NATO has dilemma is of its own making. It is overextended. George Kennan had warnedd NATO's expansion was a "*strategic blunder of potentially epic proportions*." Deceiving Russia on NATO expansion, alienating Russia's political elite across the political spectrum, expanding NATO to Russia's borders and to within 100 miles of St. Petersburg, ensured Russia would upgrade and expand its military capabilities. Treating Russia as a threat resulted in Russia becoming a threat. The result: Instead of providing NATO with a straight, flat route to Moscow, the European Plain now provides Russia with a straight, flat route to the west – to Kiev, Riga, Tallinn, and beyond, writes Joseph E Fallon.

On April 4, 2019, NATO celebrated its 70th anniversary. Originally consisting of 12 members – "Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States", NATO had been created in 1949 at the outbreak of the Cold War as a defense pact against Soviet Expansionism. However, once the rival Soviet controlled Warsaw Pact dissolved, March 31, 1991, and the Soviet Union disintegrated, December 26, 1991, the rational for the existence of NATO vanished.

Calls to dismantle NATO, however, were rejected. The justification for preserving NATO was that a military threat to Western Europe still existed, if only potentially, and the implied threat came from Russia. For that reason, suggestions Russia be admitted into NATO were similarly rejected.

According to Richard Haass , president of the Council on Foreign Relations, and former Director of Policy Planning at the U.S. State Department under President George W. Bush:

"Those who doubted the wisdom of it…worried that it would impair the continuing military effectiveness of NATO that Russia, essentially as an insider, would become obstructive and would work against NATO's continuing viability."

Why would Russia become "*obstructive*"? How would Russia "*work against NATO's continuing viability*"? The Communist regime had been overthrown. The non-Communist government had agreed to the abolition of the Warsaw Pact, the reunification of Germany, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Moscow had recognized the independence of all the former Soviet republics.

Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott "*warned in an internal memo that 'An expanded NATO that excludes Russia will not serve to contain Russia's retrograde, expansionist impulses.' On the contrary, he argued, 'it will further provoke them*.'

Such concerns were ignored. For NATO, Russia was a permanent "outsider"; a "non-Western" nuclear power, a "non-European" state with the world's second largest military after the U.S., a "*riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma*".
A vast, resource rich, country whose national interests had to be inherently in conflict with NATO. So Russia replaced the Soviet Union as the existential threat justifying NATO.

In the words of Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, U.S. diplomat and former National Security Adviser to President Jimmy Carter, the threat from Russia justified not only the continuation of NATO, but necessitated its expansion eastward. "Failure to widen NATO…could reignite dormant Russian political aspirations in Central Europe". To eliminate that threat, Dr. Brzezinski stated Russia must be abolished. To be replaced by a loose confederation "composed of a European Russia, a Siberian Republic, and a Far Eastern Republic...A sovereign Ukraine is a critically important component of such a policy…"

In a 1998 interview with *The New York Times*, George F. Kennan, former U.S. Ambassador to Stalin's Soviet Union and architect of the U.S. containment policy of Soviet expansionism, lamented:

"'I was particularly bothered by the references to Russia as a country dying to attack Western Europe. Don't people understand? Our differences in the cold war were with the Soviet Communist regime. And now we are turning our backs on the very people who mounted the greatest bloodless revolution in history to remove that Soviet regime."

Two decades later, on April 3, 2019, *"The head of NATO̅ warned the U.S. Congress…of the threat posed by '* [a more assertive Russia](#) *,'* *including a massive military build up* *, threats to sovereign states, the use of nerve agents and cyber attacks* *. 'We must overcome our differences now because we will need our alliance even more in the future. We face unprecedented challenges - challenges no one nation can face alone,' NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said."*

But NATO had been viewing Russia as a potential threat for 28 years; even when Russia was weak and in economic turmoil following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Seeking to prevent Russia from emerging as a future military adversary, but pursuing policies that could assure just that, NATO gradually expanded eastward. It incorporated former Warsaw Pact countries, one after another. Then in what was considered an act of provocation incorporated the former Soviet Republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, "*bringing St. Petersburg within a hundred miles of a NATO country."*

George F. Kennan decried this expansion as a "*strategic blunder of potentially epic proportions*. " An expansion, which was in violation of a 1990 understanding among the U.S., the U.K., Germany, and the Soviet Union that NATO would not expand beyond the borders of a reunified Germany. According to an investigative report by the German news magazine, *Spiegel:*
"
After speaking with many of those involved and examining previously classified British and German documents in detail, SPIEGEL has concluded that there was no doubt that the West did everything it could to give the Soviets the impression that NATO membership was out of the question for countries like Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia."

