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Hypertrophy as NATO’s Masculinity: Out-of-Area Operations and Enlargements in the Post-Cold War Context

By Carlos González-Villa¹ and Branislav Radeljić²

Abstract

The Russian intervention in Ukraine in February 2022 has served as a catalyst or actualizer of a long-standing trend in NATO: that of justifying its existence by its geographical expansion. This is both in organic terms, through the incorporation of new states into its structure, and in operational terms, through the execution of so-called out-of-area operations, and the intensification of its rivalry with Russia. This dynamic, which has been firmly established since the mid-1990s, has been overridden by the growing contradictions between the interests of its members, the successive changes in US administrations, and the transformation of the international system, characterized by an inexorable trend toward multipolarity. Altogether, these factors explain the extent to which NATO is facing a definitive choice. Starting with the implications of the war in Ukraine for NATO, this article provides a historical analysis of this phenomenon, noting the vicissitudes of NATO’s enlargements and operations over the past thirty years, and how these activities have enabled the alliance to weather the successive internal crises it has faced. Ultimately, the authors argue that the war in Ukraine marks the end of this dynamic and of NATO’s masculinist dilemma either to limit its operations to the defense of its members (in line with the collective security clause enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty) or to complete pending enlargement processes, thereby endangering international peace and security.

Keywords: NATO, Russia-Ukraine War, Post-Cold War, Hypertrophy, Masculinity

Introduction

Russia’s intervention in Ukraine allowed an idea to flourish that seemed unthinkable just a short time ago: NATO’s revival as a relevant actor on the international stage. Internal tensions within the organization had led French President Emmanuel Macron to state in late 2019 that NATO was “brain dead” (BBC, 2019). At the time, Angela Merkel’s attempts to defuse the tension did not hide the reality that the different priorities of member states were leaving the organization increasingly empty of content, to the point that its troops and delegated militias were defending opposing interests in scenarios such as Syria and Libya. Meanwhile, the Poles were horrified to see how this drift could usher in a new era in the European powers’ relations with Russia (Baranowski 2019).
et al., 2020). For this very reason, after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War, the French media asked whether the new scenario has contributed to transcending this situation (Roméo, 2022), although without really convincing answers. There seems to be more enthusiasm among US specialists who urge NATO, as the armed wing of the West, to act as a guarantor of global security (Depta et al., 2022). In this context, in which traditional approaches to security seem to be regaining prominence, the deployment of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda in the Atlantic Alliance has been displaced.

There seems to be good reason to believe that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has helped revive NATO (Smith, 2022), an organization that—even before the outbreak of the war—had been increasing its military deployment in the countries on its eastern flank. Moreover, certain actions project the idea that NATO is more alive than ever, as the allies sought to illustrate at the Madrid Summit in June 2022 using the following evidence: the incorporation of Finland and Sweden; the commitments to increase military spending by European states (including Germany); the announcement of its deployment on the internet; and, above all, the reaffirmation of the United States as the arbiter of major European affairs. In this context, the EU’s Strategic Compass project (SEAE, 2022), adopted shortly after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War, seems condemned from the outset to subalternity vis-à-vis the Atlantic Alliance. In the presentation of this project, the EU’s high representative for foreign policy could not avoid talking about the need to strengthen ties between the two organizations, despite all the rhetoric about the EU’s “awakening” as a geopolitical actor. The dynamics of the interventions in the war seem to give rise to the idea that “[w]hile the Putin regime bears responsibility for the invasion, a central underlying factor in the conflict is the Anglo-American desire to consolidate NATO as a vehicle for political and military domination in Europe” (Cafruny et al., 2023, p. 2).

Against the thesis of NATO’s resurrection, it can be argued that divergences, fueled by the change in the global geopolitical order, are still present despite the force with which the armed conflict in Ukraine has burst into the media and into Western political engine rooms. In other words, the factors that triggered the crisis that was looming over NATO at the end of 2019 are still evolving even more forcefully, albeit with the volume attenuated as a result of the noise of the guns. These factors include, on the one hand, strategic divergences among its members and on the other hand, a dynamic of what we call “hypertrophy”—a prioritization of the organization’s action beyond its geographical boundaries in terms of enlargements and out-of-area operations. “Hypertrophy” has contributed to diminishing the importance of internal divergences, but in the current circumstances enlargements and out-of-area operations could end up fraying the internal fabric of the organization.

