Article

The Unsettled Alliance: Risk, Fear and Solidarity in NATO

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Journal of Autonomy and Security Studies,
7(2) 2023, pp. 82 – 99

Abstract

NATO never managed to settle how the Alliance should manage Russia post-Cold War. Consequently, the Alliance is still experiencing an internal dichotomy. This article explores the Alliance dynamics since the end of the Cold War and argues that the North-eastern flank countries' perceptions of Russia and Russian intentionality appear to be based on fear which lead them to pursue an ever-strengthened forward defence. Moreover, this is seen by the flank to be at odds with their Western allies that are willing to pursue a more cooperative approach to Russia. Risk reduction policies therefore become a potential point of contention between the allies, however also a vehicle for the North-eastern flank to boost the forward defence in the region.

Keywords

NATO, NATO-Russia, North-Eastern flank, risk reduction, deterrence, post-cold war

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Acknowledgements

For invaluable feedback the author thanks the anonymous peer reviewers and Marion Messmer for their insightful comments.

1. Introduction

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO appears to be grasping for a joint position on NATO's role during the armed conflict in Ukraine, despite the much celebrated 'European unity' that emerged at the beginning of the Russian invasion. This article seeks to answer why NATO allies find it difficult to arrive at a joint position.

In the article, I explore the alliance dynamics since the end of the Cold War and I argue that NATO has been riddled by an internal dichotomy since the first NATO enlargement in the 1990s, and that this is the starting point of the Alliance's inability to arrive at a joint position towards Russia today. Essentially, NATO never managed to solve the question of the post-Cold War settlement internally. More specifically, I show that NATO's North-eastern flank countries have a different understanding of security than their Western allies and I argue that the North-eastern flank understanding of security is a result of fear manifested in a drive to physical protection. This explains why there is a significant focus on physical security on the North-eastern flank, such as advancing forward deterrence, a drive towards a continued arms build-up on the Eastern flank, and a rejection of pursuing a risk reduction agenda towards Russia.

The article is partly based on the findings from two workshops with national experts from universities or think tanks, and government officials from both ministries of defence and foreign affairs from NATO's North-eastern flank countries, as well as a final conference with Track 1 and 2 participation from Western allies. At each workshop there were approximately 20 participants split evenly between Track 1 and 2. The workshops were held as the armed conflict in Ukraine unfolded.[1] The purpose of the workshops was to identify risk reduction measures, including the potential of de-escalation, and the future relationship between Russia and NATO.

The article falls in three sections: I first introduce the concept of fear. This is followed by an analysis of the evolution of the Alliance dichotomy; I then proceed to an analysis of the findings from the workshops. The article ends with concluding remarks.

2. Fear

What can explain this markedly different perception among the North-eastern flank countries of deterrence, risk reduction, and how to manage the relationship with Russia? Clearly the historic experience the flank has had with the Soviet Union or even Imperial

1 The project "Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction" was undertaken in the period September 2021 to October 2022. There was a total of six workshops, of which participants from the North-eastern flank took part in three. For all publications from the project see https://basicint.org/portfolio/risk-reduction .

Russia is one reason that may explain their understanding of Russian intentionality, however, geopolitics and analogical reasoning influence most states' perceptions and policies. Instead, I argue that on the North-eastern flank fear is part of the equation. But what is fear?

Fear is usually in realist thought defined as a defensive reaction that creates an urgent desire to physically protect the state from the perceived threat and danger. States' self-protection can be pursued through aggression or restraint, but when fear is the starting point urging states to self-protect, states usually turn to restraint rather than aggression. Yet, at times when circumstances are not allowing states to act in restraint, fear can result in an aggressive reaction towards the perceived danger in order to self-protect. The end goal of self-protection sets defensive aggression apart from offensive aggression; mostly states turn to fear-based offensive aggression to reach specific political goals, such as territorial expansion. Fear can have many root causes, such as being on the brink of nuclear war.[2]

Two premises have to be met for fear to exist in this school of thought – capabilities and security. This means that for fear to emerge in a state, the opposing state must first be perceived to have the necessary capabilities to attack and the will to use these, and second, states must be concerned about their own security which provides the incentives to defend themselves against the perceived threats.[3] In this conception, fear is understood to be concerned with the physical security of the state – the state's survival.

