which it had not previously had to do.¹⁵⁷

Crucially, the move also demonstrated taking ambiguous action. By granting Ukraine EOP, NATO did little more than give it more access to already existing activities. From NATO’s

¹⁵³ Interview AA, U.S. military attaché, Washington, DC, 29 April 2021.

¹⁵⁴ Interview V, British defense advisor, by telephone, 14 July 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Interview G, U.S. military officer posted to NATO headquarters, by telephone, 15 June 2020.

¹⁵⁶ Interview W, U.S. military officer posted to NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 15 July 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Interview BB, senior Ukrainian military officer, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021.

perspective, EOP did not imply “any concrete commitment to membership,” claimed a British defense advisor to Ukraine.¹⁵⁸ According to a U.S. military attaché, Ukrainian officials for their part did not consider EOP a “stepping-stone” toward membership.¹⁵⁹ However, another U.S. official said the opposite. The Ukrainians wrongly “misconceived” EOP as a “...stepping-stone to membership. This is what the Ukrainians think,” asserted a foreign service officer.¹⁶⁰ While NATO may have not intended to create ambiguity with the EOP move, it was clear that people saw it that way. And yet that very ambiguity afforded NATO a measure of maneuver space in making future moves regarding Ukraine.

Finally, it was difficult to separate NATO’s public and private motivations for granting EOP. Officially, it was meant to provide a close partner with even greater opportunities to enhance its military capabilities and to achieve interoperability with allied forces through “tailor-made” engagement (NATO, 2020a). In private, many observers alluded to the “more political and less so practical” aims for the move.¹⁶¹ One interviewee claimed that it was given to Ukraine as a token of NATO’s political support for Zelenskyy in response to the November 2018 incident in which Russian coast guard vessels opened fire and captured three Ukrainian vessels as they attempted to transit through the Kerch Strait. The EOP move was considered a way to increase the new president’s domestic appeal and take advantage of his momentum following his unexpected victory in the 2019 presidential election.¹⁶² Within NATO, there was a perception that regular Ukrainians were growing weary of their country’s seeming never-ending journey.

¹⁵⁸ Interview V, British defense advisor, by telephone, 14 July 2020.

¹⁵⁹ Interview A, U.S. military attaché officer, by telephone, 18 March 2020.

¹⁶⁰ Interview EE, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 16 July 2021.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Interview W, U.S. military officer at NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 15 July 2020.

Thus, achieving EOP status was presented as evidence of progress to persuade the public to continue supporting “the way to membership.”¹⁶³

Given the following three factors, EOP constituted yet another ambiguous action which allowed the allies to further postpone MAP, and by implication, NATO membership for Ukraine. First, the country was involved in an unresolved conflict with a powerful neighboring state who violently opposed it joining NATO. Second, and related, the Ukrainian government lacked full control over its internationally recognized territory. Given these two realities, NATO was hesitant to make more commitments to bringing Ukraine into the alliance for fear of becoming directly involved. To do otherwise could trigger an article five scenario against Russia, which the allies would be required to respond to. Finally, and mostly due to the first two factors, there was still disagreement within NATO over issuing a MAP to Ukraine.

Although there were some distinctions between the two cases—one of them being the status of lost territories—the same set of criteria also applied to Georgia. The allies had given both countries everything they wanted, except NATO membership. However, if they had territorial disputes and ongoing conflicts, that was likely never going to take place. By 2020, NATO, Ukraine, and Georgia had supposedly coalesced around “a level of pragmatism,” behind closed doors, realizing that joining NATO was “not an aspiration that can happen” for the foreseeable future.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Interview X, Senior German military officer, by email, 20 July 2020.

¹⁶⁴ Interview V, British advisor to Ukrainian defense ministry, by telephone, 14 July 2020.

12.43 Growing U.S. Security Cooperation

Even before Russia's renewed invasion in February 2022, the United States had supported Ukraine with substantial financial aid and access to purchase Western equipment and training resources to help defend itself against Russia. Between 2014 and 2016, the Obama administration committed more than \$600 million in security aid to Ukraine. This included equipment such as radios, radars, and night vision goggles but not so-called lethal weapons like Javelin anti-tank missiles.