An institutionalist reading would suggest that NATO has survived beyond the Cold War because of its ability to adapt to an increasingly complex security context not only because of its transactional value, but also because it has been a valid instrument in reducing instability and mistrust among allies (Wallander, 2000). Constructivists and post-structuralists have pointed to the importance of ideational, normative, and discursive components in redefining the subjects involved in the security scheme and in justifying its operations in a context different from that of its creation (Adler, 2008; Schlag, 2015). This includes feminist perspectives that, while attempting to answer the question of “Where are the women?” (Enloe, 2014) in the post-Cold War context, have addressed the incorporation of specific “feminist knowledge” to inform NATO’s transformation into a “globally engaged actor” (Wright et al., 2019, p. 16). More specifically, they show how

3 This is a problematic effort, considering that militarism and imperialism are incompatible with the protection of women’s rights (Enloe, 2014).
NATO’s organizational practices and operational projection have been aligned with the deployment of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda (von Hlatky, 2019). Realists, in turn, have long warned against the danger of this drift, both from their ontological assumptions—by pointing out that the existence of alliances is not an autonomous question with respect to the existence of the threat that gave rise to their creation (Walt, 1997)—and from the practical results visible today (Mearsheimer, 2022). The resurgence of realism as a doctrine of the different parties involved after the outbreak of war in Ukraine is a driving force behind the underpinning of hegemonic masculinity, insofar as—on the basis of its state-centric and militaristic definition of security—it allows the reproduction of male dominance over women (Siddiqui, 2013).

Susan Woodward (2017) has explained in detail how these logics have operated in the implementation and enhancement of the organizational and political capacities of the conglomerate of Western organizations specializing in international intervention for stabilization and state-building in the peripheries during the post-Cold War period. Based on her study of interventions on “failed states”—which function as ideological artifacts within the bureaucracies of these institutions—the author points out the failure of interventionism in its quest to impose a synthesis between security and development. Interventionism did not prevent the survival of the “failed states” and did not prevent the survival of a whole range of organizations, including NATO, for decades due to a combination of factors. These included the fact that policy planning has focused less on the real needs of the intervened than on the bureaucratic and political vicissitudes of the institutional conglomerate.

With this in mind, NATO’s main problem after the end of the Cold War was how to remain relevant in a context very different from the one in which it was created. In the early post-Cold War years, this involved competition with other political-bureaucratic apparatuses that were also grappling with the problem of how to ensure European security after the end of bipolarity. Contenders included: the OSCE (which between 1990 and 1991 threatened NATO with articulation as a pan-European collective security system); the United Nations, with which NATO engaged in operational competition, during the intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Woodward, 2017, p. 86), as well as in political competition that led NATO to set itself up as the guarantor of international peace and security in place of the United Nations, in the run-up to the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 (Pérez Rastrilla, 2018, pp. 122–123); and the European Union, whose common foreign and security policy, institutionalized in 1999, was constrained from the outset by Washington’s demands in the area of military cooperation (Woodward, 2017, p. 90).

This approach is relevant in the case of the Atlantic Alliance as its out-of-area operations have been carried out precisely in states that fit the definition of “failed states.” Those “failed states” are territories that generated situations perceived as threatening for international security, including drug trafficking and human rights violations (Woodward, 2017, p. 12), and which, until the fall of the socialist camp, were analyzed solely in terms of the level of “Soviet penetration” (Hatzivassiliou, 2013). Thus, NATO’s survival came not only through pushing its way past other organizations thanks to American pressure, but also through the adaptation of its bureaucracies to the planning of military operations and, concomitantly, the incorporation of new states in Eastern Europe, for which their entry had less to do with military threats than with the completion of their post-socialist transitions (Šabić & Bukowski, 2002, p. xvi).

This article presents NATO’s post-Cold War expansions as a response to NATO’s internal crises following the collapse of the socialist bloc, which had been the raison d’être of the Atlantic Alliance for four decades. In the aftermath of each of these crises, all triggered by the absence of a clear purpose in the changing post-Cold War context, NATO managed to reinvent itself—thanks to US leadership—through the addition of new members, the expansion of the geographic scope
of its out-of-area operations, and increasing polarization with Russia. Taken together, these factors suggest that NATO has become a hypertrophied organization; that is, one that operates in a way that goes beyond its actual capabilities in a changing geopolitical context. The dynamics of hypertrophy will be observed, first, through an analysis of the strategic contradictions of the current NATO crisis. Second, we will look at the two preceding crises after the end of the Cold War. Finally, we will address the characteristics of the current crisis in the Ukrainian scenario. Contrary to seemingly obvious assumptions, NATO is at a crossroads that may threaten its very existence. Moreover, this crossroads is also one of hegemonic masculinity which, by displacing the human dimension of security, cedes the leading role to military force. Other development agendas concomitant with the articulation of the new multipolarity are opening up, with new opportunities for women and girls. Understanding this requires rethinking hypertrophy as a projection of the masculinity of the Euro-Atlantic community.

**Strategic Cleavages**

Enlargements and out-of-area operations have allowed NATO to survive its internal contradictions. This is not a trivial assertion, as the divergences between members’ priorities and approaches are stark. To begin with, the US strategic focus is on China. The approach to rivalry with that power is an issue that goes beyond changes between administrations and is clear from the perspective of think tanks. For example, in 2021, the Atlantic Council published an anonymous “Longer Telegram” (Anonymous, 2021) that openly mimicked George Kennan’s “Long Telegram,” published under the pseudonym of Mr. X in 1947 by *Foreign Affairs*. It influenced the development of containment strategies throughout the Cold War (Gaddis, 2005), but also of the position of the administration. In fact, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken clearly stated in August 2022 that the United States’ main strategic concern remains the Asian giant, regardless of the course of the war in Ukraine:

> Even as President Putin’s war continues, we will remain focused on the most serious long-term challenge to the international order—and that is the one posed by the People’s Republic of China. China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order—and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing’s vision would move us away from the universal values that have sustained so much of the world’s progress over the past 75 years. (Blinken, 2022)

Add to this the strengthening of military ties between China and Russia throughout the conflict—a point made by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (Cahill, 2022)—and the war becomes a transitory situation in relation to the central problem, which is linked to the Asian giant.