Fear however can also be seen to be an effect of anxiety, and not necessarily a response to a physical threat or danger. Most notably and inspired by existentialist thought, Rumelili takes the concept of anxiety to international relations (IR) and argues that 'anxiety is constitutive of the pervasive fear of other states in IR because the power competition in the state of nature can be ultimately traced to the human desire to know and shape the – ultimately unknowable – future. Consequently, the effects of anxiety are manifest as the effects of fear.'[4]

As such, fear is an effect of anxiety because fear, unlike anxiety, has an object which can both be managed and countered often through securitisation, and crucially anxiety is a constitutive 'background condition of the egoistic power struggle that makes up the state of nature'.[5] In her reading of Hobbes, Rumelili also establishes that the desire for power

2 Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou, 'Realism and Fear in International Relations', in Realism and Fear in International Relations: Morgenthau, Waltz and Mearsheimer Reconsidered, ed. Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-41012-8_1.

3 Ibid.

4 Bahar Rumelili, '[Our] Age of Anxiety: Existentialism and the Current State of International Relations', Journal of International Relations and Development 24, no. 4 (1 December 2021): 1020–36, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-021-00226-y.

5 Bahar Rumelili, 'Integrating Anxiety into International Relations Theory: Hobbes, Existentialism, and Ontological Security', International Theory 12, no. 2 (July 2020): 257–72, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971920000093

emanates from anxiety about the future 'because the future can only be known to those that have the power to shape the future'. This means in turn that there will be a never-ending race for more power, because there will never be certainty around how much power is necessary to uphold existence, and crucially, this leads to fear of others that are engaged in same pursuit of power.

Uncertainty is therefore an important denominator for anxiety, and uncertainty about the future or in the state of nature is amplified, according to Rumelili, by the lack of a shared understanding and moral standards.[6]

The tendency of states to contain anxiety through fears (by adding an object) shows how ontological security produces concerns about physical security through the 'attribution of threat and danger'. Rumelili argues further that ontological security concerns can override physical concerns, indeed in this sense, 'it also becomes possible to conceive the relentless pursuit of absolute physical security in the face of ever-present threats as a response to anxiety, rather than the independent primal motive. This is how ontological security concerns override physical ones in contexts such as protracted conflicts.'[7]

However, since fear is but one outlet for anxiety, anxiety can also manifest itself in the pursuit of, for instance, cooperation, status, and peace building.

3. The evolution of alliance dichotomy

When applying Rumelili's premise that anxiety is a constitutive element of IR to the history of the North-eastern flank countries and NATO, anxiety is arguably manifested periodically as a fear-based quest for securitisation on the Eastern flank. At the same time, this is not necessarily shared by their Western allies, suggesting that these allies after the end of the Cold War were ontological secure actors that unlike the former Warsaw Pact members chose a different approach to the new Russian Federation. This internal dichotomy in the approach to Russia highlights a lack of shared understanding of the international in the Alliance. Crucially this, according to Rumelili, amplifies the uncertainty amongst the North-eastern flank.

3.1 The 1990s and 2000s

When looking closer at the developments in the 1990s and 2000s when Poland and the Baltic countries became members of NATO (and the EU), the dichotomy between an Eastern and Western approach to security and Russia is clear and reflects how one actor (the West[8])

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 The West is understood to be the founding members of NATO, led by the United States.

displays signs of an ontological secure actor, in contrast to the North-eastern flank. Thus, while the Western members of the Alliance attempted to establish a closer NATO-Russian relationship whilst moving the Alliance 'out of treaty area', Eastern Europe attempted to escape the new Russian Federation by improving their territorial defences and embedding their political future and security in the West.[9]

Notwithstanding the entrepreneurship of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in enabling the West to embark upon the enlargement process in the early 1990s, a decision to enlarge the Alliance took place in Washington as early as the Bush administration (1989-1993) in connection with German reunification. Although President Bush lost the elections to Bill Clinton in 1993, the political calculation to enlarge had developed in Washington as the Soviet Union formally broke down.[10] Already as the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union began crumbling, Washington was fearful that their European allies in NATO would take matters into their own hands and carve out a distinctive European security organisation in the European Community (EC) or revive the Western Union (WEU) as the primary organisation handling security on the continent. In this scheme it was evident that the US would play a limited and insignificant role in the long term. The problem with that was that the US would not be able to hedge against a possible resurgent Russia, because a European security structure would undermine NATO as well as the US position in Europe. The WEU's decision to invite CEE to its ministerial meeting in Bonn in 1992 probably caused a certain unease in Washington.[11] Consequently, or so the argument went in Washington, NATO had to expand eastwards to secure the US position in Europe.[12]

9 There is limited commonality of the Polish accession and the three Baltic states accession.

10 Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, 'Eastbound and down: The United States, NATO Enlargement, and Suppressing the Soviet and Western European Alternatives, 1990–1992', Journal of Strategic Studies 43, no. 6–7 (9 November 2020): 816–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1737931; M. E. Sarotte, 'How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95', International Security 44, no. 1 (2019): 7–41, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00353.