The Javelin issue became a matter of debate in U.S. foreign policy making as Obama officials and its allies claimed providing such weapons might provoke President Putin to escalate the conflict in the Donbas. Critics unsurprisingly cited the decision as evidence of Obama being "soft on Russia" (Burns et, al., 2022). Nonetheless, in the final year of the Obama administration the United States established the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which provided U.S. military kit and training to the country. From 2016 to 2019, Congress appropriated \$850 million for this initiative. Under the Trump administration, the United States approved the sale of 210 Javelin anti-armor missiles in 2018 and an additional 150 missiles in 2019 (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

12.5 Winning and Losing

Alludes to a perceived zero-sum game between Russia and NATO pervaded the interview responses about the alliance's expansion. According to the prevailing attitude, the two sides were locked in a geopolitical power struggle over Ukraine and Georgia. Through the discourse, NATO

was culturally predisposed to view itself as the dominant player, so what followed was that Russia needed to acknowledge the harsh reality and act accordingly. This explained why the allies would “never admit defeat” to Russia, asserted a U.S. military officer at NATO headquarters.¹⁶⁵ On the other hand, “Russia wins” if NATO withdrew the commitments made at Bucharest, said an interviewee.¹⁶⁶ A Ukrainian military attaché went a step further, claiming “Russia would have a victory” even if MAPs were not given to Ukraine and Georgia.¹⁶⁷ This point of view agreed with NATO’s repeated assertion that MAPs were an “integral part of the process” toward membership (NATO, 2021).

It was difficult to discern if such a claim was made in good faith. Through the various other institutional structures and reform initiatives, the two countries had all the content that MAPs could offer by 2020, but they nonetheless lacked the recognition and validation brought by the official moniker. This meant MAPs were “an outdated concept” in the context of Ukraine and Georgia, suggested a U.S. State Department official.¹⁶⁸ While this may be true, it dismissed the symbolic value of having a MAP. Nonetheless, taken together, the statements about “winning” and “losing” were important because of the attitude they reflected. The rhetorical commitment to upholding the Bucharest decision had become less about following through on incorporating the two countries into the alliance as “full members” and more about salvaging a political win while not allowing Russia to claim victory.

In a related vein, Ukraine and Georgia were defined by some interviewees only as geopolitical pawns. A Lithuanian military officer at NATO headquarters claimed that part of

¹⁶⁵ Interview P, U.S. military officer at NATO International Military Staff, by telephone, 3 July 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Interview F, senior U.S. military officer at U.S. European Command, by telephone, 12 June 2020.

¹⁶⁷ Interview BB, Ukrainian military attaché, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021.

¹⁶⁸ Interview EE, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 16 July 2021.

NATO's commitment to the two countries was explained by a "desire to not see them dragged into Russian influence" against their will.¹⁶⁹ This was in line with NATO's official stance on the principle of national self-determination, which served as one of the foundational ideas guiding alliance expansion. Likewise, the U.S. and NATO were reportedly committed to Ukraine and Georgia "so they don't get sucked back into Russia's orbit."¹⁷⁰ According to a crass admission made by a U.S. interviewee, "we keep Ukraine and Georgia going because it is a 'faux pas' to disinvite them," as if the Bucharest commitment was synonymous to an invitation for a birthday party.

Russian opposition to a potential further NATO expansion to the east was read as an attempt to restrict the freedom of the alliance rather than as a genuine national security concern for Russia. NATO was not willing to have its independent decision-making ability curtailed by a player it regarded as a weaker power. The allies "can't say no" to Ukraine and Georgia because doing so would acknowledge that Russia does in fact have veto power over whether a country can join NATO, according to the former U.S. military attaché to Ukraine.¹⁷¹ This was premised on the assertion—repeatedly made in public statements—that "no third country" could influence NATO's decisions. The United States "will not admit that Russia has any 'veto' over the Ukrainian membership issue," declared a State Department official.¹⁷² According to the official, Ukraine and Georgia's memberships were delayed because they had not fully carried out the necessary reforms in accordance with NATO's requirements.¹⁷³ This was a diversionary tactic. It not only sidestepped the "Russia veto" issue, but also set a standard that no other aspirant

¹⁶⁹ Interview Q, Lithuanian military officer at NATO International Military Staff, by telephone, 7 July 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Interview CC, U.S. defense official, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021.

¹⁷¹ Interview AA, U.S. military attaché, Washington, DC, 29 April 2021.