Another continuity between the Biden and Trump administrations has to do with the subordinate position of their European allies in their global strategy. The Russia-Ukraine War has led Joseph Biden to capitalize on some of his predecessor’s demands in the White House with respect to the region, including increased military spending and disconnection from Russian energy sources (McTague, 2022). In some cases, such as Poland’s, increased military spending can reach 5 percent of its GDP (Tilles, 2022). All of this is synthesized with the priorities of the Baltic states and Poland, which, based on their own security considerations, have become platforms at the service not of NATO but of the United States itself. This has happened to the extent that, when requesting assistance, they would prefer it to be provided directly by that power (Bennhold, 2022).
They are joined by the post-Brexit UK, which has identified Russia as its main threat in the next decade (Allan & Bond, 2022).

The priorities of Western European powers are different and include terrorism and what they interpret as stability in North Africa and the Sahel. This idea includes the failed French missions in the region (Samaan, 2022) although, paradoxically, a major source of instability was NATO’s intervention in Libya in 2011, in which France played a leading role. This group, which includes France but also Germany, has pledged to support Ukraine, sanction Russia, and increase its defense budget, despite the economic and social costs involved. This is where the warnings coming from German industrialists about the risk of deindustrialization related to the interruption of the flow of gas through Nord Stream (Blenkinsop, 2022) (which today seems permanent) should be included. The successful severing of energy connections with Russia condemns the continental powers to a situation of dependence on the United States, whose allies in Eastern Europe are strengthening their positions by resorting to historicist quarrels, such as Poland’s recent request to Germany to pay up to €1.3 billion in reparations for the Second World War (DW, 2022).

The idea that Europe will cease to be dependent on Russia as a source of energy will not make the EU structurally less dependent. Some plans are uncertain, such as the proposed gas corridor between Nigeria and Morocco which, if realized, would cross the borders of 13 West African countries (El Confidencial, 2022). In the short term, the cost of liquefied gas could be less of a problem than threats to supply such as speculation in the LNG tanker market (Irigoyen, 2022) or security of travel (Sirvent Zaragoza, 2017). This is an alternative that the EU has been developing over the last decade, albeit with a view to the long term (Pardo Sauvageot, 2020). Ultimately, even if this longed-for independence is achieved, Russian supply will continue to condition world energy market prices despite the European sanctions package announced in September 2022, which foresees the establishment of a cap on Russian oil prices. As CSIS’s Ben Cahill (2022) points out, the move may have damaging consequences for buyers, including pricing problems and the proliferation of intermediaries (Ghaddar, 2022; Sampson, 2022).

Turkey, on the other hand, also makes NATO’s contradictions clearly visible. It maintains fluid relations with both Ukraine and Russia, to the extent that it is the only NATO member that has not implemented sanctions against the latter. Its participation in any post-war settlement seems inevitable. Its authoritarian drift converges with that of other NATO members such as Poland and Hungary, which has led to it being labeled by liberal centers as one of NATO’s bad boys. In contrast to this label, the war has given rise to a certain “Ukraine-washing,” a kind of whitewashing of the media, political parties, companies, and states by means of the unstinting defense of the Ukrainian cause. Poland has benefited in this way to the extent that its prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, has gone so far as to say that “Poland has never had such an excellent brand, all over the world” (Gherasim, 2022). Hungary, which usually goes hand in hand with Poland in EU affairs linked to respect for the rule of law, is currently often placed on the wrong side of history for not supporting European sanctions on Russia with the same enthusiasm as its partners (Nattrass, 2022).

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4 These considerations leave aside the fact that alternative energy sources are dominated by regimes that, from a European perspective, violate human rights and, as in the case of Morocco, have attacked neighboring states—all factors that seem to matter greatly to the EU when it comes to Russia.

5 An example of this can be seen in the permanent inclusion of the Ukrainian flag on Televisión Española in the first weeks of the war or the use of the Ukrainian flag in the acts of the ruling party in Spain (e-notícies, 2022).
Crises and Transformations by Hypertrophy

In NATO, internal divergences in recent decades have been compensated for through external action. It is true, however, that NATO’s history has certainly been marked by major crises even during the Cold War. Some of these crises came close to the tension of the Syrian scenario, where some member states ended up with policies that clashed head-on (Taspinar, 2021; Weiss, 2022). Thus, the crisis with Turkey and Macron’s angry reaction in 2019 has a precedent in which two member states had clashed in Cyprus following the Greek-instigated coup and the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974 (Meaney, 2022). Demir and Dalmis (2022) point out that crises have been resolved through members’ willingness to cooperate. However, the voluntarist approach encounters limits when taking into account members’ common strategic interests and internal power structures. In this case, the United States acted as arbiter of the situation through the maneuvers of Henry Kissinger, who favored the partition of the island and the interests of Turkey, a more reliable and important ally than Greece in the Cold War context (Rizas, 2019). Forty-five years later, in the Syrian scenario, Turkish and US interests clashed and, in this context, the Americans went so far as to impose sanctions on their partner as a result of Ankara’s purchase of Russian S-400s. Fundamental interests were no longer shared and internal hierarchies were being challenged.