11 It is not a new phenomenon in transatlantic relations that the US reacts out of fear of losing its position as a European power. See Gry Thomasen, 'Lyndon B. Johnson and the Building of East-West Bridges', in The Long Détente, Changing Concepts of Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1950s–1980s (Central European University Press, 2017), 255–80; Gry Thomasen, Between Involvement and Detachment: The Johnson Administration's Perception of France, West Germany, and NATO, 1963-1969., Unpublished PhD dissertation (Copenhagen: Copenhagen University, 2013); Vojtech Mastny, 'Eastern Europe and the Early Prospects for EC/EU and NATO Membership: Ending the Cold War in Europe', Cold War History 9, no. 2 (May 2009): 203–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740802170834.

12 In addition, the administration was driven by an imperative of expanding the global economy for US prosperity, and in this sense a peaceful and stable Europe was indispensable for further economic globalisation as was the openness of the European economy. In this sense NATO and NATO enlargement became instrumental for the US's economic ambitions as well. Shifrinson, 'Eastbound and Down'; Liviu Horovitz and Elias Götz, 'The Overlooked Importance of Economics: Why the Bush Administration Wanted NATO Enlargement', Journal of Strategic Studies 43, no. 6–7 (9 November 2020): 847–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1819799; Sarotte, 'How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95'; Mastny, 'Eastern Europe and the Early Prospects for EC/EU and NATO Membership'.

This is not to deny that the CEE played an important part in bringing on NATO's enlargement, however recognising that the enlargement was part of a bigger ploy of the United States to maintain and secure its position as a European power as the Cold War ended is important when discussing the enlargement.[13] This means that when the CEE joined NATO it was as much about enrolling these new countries into a US conception of security (and US global economic aims), and crucially into a European order that featured the United States in a prominent position. In fact, the Bush administration mused that the CEE would be useful allies as Western Europe were reluctant to host US forces and bases, and were not feeling the same acute need for security as the CEE allegedly would, which would make CEE fundamentally more supportive of the US in alliance matters and thus reduce the influence of sceptical Western European security partners.[14]

Despite the importance Washington attached to their ability to hedge against a possible resurgence of Russia, the US slowly contemplated how the relationship with the new Russian Federation should be. Arguably, as the Bush administration and later the Clinton administration (1993-2001) witnessed the Soviet Union disintegrating and new states emerging, perceptions of the new Russian Federation were of course not entirely detached from its Soviet legacy – especially not as the Soviet Union cracked down on moves towards independence in Latvia and Lithuania in January 1991. However, early on in the immediate post-Cold War era, the US administration realised that embarking upon a policy that would isolate Russia from European matters was a no go. Rather, creating a shared understanding of security in Europe became the prerogative of especially the Clinton administration, but also the George W Bush administration (2001-2009). This is underscored by their somewhat close relationships with Yeltsin (1991-1999) and later Putin I (2000-2008) that arguably aimed at creating a shared understanding of security in Europe.

Thus, the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991 and the so-called Partnership for Peace programme (PfP) in 1994 although reflecting a cautious approach to Russia, both and especially the PfP offered an opportunity of 'practical bilateral cooperation' for Eurasia, including Russia. [15] As the then US secretary of defence allegedly put it, the main accomplishment of the PfP was to 'put NATO enlargement in the end, rather than the beginning of a process'.[16] The PfP, however, did not rule out eventual

13 On the CEE role in orchestrating the enlargement see Maria Malksöo, The Politics of Becoming European: A Study of Polish and Baltic Post-Cold War Security Imaginaries, The New International Relations (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010); Maria Malksöo, 'Enabling NATO Enlargement: Changing Constructions of the Baltic States', Tames 3, no. 8(58/53) (2004): 284–98.

14 Horovitz and Götz, 'The Overlooked Importance of Economics: Why the Bush Administration Wanted NATO Enlargement'. Indeed, a range of Western European NATO members had set conditions for joining, ultimately restricting US room of manoeuvre on their territories. See Sarotte, 'How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95'.