¹⁷² Interview EE, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 16 July 2021.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

country had to satisfy. There were many countries that had not yet completed all the reforms by the time of their accession. In fact, the MAP mechanism was created precisely because it was believed the first wave of candidates had not. In a more recent example, NATO made clear at the time of North Macedonia's accession in 2020 that the country needed to make "further progress on important reforms before *and after* accession"¹⁷⁴ (NATO, 2020b). Inviting a candidate into NATO was always a decision driven by political considerations, not technical qualifications. The reality was that Russia really did have some influence over which countries joined the alliance, highlighting the limits to NATO's maximalist conception of state sovereignty. The allies would never admit this out of concern for subverting inter-democratic solidarity as well as their own credibility and reputation as reliable Euro-Atlantic community members.

12.6 Conclusion

The so-called distinctive partnership between NATO and Ukraine continued on a path of integration and institutionalization between 2015 and 2020 despite, or perhaps because of, Russia's annexation and ongoing undeclared intervention in the eastern part of the country.

After the pro-Western government took over in Ukraine, the NATO allies promptly and unsurprisingly backed its renewed ambitions to join Western institutions. This action accomplished a short-term goal of displaying solidarity with a loyal partner while protecting NATO's preferred self-image as a reliable alliance partner who stood up for its friends. Moreover, supporting Ukraine's ambitions helped uphold the perception that NATO's membership door remained open to other post-communist states. Beyond the rhetoric, the CAP and EOP moves showed the material dimension of multivocality. From NATO's perspective, this

¹⁷⁴ Emphasis added.

material support was intended to bolster Ukraine's ability to defend itself against Russia. Whether or not the support was also meant to enhance Ukraine's candidacy for NATO membership was difficult to tell. Such ambiguity worked to NATO's advantage. It could claim to be supporting a loyal partner and friend while also demonstrating that it would not be deterred by Russia's actions to prevent Ukraine from making its own foreign policy decisions.

Although NATO remained formally committed to upholding the Bucharest decision for Ukraine to uphold the principles of the right of national self-determination and a maximalist interpretation of state sovereignty, some skeptical interviewees suggested the justification was driven by something else. Behind closed doors, the optimistic rhetoric was more about NATO avoiding being seen as succumbing to Russian pressure and coercion.

Chapter 13 - Conclusion

This final chapter organizes the study's conclusions, reflects on their implications at both the practical and theoretical levels, and suggests opportunities for future research. Before doing so, however, we should briefly revisit the puzzle that motivated the project.

13.1 Strategic Folly

NATO has long styled itself as “the greatest military alliance” in history. That is both a boast and a call for the organization to be held to its own standard—above politics—to be judged against its own image of itself. Nonetheless, NATO has endured for nearly 75 years, which is an extraordinary achievement. Most alliances die young, as external threats change, national interests diverge, and costs become too heavy. NATO, by contrast, has not only outlasted the demise of the original Soviet threat against which it was formed but adapted itself to the post-Cold War era by expanding its functions and territory greatly. It has nearly doubled its membership since 1998, from 16 members to 31—soon to be 32 when Sweden joins, its dispute with Turkey over the treatment of Kurdish groups the latter believes to be “terrorists” as well as an arms embargo now settled. Of the eight countries that comprised NATO's erstwhile rival, the Warsaw Pact, seven have become part of the alliance, as have three former Soviet republics. The eighth one, the Soviet Union itself, has dissolved.

The possibility of further expansion of NATO to Ukraine and Georgia has been among the alliance's greatest challenges over the past 15 years. The 2008 Bucharest summit split open the divisions within NATO over the issue and produced a tragic compromise: membership was promised though not granted. This was enough to trigger a harsh response from Russia but too little to protect the two countries from the response. Since then, NATO's engagement with both

countries has labored to appear committed to the Bucharest decision while avoiding following through on this bad decision.

NATO's persistent claim that upholding Bucharest is about defending the principles of national self-determination and state sovereignty is untenable. NATO cannot insist that all countries have the right to make their own foreign policy choices, to include pursuing treaties of alliance, while at the same time being unable or unwilling to grant them those choices or to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Of course, this is not what NATO really means when it talks about freedom of choice and sovereignty. If it were, then those principles would inevitably have to apply to Russia as well. Like it or not, Russia perceives NATO expansionism threatening and has demonstrated its own independent decision making by taking violent action against both Ukraine and Georgia precisely because of their attempts to break free from its orbit and join the West. NATO has never accepted Russia's argument that NATO expansion represents a clear threat to Russian national security because doing so would admit that the policy can be interpreted as something other than the peaceful extension of a community of democracies.