The current situation is the result of at least three concatenated post-Cold War crises that NATO has weathered through changes that have transformed it into a hypertrophied organization, both organically and functionally. As a result of this drift, the Atlantic Alliance is only operational in terms of what happens outside the borders of its member states. These crises, generated by the absence of a clear common purpose and the growing divergence between the interests and characteristics of its members, have been compensated for through enlargements, out-of-area actions, and the reformulation of the relationship with Russia. Each crisis has resulted in more breathing space for NATO as an institution and for the United States as the dominant power in Europe, but also in an alliance that is more outward-looking and increasingly fragile internally. All this without clearly evaluating the ultimate test of unity: Article 5 of the NATO Treaty.  

Hypertrophy is closely linked to the feminist perspective, insofar as the geographical and functional expansion of the Atlantic Alliance, materialized through its successive enlargements, establishes a bidirectional relationship between masculine dynamics. One—top-down—reflects the diffusion of stable masculine norms and practices over time thanks to the military as an institution (Goldstein, 2001), all of which has facilitated the functioning of the Atlantic Alliance despite the specific cultural differences between its members and the institution (Wright et al., 2019, p. 28). The second—bottom-up—allows us to appreciate, from the peripheries, NATO’s capacity to regenerate, with its own narrative baggage, local collective identities. Among these we can mention those related to traditional models of masculinity, as illustrated through the case study of

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6 Another noteworthy case is the Suez crisis, in which two members were forced by the Americans to drop their demands (Lucas, 1992).
7 So far it has been activated only once, in a very limited way, after the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001.
8 Since the end of the Cold War, Atlantic Alliance membership has almost doubled from 16 to 31 members, following the recent addition of Finland.

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Montenegro,\(^9\) or by those pointing to a regressive tendency in democratic terms, as in the case of Latvia.\(^10\)

Furthermore, hypertrophy as a male projection can be observed through the operations deployed by NATO after the end of the Cold War outside its defensive sphere of action, through the discourse that accompanies them. The “other” that the Atlantic Alliance has faced, in accordance with the logic of “failed states” (Woodward, 2017), is often a space of oppression for women, which has allowed the articulation of discourses that address the different dimensions of oppression (including aspects such as sexual violence, legal subordination or the trafficking of women and girls) in instrumental terms, and always in relation to military deployments. Thus, gender issues “provided a means for states and institutions such as NATO to ‘criminalize’ their military targets through the ‘new wars’ doctrine” (Wright et al., 2019, p. 43).

Finally, Wright et al. point to an additional aspect that can be integrated into the dynamics of hypertrophy, linked to the dominance of men and the marginalization of women in the decision-making process. This is a dynamic that feeds back through the socialization of gender roles between the organization and states, including both members and partners (2019, pp. 159–160). Paradoxically, the dynamics of hypertrophy—with all its burden of masculinity—developed after the end of the Cold War at the same time that, in line with the widening and deepening dynamics of the concept of security (Buzan and Hansen, 2009, p. 187, 208), the Atlantic Alliance accommodated a certain feminist approach. Within its organizational and operational scheme the approach was to redress these imbalances (NATO, 2007, p. 7; Wright et al., 2019, p. 149) or to engage with the Women, Peace, and Security agenda as a result of pressure from states (Wright, 2023).\(^11\)

### Ups and Downs in the Post-Cold War Context

The first of NATO’s three post-Cold War crises was triggered by the end of the Cold War. After the collapse of the socialist camp, the European powers came to flirt with approaches that coincided with those of Gorbachev’s “Common European Home” (Casier, 2018, p. 22). The signing of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, which enshrined the principle of the indivisibility of security on the continent, was part of this framework (Morales Hernández, 2010, p. 202). The crisis was initially averted thanks to NATO’s highly bureaucratic development as an institution and the assumption of an increasing number of functions beyond the strictly defensive, all of which enabled it to cope with the loss of its founding enemy (McCalla, 1996). The political element

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\(^9\) As explained by Branko Banović (2016, p. 150), “[i]t was not difficult to draw a parallel between NATO’s warrior tradition and that of Montenegro. Despite its significant evolution from a military alliance, through a somewhat political grouping, to a predominantly political alliance, in the perception of the Montenegrin public NATO remains primarily a military alliance. It is only to be expected that the opposing sides in the debate about whether or not Montenegro should join NATO would utilize Montenegro’s tradition as a warrior people in their argumentation, and that a significant portion of their fight would be over ‘the rights’ to this part of Montenegrin history.”