15 See NATO, The Partnership for Peace Programme.

16 Sarotte, 'How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95'.

Russian membership of NATO. Further, in the 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement, NATO declared that:

> A stronger NATO-Russia relationship should form anther cornerstone of a new, inclusive and comprehensive security structure in Europe. NATO-Russia cooperation can help overcome any lingering distrust from the Cold War period, and help ensure that Europe is never again divided into opposing camps.[17]

This was followed in 1997 with the so-called 'Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security' between NATO and the Russian Federation. With the Founding Act they both declared an end to the adversarial relationship and established the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council to hold regular consultations and develop joint initiatives, essentially opening for future joint operations under the UN Security Council or the OSCE. On top of that, the Act also established a mechanism for closer military-to-military liaison by establishing military missions on both sides.[18] The Founding Act was followed by the 2002 Rome summit that declared a new 'qualitative' relationship and established the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) that 'was established as a mechanism for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision making and joint action'.[19]

These developments can be seen as evidence of an Alliance feeling ontologically safe, in particular after Washington secured its position as a European power when deciding to expand NATO membership to former Warsaw Pact countries. In the first decade of the post-Cold War era, creating a shared understanding of security in Europe with Russia arguably became an outlet for the still present anxieties surrounding the new Russian Federation.

3.2 North-eastern flank accessions

Thus, when Poland joined NATO in 1999, NATO had already moved the Alliance closer into a cooperative relationship with the Russia, and arguably Polish perceptions of Russia and the Russian threat were at odds with NATO.

17 NATO, 'Study on NATO Enlargement' (NATO, 1995) para 26.

18 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris, France, 1997. See sections II Mechanism for Consultation and Cooperation, the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council and IV Political-Military Matters especially, see https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm

19 Statement: Meeting of the NATO-Russia Council at the level of Ministers of Defence NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 1 December 2003. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_20277.htm?selectedLocale=en last accessed 28 October 2021; Chairman's Statement. 2 April 2004 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_21032.htm?selectedLocale=en last accessed 28 October 2021; NATO-Russia Council https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50091.htm

The Polish accession, driven by a strategy to embed Poland and its defence in the collective West through NATO and EU membership, was based on an existential concern with territorial integrity and a sense of geostrategic vulnerability sparked by uncertainty around the new Russian Federation's intentionality. This sense of vulnerability and uncertainty about the future was arguably more acute in Poland than elsewhere within the CEE area, as Poland's unique experience of partition underscored this concern for territorial integrity. The fact that Imperial Russia was part of all three partitions probably exacerbated the Polish sense of vulnerability, and it is hardly surprising that when the attempted 1991 coup against President Mikhail Gorbachev appeared to succeed, Poland prepared to mobilize its army.[20]

The Polish existential concerns were something the US State Department was acutely aware of. Already in 1992 a State Department official assessed that a unified Germany would no longer host '95% of our military presence in Europe' and that the old Soviet facilities in Poland would be a bargain investment, and a US brigade of military personnel would be treated as 'local heroes'.[21]

In addition, the Polish quest to embed itself into the Western architecture was evident immediately after the end of the Cold War. Unlike the rest of the former Warsaw Pact countries, Poles did not favour neutrality, and the Polish president Lech Wałęsa (1990-1995) proposed NATO II (and EU-2) that envisaged CEE's quick admission into NATO in 1992.[22] Likely, the sense of territorial vulnerability and uncertainty around Russian intentionality and the future led Poland to undertake heavy investments in its national defence capabilities (also to court NATO), which after NATO membership resulted in Poland reaching NATO's 2% target early.[23] Today Poland is well beyond the 2% target. That capabilities and improved territorial defences are crucial to Poland is highlighted by that since entering NATO in 1999 Poland have worked to move NATO towards territorial defence and promoting the principle of indivisibly of security. Arguably this continued focus on capabilities reflects a fear-based urge to self-protect via a continued bolstering of the forward defences on the Eastern flank.

And the State Department official was right, Poland considers the US the most important ally for a credible deterrence and defence posture. As such, Warsaw developed its foreign and defence policies around the US in a near unconditional support for Washington's

20 Mastny, 'Eastern Europe and the Early Prospects for EC/EU and NATO Membership, p 213'; see also Andrew A. Michta, Poland, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198790501.003.0007; Gry Thomasen, Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Perspectives from the North East Flank (London, United Kingdom: BASIC, 2022).