How can an alliance that is meant to be built on security and defense continue to support a decision that has jeopardized the security of its members and made two of its closest partners the subject of attacks? The United States bears much of the responsibility for this problem.

In the years after NATO's compromise at Bucharest, the United States, as the leader of the alliance, has chosen to keep operating in its desired form of institutionalizing relations with Ukraine and Georgia while shepherding their integration into NATO structures. In November 2021, the United States and Ukraine established a "charter on strategic partnership." This calls for the "full integration" of Ukraine into "European and Euro-Atlantic institutions" and endorses

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the Ukrainian government's maximalist position on reestablishing the country's 2013 borders (U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, 2021). Consequently, the United States has made (another) significant commitment to include Ukraine in NATO, a goal it cannot accomplish on its own and is divorced from the reality of Western policies toward Ukraine. In addition, it is also becoming clear that as the war continues, the U.S. attitude has softened, while the French strategy is shifting in the opposite direction—a situation dubbed “Bucharest inverted” by a recent contribution (Cadier and Quencez, 2023). France and Germany had led the opposition against the U.S.-led group's preference to issue MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia.

13.2 Summary of Findings

The conceptual framework used in the study yielded a number of findings about Ukraine and Georgia's partial, protracted integration with NATO since the Bucharest decision.

First, Ukraine, Georgia, and their allies within NATO have advanced the same arguments as the previous NATO membership applicants. The study conceptualized this phenomenon as rhetorical action, the strategic use of discourse to serve an agent's interests. There were three discursive claims within the argumentative strategy. First, the two countries were presented as fundamentally part of Europe and the West, aspirational communities to which they had historically belonged to since time immemorial and from which they had been illegitimately torn apart from during the Soviet era. Second, they had made successful transitions to democracy, but their progress and independence were vulnerable to subversion by conspiring forces—whether internal, external, or a combination of the two. The aggressive actions toward Ukraine and Georgia have helped to revive and strengthen the historically-rooted perception of Russia as the primary source of danger. Indeed, the complementary storylines of victimhood and suffering played well with NATO's self-assigned mission as the guardian of democracy. Lastly, the two

countries had internalized NATO's political values and contributed to its military missions, thus proving their loyalty to the NATO cause.

The simplest explanation for why proponents of Ukraine and Georgia make these arguments now is that they have been successful in the past. Another reason is that alternative lines of argument—for example, that membership would enable the two countries to obtain the only security guarantee available to them—did not resonate with Western elites, as NATO had consistently framed expansion as an issue of democracy promotion, rather than of defense and deterrence. Thus, as the narrative goes, both countries are worthy of acceptance into NATO as “full members” because of their European identity, democratic character, and allegiance to NATO over the years.

The problem with this argument is two-fold. The first issue is that it comprises a set of homogenizing discursive claims which have downplayed and marginalized the differences between Ukraine and Georgia on the one hand, and the CEE countries and the Baltic States, on the other. Unlike the countries which joined NATO in 1999 and 2004, both Ukraine and Georgia were original members of the Soviet Union, and were thus deeply entangled with Soviet and Russian culture, history, and identity. Kyiv is believed to be the cradle of Russian civilization and Georgia is the birthplace of Joseph Stalin. Already by the time of the 2008 Bucharest summit, Crimea had been the headquarters for Russia's Black Sea Fleet for 225 years, while Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been existing as de facto independent states, under Russian protection and outside the control of Georgia's central government, for a decade and a half. Moreover, Russian officials had repeatedly warned that bringing the two countries into the alliance would cross the brightest of Russia's “red lines.” These issues were always going to

complicate the two countries' bids for NATO membership, whether or not the allies could ever agree to extend MAPs in the years after Bucharest.

The second problem with the argumentative strategy used by Ukraine, Georgia, and their advocates within NATO is that it has blurred the distinctions between the two countries. Ukraine and Georgia are very different culturally and linguistically as well as in size and strategic location. In just one example, there were approximately 8 million ethnic Russians living in Ukraine in 2001, according to a census taken that year, mostly in the east and south, while the total population of Georgia was less than 4 million in 2022. Russian state leaders claimed a responsibility to protect these people as pretext for its actions in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, just as they had done in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, by intervening in defense of Russian "compatriots" living abroad.