\(^10\) As discussed by Frances Harrison (2022, p. 27), “[w]ith the reorganization of society around national defense and the men obliged to defend Lithuanian territory, the increasing prevalence of men in uniform in public space signaled […] that ‘something is not right,’ that there is a ‘lack of actual democracy in Lithuania.’ […] Whether the chauvinism […] is organized around the superiority of the male sex or by way of extreme patriotism, conscription for young males and the increasing presence of ‘the uniform’ in Lithuanian communities undoubtedly contributes to socially acceptable ways of living.”

\(^11\) The masculinist regression in the Euro-Atlantic sphere, with all its securitizing and polarizing charge, has an immediate precedent in the management of the COVID-19 crisis, insofar as the leadership established from the outset narratives aimed at identifying an enemy (invisible, in this case) that had to be defeated at all costs and by any means (Radeljić & González-Villa, 2021).
should not be lost sight of here either, insofar as the Bush senior administration was already very early on considering reproducing the organization’s founding strategic logic in the post-Cold War period:

When, in 1989, George H. W. Bush took office, he and his administration believed the alliance was essential. They left office thinking the same thing—even if during that time the Berlin Wall fell, Germany was unified, and the Soviet Union collapsed. For Bush and his advisers, the logic of NATO both as a bulwark against Moscow’s influence and as a means of preventing the establishment of a shaky system of alliances in central Europe continued to apply after the end of the Cold War. The need to salt the earth against a potential reconstitution of Soviet power, and the desire to ensure that the former members of the Warsaw Pact did not seek destabilizing alliances of their own, led to early thinking about the expansion of NATO to the east, and the maintenance of a permanent Pax Atlantica. (Sayle, 2019, p. 9)

In November 1991, in the context of the final crisis of the USSR and the institutionalization of a European foreign policy, NATO adopted a strategic concept for a new era. The strategy was presented as a diffuse document, with repeated references to cooperation and regional dialogue, without a specifically defined threat beyond risks, stemming from instability and divisions, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or terrorism (NATO, 1991). This exercise in institutional resistance allowed hypertrophy to manifest itself throughout the 1990s through the beginning of the enlargements to Eastern Europe. This was seen, from the most aggressive sides of US foreign policy, as the culmination of the fait accompli of the disappearance of the “Soviet empire” (Weinrod, 1996)—and out-of-area operations, with the interventions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Moreover, in 1997 the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security was signed. Despite the fine words, this initiative re-established the dialectical relationship between the two sides as mutual security guarantees were negotiated. This included NATO’s commitment not to deploy nuclear weapons in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, the territories into which the organization would eventually expand in 1999 (Vidal-Folch, 1997).

The year 1999, with the first enlargement (followed by enlargement in 2004 to include former Soviet states) and the first operation without UN authorization, promised much joy for NATO’s future, but in fact marked the beginning of a new crisis. The festive atmosphere of the Washington summit in April was undermined by the divisions generated by the month-long bombing campaign. At the operational level, deep rifts emerged among allies over the extent of political control of operations. As the NATO commander of the operation, United States Army Officer Wesley Clark recalls that the Yugoslavs knew some of the bombing targets and when they would be attacked. Months before the start, a French officer assigned to NATO headquarters had leaked the initial operational plan, which was supposed to be top secret, to the Yugoslavs. As Clark notes (BBC, 2000), something similar continued to happen throughout the campaign. US generals, moreover, complained bitterly about French political interference in targeting and operational decisions, while the French accused the United States of conducting operations outside the Allied chain of command.

These divisions were the prelude to the fundamental divide, defined by Donald Rumsfeld in 2003 in terms of an “old Europe”—revolving around the Franco-German axis. This was less important in NATO than the new eastern allies (joined, willingly, by others such as Spain), more clearly aligned with the United States and the neo-conservative agenda in the framework of the so-
called War on Terror (Iglesias, 2017). In this framework, NATO became what some—such as Rafael Bardají, José María Aznar’s neocon guru—called a “toolbox” that allowed members who so wished to take advantage of its capabilities to form ad hoc coalitions for specific missions (Bardají, 2017). And so they did after 11 September 2001, with operations of varying degrees of participation and out-of-area operations, including in Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2004), Somalia, the Red Sea and Yemen (2009), and Libya (2011). These were territories that either fell into the classic categories of “failed states” (Schwarz, 2010), or in its variant defined according to the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, in an interpretation aimed at justifying NATO as a security provider (Carati, 2017). In this context, the instrumental criminalization of the “other” through violations of women’s human rights—on the basis of a dichotomous discourse in which the civilized West set itself up as the liberator of women—found in the “war on terror” a propitious scenario for its deployment, in such a way that:

[B]y rendering women the passive grounds for an argument aimed at imperialist domination, the discourse of protection used by politicians and media alike—like the very fundamentalism it purported to attack—denied women any agency in the decision-making processes that affected their everyday lives and futures. (Stabile & Kumar, 2005, p. 770)

All of this occurred against the backrop of the restoration of polarization with Russia by the Americans, with actions such as the denunciation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in June 2002, or support for the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space between 2003 and 2005 (González Villa, 2012). This factor also reflects hypertrophy in terms of masculinity, in a dynamic that has had its roots in the rivalries between capitalist powers since the early twentieth century. It has, though, adapted to the strategic context of the post-Cold War era such that “[t]he tensions that emerged in 2008 between Russia and NATO over Georgia and Kosovo can be understood at least partly in terms of rival masculinities” (Moghadam, 2009, p. 211).