The findings of *Spiegel* were corroborated by the *National Security Archive* at George Washington University. "
Declassified documents from U.S. and Russian archives show that U.S. officials led Russian President Boris Yeltsin to believe in 1993 that the Partnership for Peace was the alternative to NATO expansion, rather than a precursor to it, while simultaneously planning for expansion

after Yeltsin's re-election bid in 1996 and telling the Russians repeatedly that the future European security system would include, not exclude, Russia
."

Reacting to the publications by the *National Security Archive*, Dr. Stephen F. Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian Studies and Politics at New York University and Princeton, wrote: *"…the invaluable National Security Archive at George Washington University has established the historical truth by publishing, on December 12 of last year, not only a detailed account of what Gorbachev was promised in 1990–91 but the relevant documents themselves . The truth, and the promises broken, are much more expansive than previously known: All of the Western powers involved—the US, the UK, France, Germany itself—made the same promise to Gorbachev on multiple occasions and in various emphatic ways… [implanting] in at least one generation of the Russian policy elite the conviction that the broken promise to Gorbachev represented characteristic American 'betrayal and deceit.' Both Russian presidents since 2000—Putin and President Obama's 'reset partner,' Dmitry Medvedev—have said the same, more than once. Putin put it bluntly: 'They duped us, in the full sense of this word.'"*

Attempts were made to placate Moscow. A partnership between NATO and Russia was proposed.

*ÂÂ Relations started after the end of the Cold War, when Russia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (1991). This forum for dialogue was succeeded in 1997 by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, which brings together all Allies and partner countries in the Euro-Atlantic area.

* Practical cooperation started after Russia joined the Partnership for Peace programme (1994) and deployed peacekeepers in support of NATO-led peace-support operations in the Western Balkans in the late 1990s..

* The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act provided the formal basis for bilateral relations.

* Dialogue and cooperation were strengthened in 2002 with the establishment of theÂÂ NATO-Russia CouncilÂÂ (NRC) to serve as a forum for consultation on current security issues and to direct practical cooperation in a wide range of areas.

However, in April 2014, NATO announced *"All practical civilian and military cooperation under the NRC with Russia has been suspended…in response to Russia's military intervention and aggressive actions in Ukraine, and its illegal occupation and annexation of Crimea..."*

NATO's reaction was understandable. For NATO, Ukraine was the geopolitical prize that would insure Russia could never emerge as a military rival. Geography made Ukraine Russia's "Achilles Heel". *"Ukraine was the key, because the Ukrainian border went through Russia's agricultural heartland, as well as large population centers and transportation networks."*

A Ukraine in NATO would first deprive Russia, which is for all practical purposes land-locked, of its only warm water port, Sevastopol. (This has been a driver of Russian policy for centuries, but is often ignored.)

"European Russia has three potential points from which to access global maritime trade. One is through the Black Sea and the Bosporus, a narrow waterway controlled by Turkey that can easily be closed to Russia. Another is from St. Petersburg, where ships can sail through Danish waters, but this passageway can also be easily blocked. The third is the long Arctic Ocean route, starting from Murmansk and then extending through the gaps between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom. During the Cold War, air bases in Norway, Scotland, and Iceland, coupled with carrier battle groups, worked to deny Russia access to the sea."

Second, Russia's heartland would be exposed to potential military attack across the European Plain from the Baltic States in the northwest to Ukraine in the southwest. A vast pincer movement would imperil the Russian cities of St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Rostov on Don.

For Russia's *"defining characteristic was its indefensibility. No mountain ranges or bodies of water protected its western borders. For centuries, it suffered repeated invasions."*

It has been the European Plain that has shaped the history of Russia and defined the geopolitical strategy of its leaders. In the north, the plain is 300 miles wide stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Carpathian Mountains. It provided a corridor through which Western powers invaded Russia, but one Moscow could block. As occurred with the defeated invasions by the

Poles in 1605, the Swedes in 1707, the French in 1812, and the Germans in 1914 and, again, in 1941. But to the south is Ukraine where the European Plain opens up expanding to 2,000 miles in width offering enemy forces "a flat route straight to Moscow."

Ukraine in NATO, therefore, is perceived to be the geostrategic key to eliminate the Russian threat. To that end, the U.S. provided significant amount of funds to advance Ukrainian membership in NATO. *"Victoria Nuland, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, estimated in December 2013 that the United States had invested more than $5 billion since 1991 to help Ukraine achieve "the future it deserves." As part of that effort, the U.S. government has bankrolled the National Endowment for Democracy. The nonprofit foundation has funded more than 60 projects aimed at promoting civil society in Ukraine, and the NED's president, Carl Gershman, has called that country "the biggest prize."*

But attempts to redraw the geopolitical map were interrupted by the February 2014 political crisis in Ukraine, and Russia's subsequent actions in Crimea, annexation of the peninsula, and in eastern Ukraine, support for rebels.