In contrast to earlier arguments that sought to overcome NATO's initial opposition and commit to granting membership, the rhetorical action in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia has been used to help preserve NATO's official commitment to the Bucharest decision over a period of 15 years. To put it another way, the arguments employed in the years preceding the 1999 and 2004 accessions did not need to be made for as long or with as much rhetorical "work" as they have been in the cases of Ukraine and Georgia. While this would imply that the discursive claims are persuasive enough to elicit a commitment to upholding Bucharest, it also seems possible that Russia's conduct has contributed to the growth of the support around Ukraine and Georgia. Publicly reaffirming the Bucharest decision is a technique to achieve the goal of projecting Western resolve and political solidarity in opposition to Russia, which has now become its own objective.

Nonetheless, it is worth making a distinction between the two countries' candidacies in light of Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The cruelty of the Russian military in particular has breathed new life into Western support for Ukraine's NATO membership. At the July 2023 Vilnius summit, the NAC announced it would waive the MAP requirement for Ukraine, removing a major roadblock on the path to joining the alliance. There appears to be a growing force behind the old idea that the best way to defend Ukraine is through the collective defense guarantee provided through NATO membership.

Meanwhile, Georgia's membership bid has grown stale. While the current Georgian government continues to formally support joining NATO, its recent rhetoric and actions could imply otherwise. In March 2023, the Georgian government withdrew legislation purportedly fashioned after Russia's "foreign agents" law, amid intense opposition. In May 2023, the prime minister attributed Russia's invasion to the prospect of NATO expanding to Ukraine. There is a growing sense of "NATO fatigue" both within Georgia and among Western observers.

The second finding of this study was that these cases have shown how NATO has devised a formula for aspirant countries, short of membership. This formula's two components—rhetorical support and material support—combine to create a robust action strategy of making ambiguous moves with a multivocal character. Multivocality means that NATO's words and deeds can be interpreted coherently from many angles at the same time. This study has focused on the differing interpretations of officials within NATO on the one hand and Georgians and Ukrainians on the other.

NATO's practices represent robust action, I argue, rather than other types of behavior. The content of speeches and official statements is not merely cheap talk since the rhetoric has been backed up by material assistance. This helps to nurture the perception that the allies have

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shown a tangible commitment to the two countries. Likewise, NATO officials are not lying to Ukraine and Georgia because many are genuinely devoted to the cause of achieving a Europe whole and free through including the two countries in the alliance. Moreover, public articulations about honoring the Bucharest decision are not mere diplomatic face-saving or “cover” for a failed policy (Mearsheimer, 2011, 63-64). Rather, they are aspirational statements meant to exert a measure of independent decision making free from external pressures.

NATO has demonstrated a remarkable level of consistency in its public talking points about Ukraine and Georgia from 2007 to 2020, given that such statements, like all NATO official texts, require the unanimous consent of the allies. One indicator of such consistency was apparent in the ceaseless expressions of support for the two countries’ sovereignty and territorial integrity. This was a symbolic gesture that was meant to show Western solidarity with the two countries.

NATO’s consensus-based model is both an asset and a liability. On one hand, official documents serve as guideposts or the most common denominator of the shared position of the allies on a particular issue. Consequently, policy declarations and public pronouncements are definitive and should be treated as such. On the other hand, NATO can come across as rigid and unable to adjust to changing conditions if it becomes too accustomed to its pre-approved talking points. In practice, what appears to be harmony on the outside may hide the tension behind the scenes.

In order to conceal disagreements among the allies and give itself room to maneuver in the future, NATO has been able to maintain continuity by purposefully leaving the wording of its statements ambiguous. For instance, immediately following Russia’s invasion of Georgia, NATO chose not to criticize Russia and briefly reinterpreted the Bucharest decision as an issue

of merely supporting Ukraine and Georgia's aspirations to join NATO. It is difficult to say whether NATO's ostensibly conciliatory language contributed to facilitating the Obama-led reset with Russia that began in early 2009, but it appeared that in the wake of the August war, the allies had disagreed over how to respond to the conflict and even how to interpret the events taking place.

Putting a positive spin on apparent setbacks was another defining feature of NATO's rhetoric. The Yanukovich-led government's decision in 2010 to abandon Ukraine's interest in joining NATO and instead proclaim neutrality was not portrayed as rejecting NATO's vision of a Europe whole and free. Instead, it was seen as an opportunity for NATO to support the principle of the right to national self-determination, one of the guiding ideas behind NATO expansion. Ukraine's decision was a key moment in the country's integration with NATO and the history of its expansion. It was the only time an aspiring state formally abandoned its membership request, especially one that had been designated a future member. Thereafter, NATO could then proceed with stealthily integrating the country while avoiding having to openly endorse the Bucharest decision for Ukraine. This was an advantageous position for NATO to be in but not necessarily for Ukraine.

