RUSSIA’S 2014 ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA AND INTERVENTION IN EASTERN UKRAINE MARK AN END TO THE EUROPEAN POST–COLD WAR SECURITY ORDER—BUT ONLY IF THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE ASSENT TO IT. The West has additional policy cards to play, and should do so with confidence. As the July 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw approaches, it is time for NATO to adopt a longer-term strategy for its eastern flank that goes beyond the reactive while maintaining transatlantic unity behind a common set of goals, actions, and capabilities for the coming decade that will reinforce the security of eastern allies and promote stability for NATO’s bordering countries.

The United States and Europe have mobilized politically, militarily, and economically since February 2014: adopting defense measures to raise NATO’s readiness and imposing economic sanctions that have had an impact on the Russian economy (amplified by the decline in global oil prices and Russian economic mismanagement). But divisions in NATO remain: eastern allies focused on Russia, southern allies on instability in the Middle East and North Africa.

The United States must lead NATO in turning these initial responsive elements into a persistent NATO strategy for the east, enhancing allied military presence, demonstrating long-term resolve, bolstering NATO’s capacity to deter new Russian threats, setting the direction of resource decisions and interoperable procurements, and sharing the burden equitably on both sides of the Atlantic. This strategy should be developed in full consultation with non-NATO partners Sweden and Finland, who share NATO’s concerns about Russia’s activity in and around the Baltic Sea region, and where government and public opinion is increasingly open to a closer relationship with the Alliance, including eventual NATO membership. This would give the strategy additional depth, while building practical cooperation on core security interests with two high-end partners who could make significant contributions now, and even greater ones in the future if they choose to pursue NATO membership.

Strengthening deterrence on the eastern flank is essential. While the Alliance as a whole enjoys conventional superiority over Russia, NATO’s eastern allies face a huge imbalance of Russian forces—armor, artillery, and air forces—in the Russian Western Military District. This imbalance is magnified by Russia’s dramatically expanded exercise activity, demonstrating a level of readiness and mobilization that NATO cannot match at large scale. The quality and depth of Russia’s military forces remains questionable, but this could change: Russia already has made rapid advances in materiel and tactics since its 2008 invasion of Georgia, advances that have been on full display in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

U.S. engagement is central to sustaining NATO solidarity as a whole. The Obama administration’s 12-month European Reassurance Initiative was crucial in securing additional NATO commitments, increasing deployments of fighter aircraft to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to include F-22s, committing forces to the “spearhead” force (with its 48-hour response
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...time), and establishing NATO command-and-control elements in the Baltic countries, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. A U.S. commitment of one battalion to the Baltic countries (in addition to existing U.S. forces in Europe) could be part of an approach to leverage commitments from other allies to two additional battalion-sized units, constituting a Baltic brigade. A brigade-sized presence in the Baltic states, especially with participation from the United States and NATO’s larger member states, would demonstrate shared resolve across the Alliance, raising a significant hurdle to Russian attempts at coercion or destabilization.

Some NATO allies may seek to reopen the debate from 2014 about whether the presence of allied forces in its easternmost territories should be described as “permanent” rather than “persistent.” Permanent presence was resisted by some allies, particularly Germany, which wanted to avoid contradicting the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act’s language that NATO would not permanently station substantial combat forces on the territory of its new eastern members “in the current and foreseeable security environment.”

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NATO papered over the issue at the Wales Summit by describing NATO’s presence as “continuous . . . on a rotating basis.” NATO should avoid an internal battle over declaring the Founding Act null and void; it is in practice, anyway. Allies should instead focus on signals that its adversary will understand: that in the current and foreseeable security environment, NATO’s presence in the east will be continuous and will grow.

The development of a sustained NATO presence along its eastern flank will require greater investment in defense, and greater readiness and ability to deploy forces. The majority of NATO allies (17 of 28) have begun to increase defense spending in real terms, a hopeful sign. But spending by four of the five allies with the largest defense budgets continues to decline in real terms (the UK, France, Germany, and Italy). Among numbers 6 through 10, only Turkey, Poland, and the Netherlands show more than marginal increases in spending. The vast majority of NATO members still fall well below the Wales Summit target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense. By other measures such as research and development and major equipment spending, allies also are well short of their goals. It will be crucial at the NATO summit for allies to demonstrate that they are putting meaningful resources behind their commitments, through a combination of increased national spending and NATO commonly-funded infrastructure.

In preparation for the Warsaw Summit, the United States should make clear that it is prepared to put the necessary forces, alongside other NATO allies, on NATO’s eastern flank to deter potential Russian destabilizing efforts for the long term, not simply send forces to reassure. This will entail making difficult strategic choices, but it will send a clear signal to NATO allies, Russia, and NATO’s neighbors that America will lead.