Ukraine and the Third Crisis

The third crisis began to brew at the same time as the second seemed to be resolved through the announcement of Ukraine and Georgia’s eventual membership at the 2008 Bucharest Summit and the bombing campaign on Libya in 2011. The former is today a consummated frustration, while the latter seems to prove right Hegel’s remark evoked by Marx in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, when he asserted that history happens twice: first as tragedy (if one thinks of the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999) and then as farce.

Indeed, involvement in the Arab Spring was done without considering the consequences for the region and its own member states, namely the growth of terrorism and an increase in migration and refugee flows. None of this mattered to European decision-makers, who had information and analysis that warned of these possibilities (Arcos & Palacios, 2018). Despite all the operational problems and moral contradictions, the operation in Yugoslavia in 1999 had a clearly defined objective—the evacuation of Kosovo by Serbian security forces. In Libya, because the operation was endorsed by the United Nations (which implied Russia’s acceptance), it was formulated in terms of the “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine. In this sense, the campaign not only failed to meet the objective, but left a population more vulnerable than at the outset (Green, 2019). The consequences of that action led not only to death and suffering, but also to internal

12 Still, there were disagreements that were reproduced during and after the war, including the unresolved question of the territory’s status after the declaration of independence by the Albanian majority (Radeljić, 2014).
NATO imbalances that became apparent in 2019. Despite the differences between the personalities of US presidents, there is consensus on the priority of China as a strategic enemy, the need for Europeans to increase their military budgets, and growing trade protectionism (which at the end of the last decade took the form of a trade war against China and the European Union).

The origin of this crisis must be sought three years earlier in the 2008 Bucharest Summit, which ended up setting a precedent for the outbreak of two armed conflicts that, paradoxically, have frustrated the realization of the declared objective of enlargement. A few months after that event, the eyes of the world were on the Beijing Olympics. At the same time, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili seemed to take very seriously the declaration of intent sealed in the Romanian capital on the eventual incorporation of his country and Ukraine into the organization. The attempt to take back by force the secessionist province of South Ossetia, which had been under Russian protection since 1992, took NATO chancelleries by surprise starting with the US, which made no secret of its displeasure (Kucera, 2011). In any case, the invitation—however vague—was received with enthusiasm to the point that years later, Saakashvili, without concealing his sympathies for the most radical elements of the Bush administration, noted:

I think America was responsible a little bit late [to the start of the war] but when it did, it was quite proper. The only thing which was disappointing a little bit later was defense secretary Robert Gates basically saying we won’t use military force and that’s when the Russians took Akhalgori [in South Ossetia]. Basically, Russia took Akhalgori after one phrase of Gates, he was really disgustingly cynical and was against our integration into NATO, he sabotaged our military training, was one of the initiators of the military embargo and so on. He told me when I met him at the Munich security conference, he was sitting next to me at the dinner, he said, ‘Well I really don’t think getting you into NATO is a good idea but our president wants it so what can I do?’ Then later there was a CIA meeting when Bush was saying what are our military options, Cheney said, ‘Let’s employ cruise missiles’ and Gates said, ‘No way.’ If it had not been Gates but Rumsfeld, I think they would have used that option (Tavberidze, 2019).

On the Ukrainian stage, the maneuvers of the nationalist prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, averted a crisis that could have caused Ukraine to collapse in the winter of 2008–2009. On that occasion, she demonstrated that, despite nationalist rhetoric, business and compromise could be a basis for avoiding conflict escalation. In 2010, with the victory of Viktor Yanukovych of the Party of Regions, the main foreign policy line was aimed at fostering smooth relations with various international actors. This escaped the logic of a fundamentally Western-focused Ukraine, favored by outgoing President Viktor Yushchenko, and instead acknowledged the plural and complex nature of its society (Sánchez Monroe, 2022). In this sense, regional political and social balances had a projection on the population’s sensitivity to foreign policy issues and the country’s accommodation with the international system. Gallup surveys published by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in the United States a few months before the outbreak of Euromaidan showed such attitudes. These were reflected in the positions on the conclusion of the Association Agreement with the EU (which European leaders wanted to conclude at the Vilnius Summit, scheduled for November 2013) and the possible incorporation of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia into the customs union.

As a counterbalance to the fear of possible dissolution, enlargements focused on the Western Balkans in this period (Gajić & Ponomareva, 2020).
The lack of consensus on the country’s international integration also had a marked regional character (IRI, 2012) so that in the West, 58 percent of the population favored integration with the European Union, while in the Donbas, other eastern oblasts, and the south, 66 percent, 55 percent, and 54 percent respectively preferred integration with Russia. Tensions were highest in the central areas and in Kyiv, where the two options were closest to each other. If a referendum were to be held, those in favor of EU integration would be 43 percent and those in favor of integration with Russia 40 percent, with 26 percent and 33 percent opposed respectively (IRI, 2013). This had explosive potential, given the tendency in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the socialist camp to use these electoral instruments in the nationalist struggle (Veiga et al., 2019, p. 190).

