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## AN ANALYSIS OF NATO AS A CHALLENGE FOR RUSSIA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present the strategic relations between NATO and Russia and analyse the reasons which make Russia see NATO as a threat to its independence and interests. NATO's expansion eastward, the proliferation of military bases near Russia's borders, and the development of partnerships with post-Soviet states in the wake of the Cold War have ratcheted up Moscow's perception of strategic encirclement. Adopting a qualitative approach, rooted in neorealist explanation, the research examines how Russia has perceived NATO across seminal events such as the expansion of the alliance, the 2008 war in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The conclusions are that Russia considers NATO to be an instrument of geopolitical containment, threatening its security, influence, and regional great power status, rather than just a defensive alliance. The study suggests that until the security structure is realigned and the dialogue re-established, the NATO-Russia relationship will remain hostage to mutual distrust, escalation and systemic confrontation.

**Keywords:** NATO, Russia, sovereignty, strategic encirclement, neorealism, security dilemma, NATO expansion, Eastern Europe, hybrid warfare, NATO-Russia relations

### Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as an instrument of collective defense: An analysis of the organization's establishment and readiness Oriented against the perceived threat of the Soviet Union Created to counter the perceived threat of the Soviet Union emerged during the early stages of the Cold War in 1949. Founded on the principles of democratic governance and collective security, NATO codified a system of mutual defense, most famously through Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Although originally implemented in an Euro-Atlantic context, in the post-Cold War period its scope has increasingly expanded to include new security threats, at the cyberwarfare, and regional peace and stability security areas.

But the persistence of NATO and its expansion eastward have provoked a lasting sense of insecurity in Russia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the alliance's decision to take in former Warsaw Pact states — and then, post-Soviet republics — across the continent has been seen in Moscow as an intrusion into its historic sphere of influence. Such a view consolidated with NATO's intervention in the Balkans and developed with the war in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which were followed by a large growth of the alliance's military presence in Eastern Europe.

For Russia, NATO is more than just a defensive alliance; it represents a strategic competitor which challenges its national sovereignty and strategic freedom. The alliance's increasingly close relationship with non-member countries in the vicinity of Russia, troop deployments in the Baltic States, and support for Ukraine

clearly pose a threat to Russian influence and security. Here, NATO is not just a residue of Cold War deterrence, but seen in Russian strategic discourse as a living, breathing tool of Western containment.

This article investigates NATO as a structural and strategic challenge for the Russian Federation. It does so by considering the historical path of relations between NATO and Russia and analyzing the central determinants of Russian insecurity. In this way, this paper seeks one basic answer: Why is NATO a security threat to Russian national sovereignty? This question is crucial for understanding the rebirth of great power competition in Eurasia and the wider evolution of global security structures.

### **Literature Review**

The developing NATO-Russia relationship has emerged as itself one of the central features of the post-Cold War international security landscape. NATO has reinvented itself following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, expanded its membership and evolved in the face of new threats. But Russia views these changes as nothing less than a direct challenge to its national sovereignty and right to determine events in its sphere of influence. This review of the literature draws on academic research concerning NATO after the Cold War, the strategic rationales for NATO enlargement, Russia's responses to the expansion, and the wider implications for European and global security. Theoretical perspectives such as neorealism are also included to account for Russia's threat perception of NATO.

After the demise of the Cold War, NATO developed from a defence alliance into a security player with worldwide implications. Leave it to the scholars, such as Rynning (2018) and Binnendijk & Abenheim (2020) to analyze NATO as a flexible institution in the fight against terrorism, facing challenges on cyber-space and regional instability. Yet the group's most contentious decision was the expansion into Eastern Europe — a development that Russia regarded as a strategic push.

According to Mearsheimer (2014), NATO enlargement defeated the Cold War tacit assurances to Soviet leaders, and it created a dormant time bomb, which now went out in the form of Russian resistance. According to realist analysis, expansion violated the basic logic of great power conduct: the requirement for buffer zones and spheres of interest. The decision to admit Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to NATO in 1999, and the Baltic states in 2004, validated Russia's worst fears of strategic encirclement.