Moscow's actions were in response to a coup that overthrew a transitional government of national unity. The Ukrainian government and opposition had agreed to its formation on February 21, 2014 to oversee new elections in hopes of resolving the political crisis that had engulfed the country since November 2013. The crisis, which centered on whether to accept EU or Russian loans, had provoked violent protests, which were exacerbated by the country's ethno-linguistic division. The west is Ukrainian; the east is Russian.

In his analysis of the coup, Professor John Mearsheimer, University of Chicago, wrote: *"On February 21, the government and the opposition struck a deal that allowed Yanukovych to stay in power until new elections were held. But it immediately fell apart, and Yanukovych fled to Russia the next day. The new government in Kiev was pro-Western and anti-Russian to the core, and it contained four high-ranking members who could legitimately be labeled neofascists. Although the full extent of U.S. involvement has not yet come to light, it is clear that Washington backed the coup. Nuland and Republican Senator John McCain participated in antigovernment demonstrations, and Geoffrey Pyatt, the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, proclaimed after Yanukovych's toppling that it was 'a day for the history books.' As a leaked telephone recording revealed, Nuland had advocated regime change and wanted the Ukrainian politician Arseniy Yatsenyuk to become prime minister in the new government, which he did. No wonder Russians of all persuasions think the West played a role in Yanukovych's ouster."*

For NATO, the resulting fragmentation of Ukraine was a significant geopolitical setback. Russia was now in Crimea and Russian proxies controlled parts of eastern Ukraine. If a unified Ukraine is not in NATO, NATO fails to accomplish what its eastward expansion sought. To place Russia in an untenable military position and so achieve what Sun Tzu wrote in The Art of War was the ultimate object of war -- "*breaking the enemy's esistance without fighting."*

But by its actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, Moscow dramatically altered the geopolitical landscape in its favor. Instead of NATO in Ukraine posing a threat to the Russian heartland, it is Russia in Crimea, which now poses a threat to the "soft underbellies" of Ukraine and NATO.

First, Moscow can render Ukraine land-locked. In the east, the Ukrainian ports of Mariupol and Berdyansk in the Sea of Azov can easily be blockaded by Russia. These two ports are surrounded by Russian territory to the northeast, east, south, and southwest. And their only access to the Black Sea, the Kerch Strait, is controlled by Russia.

From Crimea, Russia can project its military power to close the ports of western Ukraine, in particular Odessa, Ilyichevsk and Yuzhniy. These three ports, situated close to one another, "account for 56.6 % of the entire cargo turnover in Ukrainian merchant seaports and 38.28 % of cargo handling in all ports and terminals of the country."

Second, Moscow has deprived Ukraine, and by extension NATO, of a significant source of energy and revenues. Russia's possession of the Crimean maritime zone, which is three times larger the peninsula, itself, gives Moscow access to oil and gas reserves estimated in the trillions of dollars.

Third, Russia has a sympathetic population in eastern and southern Ukraine, which constitutes a "human wall" blocking a NATO military move into southern Russia, as well as a base from which Russia can advance into western Ukraine.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, *"Russia is now able to threaten Ukraine on three fronts, from the northeast, the southeast and the south (Crimea) This has rendered the eastern half of Ukraine much less defensible. Should Ukrainian*
[or NATO]
forces move too far to the east in an attempt to defend Ukraine's sovereign territory, a military

offensive from Crimea would threaten to cut off such troops from the rear."

The geopolitical landscape now enables Russia to use the European Plain to its advantage offensively, as well as defensively. Since most of Ukraine is flat land, Russia has a direct route to Kyiv. A sympathetic population to its rear in eastern and southern Ukraine insures Russian supply lines are secure.

A Russian invasion of western Ukraine would not seek to annex the land. The population is hostile, meaning any occupation would be too costly, risking political instability in Moscow. The objective would be to destroy Ukrainian, and NATO, military capabilities in the country. Any annexation of territory would be confined to the newly liberated, pro-Russian, eastern and southern regions of Ukraine. It would be confirmed through a referendum on union with Russia, as was done in Crimea. The impact of both acts would be to further weaken NATO's strategic position in Eastern Europe, and potentially destabilize NATO internally.

While the conflict in Ukraine simmers, the RAND Corporation report, "*Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*
", has raised another problem for NATO. In a series of war games conducted in summer 2014 and spring 2015, the authors concluded.

"The games' findings are unambiguous: As currently postured, NATO cannot successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members. Across multiple games using a wide range of expert participants in and out of uniform playing both sides, the longest it has taken Russian forces to reach the outskirts of the Estonian and/or Latvian capitals of Tallinn and Riga, respectively, is 60 hours. Such a rapid defeat would leave NATO with a limited number of options, all bad…"

This article is a edited version of a longer work for the journal Geopolitica, Nr. 2 (78) / 2019, BLACK SEA - 2020 STRATEGIES. Jospeh E Fallon is a U K Defence Forum Research Associate