The pressure exerted by the EU in 2013 for the conclusion of the Association Treaty—an instrument that in no way envisaged Ukraine’s integration into the EU—strained the seams of Ukrainian society to the extent that it was forced to choose between one bloc or the other. In particular, European Commission President José Manuel Durão Barroso was blunt when he pointed out that the country could not sign an association treaty with the EU and be part of the Russian-driven customs union at the same time (UKRINFORM, 2013). This was especially at a time when Ukraine’s main trading partner by far—with a share of 23.8 percent of its exports and 30.1 percent of its imports—was its eastern neighbor (WITS, 2022). In the background of the crisis, moreover, were the very tough conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund for the extension of a loan that was due to expire in 2014, including severe budget cuts and rising energy prices, with all that this implied for the Donbas, where a significant part of the ruling party’s social support was concentrated (Vercueil, 2014).

Euromaidan erupted in this complex social context and blew up the possibility of Ukraine serving as a bridge between Russia and the EU, or at least remaining a united and neutral state. The demonstrations were attended by influential figures in European and US foreign policy, political events followed Yanukovich’s resignation, and the 2014 war developed. This meant that the goal of rapprochement with the EU eventually converged with the aspiration to join NATO, so that at the end of 2014 Ukraine officially renounced its status of neutrality.

With Ukraine, the logic of interventions in territories labeled as “failed states” was reversed. Western powers and international organizations specialized in state-building had become involved

14 Covering the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.
15 Dnipropetrovsk, Járkov, and Zaporozhia.
16 Oblasts of Kherson, Nikolayev, and Odessa, as well as the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.
with the aim of confronting, beyond their borders, what they perceived as a context that allowed threats to their security to germinate. In those cases, Ukraine would be progressively converted into a security problem comparable to that of “failed states” as a consequence of international interventions. With the culmination of the Euromaidan, Ukraine’s central authority was dismantled, its ethno-linguistic fabric unraveled, and its territorial unity jeopardized. From that moment on, the US and the EU focused on solving their own operational problems. This was placed in a context of squabbling over the placement of their pawns on the domestic political chessboard, as US Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland vulgarly pointed out to her ambassador in Kyiv in 2014 (Rodriguez, 2022).

As Woodward (2017) points out, interveners require preconditions on the ground. One of these is the existence of “sovereign consent” to the intervention, which was made possible by the existence of interlocutors willing to confront the shared threat posed by Russia after Yanukovych’s resignation on 22 February 2014. The internal actors also included ultra-nationalist politico-military groups with strong institutional influence, such as the Azov Regiment (Gomza & Zajaczkowski, 2019), which helped block any attempt to realize the Minsk Agreements. On the other hand, Woodward also refers to the issue of the capabilities of the intervened territory: “[T]he far greater problem for intervening actors is actually particular administrative capacities and staff expertise that these outsiders need for local implementation of their decisions and projects” (2017, p. 134).

In the military sphere, the Atlantic Alliance’s involvement in Ukraine would only increase after the Euromaidan (Poch, 2022). Just before the start of the war in 2022, the New York Times reported the presence of up to 150 US military advisers in the country (Schwirtz, 2022), while the House of Commons Library research service (2022) noted that some 100 British military personnel were serving in Ukraine as part of Operation Orbital to train its armed forces. Since the start of the war, the presence of Western military personnel has only increased with successive aid packages. On the other hand, the EU has specialized in the civilian sphere through its Advisory Mission, launched after the Euromaidan and the signing of the Association Treaty at the request of the new Ukrainian government (EUAM, 2022). Under its aegis, 350 staff work to develop civilian security sector reform “through strategic advice and practical support for specific reform measures in accordance with EU standards and international principles of good governance and human rights.”

These factors also call for the intervention of a feminist perspective; Ukraine was the first state in a situation of armed conflict to adopt a National Action Plan within the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1352 (O’Sullivan, 2019). Its articulation is problematic in relation to the traditional feminist agenda as it was primarily based on its insertion into a traditional military security policy. Thus, in addition to the intersection between nationalism and feminism in the Ukrainian case and the militarization of society in the conflict, international organizations ended up co-opting the role of women in the armed forces. In the specific case of NATO, an analysis of its performance in this dimension indicates that issues linked to women in the conflict have ultimately been subservient to military support in the context of the armed confrontation with Russia (O’Sullivan, 2019, pp. 14–15). Following the Russian intervention in 2022, calls for NATO engagement with a gender perspective seem to have fallen on deaf ears amid the Article 5 debate (Wright, 2022).