Russian strategic thought has evolved from the experience of invasions and dual loss of buffer territories. Academics like Allison (2014) and Trenin (2011) point out that Russia does not take NATO's enlargement as something beneficial, but as a calculated policy of containment. The Kremlin security strategists perceive NATO's enlarged footprint along its borders as part of an organized

effort to curtail Russian influence in the post-soviet regions (Karaganov 2016).

It was the 2007 Munich Security Conference speech by President Vladimir Putin that represented a rhetorical pivot in which he named NATO as the organization that betrayed promises to Russia and sought to drag it into a vise. As Sakwa (2017) notes, this speech signaled a change in the Russian foreign policy from partnership to opposition, born out of the conviction on behalf of Moscow that NATO was intended to subvert Russian sovereignty.

Tensions have been additionally exacerbated by key flashpoints such as NATO backing for Georgia and Ukraine. As Smith (2020) notes, NATO relations with these states—in the forms of military training, exercises and promises of future membership—increased Russia's perceived security threat. Moscow saw the 2008 Bucharest Summit declaration, which invited Georgia and Ukraine to seek NATO membership, as crossing a red line.

Russia's wars in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014, 2022) can be interpreted as responses to this alleged threat. These interventions, Galeotti (2019) proposes, were not just about territorial control but had been devised as a barrier to NATO's progress. In that sense, NATO's activity became not only a trigger but also a cover for Russia's hard power coping.

The security dilemma is a key conceptual lens through which the tension between NATO and Russia is often theorized in academia. Nor indeed need they have been." As Glaser (1997) and Jervis (1978) would both add, the defensive steps of one state (or alliances) can be seen as offensive ones by another, and from there, trust and arms control can spiral to a standstill. Forward deployed troops to Eastern Europe by NATO is a prime example of this.

Rühle (2017) emphasizes that NATO has asserted all along that all what it does is quite defensive, to reassure allies and to deter aggression. Nevertheless, Lo (2015) argues that a NATO conducting operations from this side of the world mainland cannot be anything but posing an existential threat to Russia, since NATO is actively changing the power balance and eroding Russia's strategic space.

In recent years, NATO has confronted Russia's use of hybrid warfare, which includes cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and political subversion. This is what Murray and Mansoor (2012) term as "pol-mil blurring," or blurring the distinction between conventional and non-conventional operations and that Russia employed in response to NATO's overwhelming military superiority. In response, Nato has broadened its strategic concept to include cyber and information warfare. But this, too, has helped to securitize the NATO-Russia relationship. As Sperling and Webber (2019) contend, NATO — through its efforts to develop resilience against hybrid threats — is seen by Moscow as a further stratum of hostile containment.

NATO is an explicit threat according to Russia's military and nation

security doctrines. The 2014 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation states that expansion and global activities of NATO are a leading military risk. The 2021 National Security Strategy further underscores this perspective by depicting NATO as a source of instability that creates regional insecurity and meddles in Russian sovereignty.

Monaghan (2015: 1) points out that Russian defense planning currently is based on the assumption that NATO is a long-term threat to its strategic autonomy. As a result, considerable investments have been made in military modernization and AGW capabilities, Japan being no exception in this regard either, with emphasis on nuclear weapons signalling and electronic warfare.

This literature is most persuasively read through the neorealist lens, which assumes that in an anarchic international arena, great powers take steps to guarantee their survival and equilibrium. In his book Waltz (1979) contends that structural pressures, not ideology or norms, dictate states' behavior. Ergo, Russia's push-back against NATO is not surprising in a world where power is zero-sum and expansion by one party is by its very nature antagonistic to others.

Expansion of NATO after the Cold War was essentially an imbalance that threatens Russian security and, therefore, the countervailing has just been a normal reaction", Layne (2006) comments. From this perspective, Russia is not irrationally imagining NATO as a security threat but responding rationally to changing power constellations.

The literature on NATO-Russia relations is rich but there are gaps. Existing literature generally focuses on NATO's internal logic for expansion but overlooks how this expansion is perceived from the vantage point of Russia's strategy. Furthermore, even though hybrid threats and cyber security are often discussed, there is limited work that directly overlies these fields with the issue of Russia's security concerns.