Following Ukraine's declaration of neutrality, NATO stopped talking about Bucharest in public until the 2018 Brussels summit, some time after the pro-Western government revived the idea of Ukraine joining NATO. Given President Trump's goal of improving ties with Russia, NATO's ability to rally itself, due in part to secretary-general Stoltenberg's assertiveness, by openly recommitting to Bucharest at the Brussels summit was an impressive accomplishment.

NATO has shown an ability to cultivate multivocality other than through just rhetoric. It has made a series of moves to steadily institutionalize the partnerships with Ukraine and

Georgia. These moves were meant to reinforce the rhetoric as a tangible sign of commitment to Bucharest. In December 2008, NATO responded to Russia's invasion of Georgia by permitting both countries to develop ANPs, which was unprecedented. The Bush administration pushed for the move, which circumvented the normal applicant membership procedure via a MAP by enabling direct consultation with the two countries about their progress toward membership. This was a covert way of pressing forward with Ukraine and Georgia's integration outside of the conventional MAP process.

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, NATO developed bespoke, comprehensive defense and security reform programs for Ukraine and Georgia, unlike anything that had been done for a partner country. The SNGP was implemented in 2014, with the goal of bolstering Georgia's integration and exercising NATO's freedom of action in reaction to Russia's aggression toward Ukraine (albeit indirectly). The CAP was timed to coincide with the 2016 Warsaw summit, in which NATO announced a number of other defense and deterrence measures, such as the deployment of EFP battlegroups along its eastern frontier. Both the SNGP and CAP represented major investments in military modernization. In addition, they were creative solutions that allowed NATO to assert that it was pursuing multiple lines of action concurrently, improving Ukraine and Georgia's capacity to defend themselves against Russia while also bringing their security and defense sectors up to NATO standards for membership. In this manner, they were also stealthy ways of advancing NATO integration outside of MAP. Through the EOP designation NATO has exploited the integrative power of interoperability and standardization by including Ukraine and Georgia in its military exercises and training, expeditionary operations, and procurement processes. All these moves can be understood as

consolation prizes because they were gifts intended to compensate for NATO's refusal to give Ukraine and Georgia what they truly desired—a MAP.

The final key finding was that despite territorial disintegration and worsening security conditions in both countries as a result of the crises in 2008 and 2014, respectively, the official, public-facing enlargement narratives of Ukraine and Georgia—that they were role models for NATO partners and exemplary students of the alliance's standards and values whose inclusion in NATO would increase Euro-Atlantic security—had not significantly changed.

The reason for the narrative continuity was that, from NATO's perspective, security considerations such as territory, geography, and threat perceptions, were never at the root of the West's decisions to expand the alliance. After the first wave of expansion in 1999, the tendency to overlook defense issues continued into the 2000s as NATO spread across Europe to the borders of the Russian Federation. The United States and its NATO allies did not account for the implications that aggressive territorial expansion would have on NATO's core military functions. After the 2004 round, possible further expansion deep into the post-Soviet space was based on the wishful thinking that the security environment would remain permissive for the indefinite future. With the return of Russian power and assertiveness since 2008 and the corresponding geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West thereafter, an enlarged NATO faces the difficult task of maintaining the collective defense of its members through deterrence while fostering collective security beyond its borders. While understandable, growing Western material support to Ukraine since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022 risks drawing NATO into a direct war with Russia over a partner country that it is not required to defend.

Regarding interviewee responses, the privately-held opinions on Ukraine and Georgia's NATO integration varied based on the positionality of the person. The 43 interviewees fell into

two broad categories—skeptics and true believers. The latter group consisted of representatives from the NATO international staff, the U.S. State Department, and interviewees from Ukraine and Georgia, whether they were current or former public servants. The two enduring tenets of NATO expansion—the right to national self-determination and a maximalist interpretation of state sovereignty—were reflected in their arguments. The notion that NATO membership had transformative power seemed to have won over many of them. Many Ukrainian and Georgian interviewees drew from the three homogenizing discursive claims outlined above to make their arguments. There was no evidence that the respondents from Ukraine and Georgia felt they were competing with each other for NATO approval.