Generally speaking, the Western intervention in Ukraine has yielded disappointing results in terms of improving Ukraine’s security conditions and political and social development by Western standards. Thus, Ukraine, considered by the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index (2021) as a “hybrid regime” since 2011, has dropped its score since the 2014 regime change. Otherwise, it remains a “problematic” state in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index.
(2022), and it ranks in the third quintile of Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (2021). A report by the European Court of Auditors (2021) notes that corruption linked to high-ranking officials and oligarchs has failed to be curbed. This is despite all the initiatives deployed by that organization for more than twenty years to reform the judicial sector or fight against monopolies, among other aspects. An independent report was contracted by the European Commission (Mathis et al., 2020) to evaluate the third EU aid package to Ukraine after the signing of the Association Treaty—consisting of €1.8 billion for the period 2017–2019. This justifies the European institutions’ decision not to make the last disbursement of the program, due to the lack of progress in the fight against corruption.

From a feminist perspective, Western intervention seems to have overlapped with a progressively more advantageous situation for women. Thus, the United Nations Development Programme’s Gender Inequality Index for Ukraine—which aggregates data on reproductive health, empowerment, and the insertion of women in the labor market—has experienced a gradual reduction since 1996, which accelerated in 2009 and had its largest segment of decline between 2018 and 2019. On the other hand, the war has only increased the insecurity of the civilian population, especially women and girls, who make up 90 percent of the Ukrainian refugee flow and are exposed to specific risks, including sexual exploitation and human trafficking (UN Women, 2023; UNODC, 2022). Yet the militarization of the Western response has pushed aside considerations related to human security and the protection of the most vulnerable groups (Santoire, 2022).

Ukraine is only improving in the conservative Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom (2022), which rewards market deregulation and regressive fiscal policies. The latter is largely a consequence of the International Monetary Fund’s intervention in the country. In 2015, the IMF granted a loan of €17.5 billion in exchange for accelerating the privatization of state assets, raising the retirement age and abolishing subsidies for energy consumption. By 2018, energy consumption had fallen by as much as 30 percent, which required the attention of the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty (Bretton Woods Project, 2018). With Russian intervention, the prospects for the Ukrainian economy are even bleaker, to the extent that the country seems doomed to become a Western-dependent state.

Conclusion

For a few decades, NATO’s hypertrophy seemed harmful only at the local level, thus in the areas suffering the consequences of interventions. Now, in the context of the war in Ukraine, there is a qualitative leap, since the crisis has also affected European NATO members. One is prone to wonder what the next step will be. In the post-Cold War context, NATO has transitioned from being an organization focused on the defense of its members in a seemingly immovable international arena to being a force that has advanced US policy in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, the current crisis does not appear to be a mere repetition of others, and its resolution—if it follows the pattern of hypertrophy of previous crises—generates certain risks to international security, and to women and girls in the affected zones.

With regard to enlargement, it seems clear that Sweden’s membership will be consummated, pending the objections raised by Hungary and Turkey. What is less clear is whether NATO will be able to cope with the frustration of Georgia and Ukraine for not being let in. Achieving this goal would mean that member states would have to decide, this time directly, how to deal with aggression against one of their partners. It would therefore be not only a matter of considering the potential catastrophe of such a scenario, but also of gauging the extent to which the Atlantic Alliance is capable of responding to Russia, this time directly. The answer to this question
is unclear, given precedent. In the meantime, Ukraine is left to a proxy war in which the concepts of victory and defeat are increasingly blurred (Aguirre, 2022, pp. 24-25).

Concerning out-of-area operations, it should be mentioned that, beyond the rhetoric, all those carried out by the Atlantic Alliance thus far have actually been pursued with Russia’s acquiescence, including the Kosovo operation; the Kremlin ended up playing a key role in forcing Slobodan Milošević to withdraw the Yugoslav army from the province. Subsequently, the operation in Libya was approved by the Security Council thanks to Russia’s abstention, in a vote during which Germany also abstained. With the accelerating transformation of the international system—characterized by reinforcement of multipolarity and self-actualization in virtually every corner of the world—one can sense that the time for out-of-area and limited-range operations is over.

Ukraine, rather than an opportunity for NATO reconstruction, as most optimistic Western analysts have believed, is the frontier that will end the dilemma of hypertrophy. Overgrowth has met with real fire, and a feature of the hypertrophy dynamic was the organization’s evasion of internal contradictions. It was a bubble with very tangible consequences for all, but unequal: painful for the intervened and restorative for the interveners, who saw the internal seams being stitched and their bureaucratic-institutional apparatus inflated. The road ahead is uncertain, but the existence of a historic crossroads is undeniable. If NATO does not cross this rubicon, it will be forced to find, beyond Europe, a new frontier that will allow the United States to maintain dominance over its European allies and confront the perceived Chinese threat.

The war also marks a “before and after” from a feminist perspective. NATO and Western countries have pushed gender issues off the agenda, reinforcing their instrumental role. The global crisis generated by the war has had a particular impact on women and girls in developing countries, given the increase in the price of food and energy. In this context, as UN Women (2022) denounces, gender equality issues “remain largely missing from discussions on the Ukraine crisis.” However, these issues will remain present, and while the Atlantic Alliance will continue to invest its time and effort in resolving a borderline dilemma, the different development agendas in the new multipolar world will be more likely to address the situation, albeit gradually.

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González-Villa and Radeljí?: Hypertrophy as NATO's Masculinity: Out-of-Area Operations and En