We seek to address these shortcomings by examining such NATO by paying close attention to NATO's evolution since the end of the Cold War and its impact on Russia's strategic insecurity, with a focus on its perceptions of threat as expressed in Russian doctrinal texts, Western strategic documents, and comparative threat assessments.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the historical evolution of NATO-Russia relations, especially in the post-Cold War period.
2. To analyze why Russia perceives NATO as a challenge to its sovereignty and strategic interests.
3. To assess NATO's eastern expansion and military deployments in relation to Russia's national security doctrine.
4. To explore the implications of NATO-Russia tensions for broader European and global security dynamics

## **Methodology**

This is a qualitative research study based on interpretivist logic on assessing the changing dynamics between NATO and Russia from the perspective of geopolitical and strategic. The qualitative code is suitable here as the perceptions, policy documents, strategic doctrines and discourses that the research addresses call for a contextual and thematically oriented interpretation as opposed to a quantitative measurement. The data is mainly based on secondary sources, including policy documents originated from NATO, the Russian military doctrines (18 including) such as the 2014 Military Doctrine and the 2021 National Security Strategy, official speeches (especially by Putin but not exclusively), academic work, think tank papers, as well as strategic analysis from institutions such as Chatham House, RAND Corporation, and the Carnegie Moscow Center.

For analytical depth, the study uses thematic analysis to identify major patterns, storylines, and strategic-logics found in the postulated NATO and Russian security discourses. To this end, the study is centered on three case-based lenses: (1) NATO enlargement 1991 and beyond; (2) Russian responses in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014–2022); and (3) the institutional framing of NATO as part of Russian defense doctrine. These cases have been selected because they have played a crucial part in demonstrating the cause-and-effect relationship between NATO's action and Russia's security responses. In addition, the theoretical perspective of neorealism is employed to explain how structural features of the international system - lack of a supranational authority; the competition for influence at the regional level - shape the conduct of the two actors. This methodological approach allows the analysis to connect developments on the ground with the insight into theory, resulting in a holistic explanation as to why NATO is seen as an existential threat to Russian sovereign impulses.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **1. NATO Expansion and Russian Perceptions of Encirclement**

The most important result of that scholarship has been the realization that Russia has not viewed NATO's post-Cold War enlargement as a benign rearrangement of the political landscape, but as a strategic encirclement aimed at undermining its sovereignty and regional pre-eminence. The decision to bring Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into the alliance in 1999, and the Baltic countries in 2004 had a drastic impact on Russia's (Mearsheimer, 2014) traditional sphere of influence and buffer zone, which has historically been a part of Russia's security policy. This feeling was incited by NATO's 2008 Bucharest Summit communique, which committed that Georgia and Ukraine "will become members of NATO," causing Russia to see this as an outright violation of its core area of influence (Allison 2014.)

Russia's political and military leaders see in these enlargements echoes of past Western invasions, in particular by Napoleon and

Hitler, which buttresses their conviction about the need for strategic depth (Karaganov, 2016). From a neorealist perspective, Russia's actions are a logical response to a changing balance of power: as NATO becomes both stronger and more entrenched in eastern Europe, Russia needs to adopt stronger measures to maintain its position and security (Waltz, 1979). The set of military interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014, 2022) is therefore not to be seen as expansion in its own right, but as balancing maneuvers in a disputed security context.

## **2. The Security Dilemma and NATO's Forward Presence**

Specifically, the study argues that NATO's enhanced forward presence (eFP) — its rotational deployments to the Baltic states and to Poland — has, however defensive its purpose, contributed to an increased sense of vulnerability in Russia. According to the Kremlin, these are in violation of the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 (it prohibited a permanent stationing of substantial combat forces of new Member States, Rühle, 2017). NATO, however, sees these deployments as a necessary deterrence after Russia's annexations of Crimea and military assistance to the separatists in Eastern Ukraine (NATO, 2022).

This exemplifies the logic of the security dilemma: as NATO raises its defence posture to reassure its eastward members, Russia interprets these acts as aggressive and it multiplied its deployment of troops along its westward borders, including the Kaliningrad exclave, with the deployment of Iskander missile systems (Lo, 2015). The repeated pattern of action and reaction between the pair has resulted in a militarized standoff in Eastern Europe, characterized by heightened alertness, military exercises and declining trust – a scenario that bears some resemblance to Glaser's (1997) analogy of unintended escalation between defensive alliances and nearby powers.