The skeptics were made up of a group of senior U.S. military officers and defense officials as well as former diplomats. Many claimed that the events in Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2014, respectively, demonstrated the error of the Bucharest decision. Some interviewees implied they were in charge of carrying out a policy they did not support and which, in any case, could not happen in practice. A few military officers claimed that regardless of the political climate at the time, enhancing partner capabilities was a worthy goal and felt both personally and professionally satisfied when assisting their counterparts in Ukraine and Georgia in the fight against Russia.

13.3 Implications

The study's conceptual framework and research method set out to produce two contributions to the study of international security organizations. First, NATO's engagement with Ukraine and Georgia demonstrates the nuances and layers in multilateral commitments. In practice, NATO has adapted the expansion process to something beyond the strict membership/no membership binary choice. While the Bucharest decision denied the two

countries an official path to membership, they have been nonetheless deeply integrated into NATO. In many ways, Ukraine and Georgia have achieved a level of intimacy with NATO that is virtually indistinguishable to membership. While their flags do not fly at NATO headquarters, the two countries enjoy many of the other trappings of membership, such as audiences with NATO officials, invitations to NAC summits and military exercises, and special access to intelligence, among other things.

In the intervening years since Bucharest, the allies, led by the four so-called big boys, have provided both countries with political advice, funding, arms, and training while forgoing MAPs. Consequently, NATO has devised a formula short of membership for aspirant states. Despite this, Ukraine and Georgia may not be satisfied. Their main goal is to obtain the article five security guarantee provided by NATO membership. This security goal is fundamentally at odds with NATO's ideological motivation for expansion to fulfill the vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace.

The primary issue is that NATO remains a conventional military alliance whose defining feature is a mutual defense treaty among its member states. Its membership structure was created exclusively to satisfy the security needs of members, not those of mere partners. Despite the substantial integration of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, it has been informal and unofficial. Both countries continue to be beyond the security umbrella provided by U.S. power through NATO membership.

Second, NATO's action has been robust, characterized by a series of ambiguous rhetorical and material moves focused on tactical wins while preserving strategic flexibility. NATO wants to be seen as not giving in to Russia pressure. It considers Bucharest a way to project strength and resoluteness, despite the folly in following through on the decision. The

robust action strategy's principal outcome has been to deter Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO as "full members" while simultaneously appearing to maintain a strong commitment to their membership.

13.4 Weaknesses and Opportunities

Finally, I should identify two ways in which this study was insufficient. The weaknesses noted here present opportunities for others to learn from and build on.

First, my textual discourse-centric research method likely missed some of the geopolitical context swirling around NATO's policy declarations and official pronouncements. I made a deliberate choice to privilege the specific wording of official texts based on the principle that NATO documents require the consensual agreement of the allies and therefore signify a collective perception shared over a policy issue. As is the case when producing NATO official texts, any indication of conflict or tension within the alliance is filtered out before being made public. Therefore, the method could not fully exploit the pro- and anti-expansion factions within NATO, its member state governments, and even within Ukraine and Georgia.

The goal of the background interviews was to address this problem, although it is possible that the interview sample did not accurately reflect the range of opinions on the research topic. Indeed, due to access, Americans made up half of the respondents.

Second, it was difficult for the method to determine if NATO was acting independently or only as an instrument for U.S. foreign policy. I probably should have examined more closely at how, at various points between 2007 and 2020, NATO's engagement with Ukraine and Georgia was led, enhanced, or superseded by the expanding U.S. strategic partnerships with the

two countries. Indeed, the U.S. relationship with both countries is deeply significant given that it is the de facto leader of NATO.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a dramatic escalation in the conflict that began when Russia annexed Crimea and signifies a turning point in European security. NATO perceives the conflict as an attempt by Russia to prevent the vision of a Europe whole and free.

Acute national security concerns have led Finland and Sweden, nominally neutral states which are both EU members and close NATO partners, to pursue joining the alliance to obtain a security guarantee. Finland joined NATO in April 2023, the first and only state to do so without having a MAP. It was not necessary for Finland to obtain a MAP since it was already a member of the EU, which has more stringent political, economic, and legislative admission requirements than NATO. Another reason Finland did not need a MAP was that it already has a capable military that is interoperable with NATO forces in most respects.

The NAC decided at the Vilnius summit to exempt Ukraine from obtaining a MAP. With the decision, it now seems Sweden and Ukraine will both follow Finland's lead. Regarding Ukraine, NATO has signaled that membership cannot happen until the war is over. Yet, it will be nearly impossible to implement further political and security sector reforms, as the summit communique specifies, while the war is raging. In another example of ambiguous action, the allies agreed in Vilnius to decide that they will decide about Ukraine when they agree.