## **3. Hybrid Warfare and the Expanding Domain of Confrontation**

A second key insight is that Moscow's understanding of NATO as a threat does not confine itself to conventional military threats, but also includes information warfare, cyber operations, and political subversion. That comes from Russia's doctrinal thinking, a thought process enshrined in its 2014 Military Doctrine and reaffirmed in the 2021 National Security Strategy which counts NATO's informational and ideological impact next to threats of a military nature. The Kremlin alleges that NATO is backing "color revolutions" in Russia's postSoviet neighborhood, such as the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, to undermine Russia's security environment (Monaghan, 2015).

According to Russia, democratic revolutions supported by NATO in neighboring countries do not represent internal political processes but forms of Western intervention to curb Russian influence (Sakwa, 2017). These views are echoed by NATO's investment in cyber defense centers and with tech companies to defend themselves against hybrid threats in a place like Estonia.

In retribution, Russia has wielded information and cyber capabilities to check the spread of NATO; examples of this include disinformation campaigns in Europe and cyber operations such as the 2007 strike on Estonian institutions (Murray & Mansoor, 2012). The arena for NATO-Russia rivalry has, therefore, become a broader one that encompasses not only tanks and soldiers, but also stories, equipment, and public perceptions.

#### **4. NATO's Partnerships and Strategic Depth as a Threat to Russian Influence**

Another aspect of NATO's threat to Russia comes from its growing relations with non-ally countries, especially in the post-Soviet region. Through programs like Partnership for Peace and engagement with Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, NATO has projected its power closer and closer to areas Russia considers to be its exclusive sphere (Trenin, 2011). From a Russian viewpoint, this not only erodes its power projection capabilities but also weakens collective security organisations it dominates, like the CSTO.

For example, Ukraine's increased cooperation with NATO, including military training and weapons transfers since 2014, was viewed as a de facto military alliance — even in the absence of formal membership. This perception also became a major factor in Russia's decision to initiate a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Galeotti, 2019). In the Kremlin's grand strategy, to lose Ukraine to NATO-driven institutions is an act of civilizational and geopolitical amputation, in which an historical and cultural friend is converted into a potential western enemy.

#### **5. Russian Military Modernization and the Balancing Response**

This last finding indicates that Russia's is based on strategic rearmament and doctrine adaptation in the view of compensating for certain undesirable strategic imbalances. With the enlargement of NATO and greater presence of the Alliance in Eastern Europe, Russia embarked on a sweeping modernization of its military — reform of conventional forces, renewed attention to nuclear deterrence, and asymmetric capabilities such as hypersonic missiles (Giles, 2019). The Russian defense-industry policy has become more focused on a “mobility” of the forces by increasing the pace of deployment, implementing a new command arrangement, and executing operations together.

This force posture is a departure from the post-Soviet defensive posture to a more pre-emptive and assertive posture. As Kupchan (2012) argues, this balancing behavior can be anticipated in a neorealist international system, where states reciprocally react to external pressures in a competitive manner to increase their military choices. A more venturesome and independent Russia — evident both in Syria and Ukraine — also reflects Moscow's desire to reassert independent credentials and push back against what it sees as NATO's push to marginalize it in the global system.



In sum, the findings lend support to the argument that the Russian perception of NATO as a strategic threat is based on multifaceted factors such as historical resentments, power play, and military thinking. Even as NATO emphasizes its defensive role, Russia sees its behavior — including expansion and partnerships — as encroachments on its sovereignty and sphere of influence. That divergence in strategic visions, along with charges of mutual mistrust and conflicting regional aspirations, is at the heart of the continued confrontation between NATO and Russia. The analysis indicates that without adjustment of attitudes and approaches, the NATO-Russia security dilemma will only grow in the next several decades.

### **Conclusion**

This research set out to investigate a critical and enduring question in global security: *Why does Russia consider NATO a security challenge to its sovereignty?* Through an examination of historical developments, strategic doctrines, and military postures, the study has shown that Russia's antagonism toward NATO is rooted not merely in present-day geopolitical rivalry, but in a longstanding fear of encirclement, loss of influence, and systemic marginalization in the evolving Euro-Atlantic security order.