The MAP decision about Ukraine has complicated Georgia's situation. The decision could have been interpreted, hypothetically, by a more assertive pro-West Georgian government as a green light to try again to retake lost territories. A future Georgian government might

therefore anticipate NATO to remove the MAP requirement if it were at war once more with Russia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If NATO refused, it might risk being accused of practicing double standards. This would add fuel to the narrative that Russian officials from Putin on down have been promoting for years, which hold that the West demands the rest of the world to play by a set of rules that it does not follow. On the other hand, NATO has consistently said membership decisions are made on a case-by-case basis.

The MAP issue has been the central bone of contention in Ukraine and Georgia's drawn-out integration with NATO since Bucharest. How the developments with Finland, Sweden, and Ukraine affect the trajectory of NATO expansion and its engagement with Georgia as well as other aspirants like Bosnia & Herzegovina (which has a MAP) and Moldova (which does not) are topics for future inquiry. Finally, the recent development by the G7 countries to contemplate formulating security assurances for Ukraine, outside of the NATO and EU frameworks, presents an opportunity for analysts to examine how multilateral structures interact to address complex challenges.

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Interview List

Georgia interview A, university law school dean, Tbilisi, 24 August 2017

Georgia interview B, senior former government official, Tbilisi, 29 August 2017

Georgia interview C, former ambassador, Tbilisi, 30 August 2017

Georgia interview D, U.S. foreign service officer, Tbilisi, 19 September 2017

Georgia interview E, senior former government official, Tbilisi, 21 September 2017

Georgia interview F, U.S. foreign service officer, Tbilisi, 22 September 2017

Georgia interview G, academic, Tbilisi, 25 September 2017

Georgia interview H, U.S. defense official, Tbilisi, 25 September 2017

Interview A, U.S. military attache officer, by telephone, 18 March 2020

Interview B, U.S. defense advisor, by telephone, 30 April 2020

Interview C, U.S. defense advisor, by video call, 28 May 2020

Interview D, Ukrainian government official, by email, 1 June 2020

Interview E, British defense advisor, by telephone, 9 June 2020

Interview F, U.S. senior military officer at U.S. European Command, by telephone, 12 June 2020

Interview G, U.S. military officer at NATO headquarters, by telephone, 15 June 2020

Interview H, former U.S. ambassador, by telephone, 16 June 2020

Interview I, U.S. military officer at NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 17 June 2020

Interview J, Canadian NATO international staff officer, by telephone, 18 June 2020

Interview K, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 24 June 2020

Interview L, former U.S. National Security Council staff officer, by telephone, 29 June 2020

Interview M, Italian NATO international staff officer, by telephone, 30 June 2020

Interview N, retired Ukrainian senior military officer, by telephone, 30 June 2020

Interview O, British defense advisor, by telephone, 1 July 2020

Interview P, U.S. military officer at NATO international military staff, by telephone, 3 July 2020

Interview Q, Lithuanian military officer at NATO international military staff, by telephone, 7 July 2020

Interview R, Dutch NATO international staff officer, by telephone, 8 July 2020

Interview S, U.S. think tank researcher, by telephone, 10 July 2020

Interview T, German NATO international staff officer, by telephone, 10 July 2020

Interview U, German military officer at NATO, by telephone, 14 July 2020

Interview V, former British defense advisor, by telephone, 14 July 2020

Interview W, U.S. military officer at NATO SHAPE, by telephone, 15 July 2020

Interview X, German military officer in Georgia, by email, 20 July 2020

Interview Y, U.S. defense official at U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, by telephone, 5 March 2021

Interview Z, U.S. military officer, by telephone, 5 March 2021

Interview AA, U.S. military attache officer, Washington, DC, 29 April 2021

Interview BB, Ukrainian military attache officer, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021

Interview CC, U.S. defense official, Washington, DC, 11 May 2021

Interview DD, U.S. defense official at NATO, by telephone, 14 May 2021

Interview EE, U.S. foreign service officer, by telephone, 16 July 2021

Interview FF, Georgian diplomat, Washington, DC, 3 September 2021

Interview GG, U.S. defense official in Georgia, by telephone, 15 September 2021

Interview HH, U.S. defense official in Georgia, by video call, 15 November 2021

Interview II, U.S. defense official at NATO, by telephone, 13 December 2021