The findings demonstrate that NATO's post-Cold War expansion — especially in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space — is the main source of Russia's insecurity." Even though NATO has always described its actions as purely defensive and cooperative, Russia sees them as systematic efforts to undermine its independence and reduce its influence over the historical domain. This disjuncture has engendered a profound, structural security dilemma: actions by the one side to safeguard its safety seem aggressive to the other, and this has beget militarization, doctrinal stiffening, and diplomatic impasse.

The research also highlights that the relationship between NATO and Russia is no longer based on a traditional direct military confrontation. Russia apprehends that NATO's ideational expansion, information strategies, and relationships with Ukraine, Georgia and other countries are non-military instruments of control-related leverage that undermine Russia's internal and external sovereignty. In answer, Russia has relied on hybrid conflict, cyber warfare, and strategic modernization as offsetting mechanisms grounded in the neorealist calculus that posits that survival and power retention are the highest imperatives of state behavior in an anarchic interstate system.

Worst of all, the implications down the road are grim. The risks of unintended conflict have grown with the absence of an agreed security framework between NATO and Russia, especially in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea. Without a deliberate action to restore diplomatic channels, manage military standoffs and acknowledge shared red lines, the risk of escalation is far too high. Arabic Words(Dictionary.com) So in short, working to rein in NATO,

and working against its expansion, is not merely central to any sustainable strategy of de-escalation and long-term stability for Europe but also to understand NATO not only as a military institution, but as a threat to Russian sovereignty.

### **Policy Recommendations**

#### **1. Reestablish Structured NATO-Russia Dialogue**

One of the top imperatives is to rebuild and sustain high-level NATO-Russia diplomatic channels, notably the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), which has been dormant since 2014. Although trust is at an all-time low level, frank and organised dialogue is essential for managing misperceptions and avoiding unintentional escalation. A revived NRC structure — even an adversarial one — might center of attention around areas of common interest like military transparency, arms control renewal and crisis deconfliction mechanisms.

#### **2. Implement Military Transparency and Risk Reduction Measures**

The buildup of forward-deployed forces on both sides has taken place in an atmosphere of ratcheted-up tensions, and so NATO and Russia have to engage in confidence-building measures (CBMs). These could range from formal mutual notification of large scale military exercises to constraints on troop deployments along sensitive borders (the Suwalki Gap and Kaliningrad in particular) to an update of arms control talks since the INF Treaty has lapsed. Reintroduction of the CFE regime or a successor regime would help bring down the Russian threat perception as well.

#### **3. Redefine NATO's Strategic Communications**

NATO also needs to do a better job of explaining the difference between defensive deterrence and a containment strategy in its public messaging, in order to minimize strategic ambiguity. The current noises we hear — often framed as “projecting stability” in Russia's near abroad — will only reinforce Russian fears of encirclement. NATO should be more transparent about its limits, red lines, and the limits of its enlargement. Non-provocative rhetoric regarding prospective membership of ambiguous states like Ukraine and Georgia is critical—unless all 28 members of NATO can speak with one voice about it in the future.

#### **4. Develop a European Security Framework Inclusive of Russia**

And there can be no lasting stability in Europe without incorporation of some kind of Russia into a more general European security system. A second Helsinki-style process, which brings together not just NATO and non-NATO countries, neutral nations as well, can serve to generate common understandings about the definition of territorial integrity, the contours of stability or the rules of nonintervention in the cyber world. Politically difficult as it may be, such a framework would also serve as the basis for the control of competitive coexistence and for breaking down the binary divide between NATO and Russia.

## 5. Focus on Strategic Stability and Nuclear Risk Reduction

As the strategic competition heats up, the danger of nuclear miscalculation increases.” NATO and Russia need to restart bilateral and multilateral talks on strategic stability, concentrating on nuclear doctrines, missile deployments and command and control systems. That would mean reopening talks about both operational intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe and the fate of the New START treaty. Policies that for early warning systems and “de-alerting” measures to head off the possibility of a nuclear confrontation originating with conventional warfare.

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