21 Quote from Sarotte, 'How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95'.

22 Mastny, 'Eastern Europe and the Early Prospects for EC/EU and NATO Membership'.

23 Mathilde Stronell, 'Poland Unveils Record 2023 Defence Budget', Janes, 1 September 2022, https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/poland-unveils-record-2023-defence-budget.

policies and did indeed invite stronger US presence into the region, including invitations to place launchers for NATO's missile shield in Poland. The importance of the US and US presence cannot be underestimated. As one Polish government official recalled at one of our workshops:

> In 2012 when the first US soldiers were arriving in Poland for their rotational … attachment, and that was less than 30 US soldiers arriving in Poland, we greeted them with a ceremony that lasted three hours, and with I believe over 300 of our soldiers, four generals and a few ministers being there.[24]

A similar sense of territorial vulnerability and uncertainty of the new Russian Federation's intentionality immersed the three Baltic countries following the breakdown of the Soviet Union. The Baltic countries are of course three different countries, but they share some similarities in foreign and defence policy. Their newly reclaimed statehood, near vicinity to the Russian Federation, and a complete lack of domestic defence capabilities led to a magnified preoccupation with territorial defence, for instance the so-called 'indefensibility' of the region became an important part of the negotiations for NATO accession in the early 2000s. It is therefore not surprising that all three Baltic countries embarked upon a process of modernising and rebuilding domestic defence and that territorial defence was prominently featured in the subsequent defence policies and doctrines.[25]

However, the defensibility of the region coupled with their status as former Soviet republics was as much as problem for the Baltic states as it was for NATO. This reflects how NATO's mission to create a shared understanding with Russia collided with the Baltic states' drive to improve their defences in the wake of uncertainty around Russia.

According to Malksöo, the Baltic countries were creating rather than solving the geopolitical problems NATO was facing after the Cold War. Having a 'constructive' relationship and creating a shared understanding of security in Europe with Russia was as mentioned above of prime importance to NATO, and admitting the Baltic countries into the Alliance was seen as alienating Russia and jeopardizing the relationship that the Alliance wanted to build with Russia as outlined in the 1995 Study. Allowing Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia into the Alliance would confirm Russian suspicions that NATO was in fact an aggressive body, and by admitting that NATO would not allow the Baltic countries into the Alliance out of fear of Russia would 'have ultimately amounted to admitting that Russia's

24 Polish government official 1, September 2021.

25 Masha Hedberg and Andres Kasekamp, Baltic States, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198790501.003.0012; Thomasen, Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Perspectives from the North East Flank; Andres Kasekamp and Viljar Veebel, 'The Baltic States and ESDP', in The North and ESDP: The Baltic States, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, European Foreign and Security Policy 7 (Gütersloh, 2007).

fear of NATO's expanding to the region were justified – that NATO really harboured aggressive imperialist anti-Russian intentions.'[26] The solution to the puzzle was to reinforce the cooperative sentiments towards Russia by formulating the CEE enlargement less in terms of defence against Russia than as an anchor of stability in Europe, and crucially to build a new Europe with Russia and not against or without it.[27]

Like Poland, the Baltic countries attach significant importance to the US and US presence in the region. As one Estonian expert explained Estonia's relationship with the US at one of our workshops:

> Estonian foreign policy [is] built around defence policy which is built around full support from the United States. So, whatever happens, Estonia is always happy to choose the position of the US, and especially when it's different from the Russian position. And it does not matter if we go to conflict with you about new security initiatives, or if it has some concerns about international law.[28]

3.3 The North-Eastern flank's NATO policies

Seen in this light, it is hardly surprising that Poland and the Baltic states since their entry into NATO have worked at moving NATO towards territorial defence and significant presence of NATO, in particular a stronger US presence along the North-eastern flank. However, it was not until the 2016 Warsaw summit that they managed to significantly move the Alliance towards a greater presence along the flank, which in turn reveals how fundamental the post-Cold War cooperative approach, that is, creating a shared understanding with Russia, was in the Alliance.

Indeed, while NATO and Russia did not manage to institutionally bind together following the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002 or the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 amongst other things, NATO continued to pledge a cooperative approach towards Russia in its 2010 NATO Strategic Concept.[29] This continued to leave the North-eastern flank without, in their perception, sufficient territorial defence. Only at the 2014 Wales Summit did the North-eastern flank succeed when NATO committed to territorial defence with the establishment of amongst others, The Very High Readiness Joint Task Force.[30] The Russian invasion and illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014, however, strongly

26 Malksöo, 'Enabling NATO Enlargement: Changing Constructions of the Baltic States'.
27 Ibid.
28 Estonian expert 2 September 2021. Similar statements were made by Lithuanian government official 2 September 2021; Lithuanian expert 2 September 2021; Latvian government official 2 September 2021.
29 NATO: Active Engagement, Modern Defence, 2010, November 2010; Andrej Krickovic, 'When Ties Do Not Bind: The Failure of Institutional Binding in NATO Russia Relations', Contemporary Security Policy 37, no. 2 (3 May 2016): 175–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1198077.
30 Wales Summit Declaration 5 September 2014; Wales Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond, 5 September 2014; NATO: NATO's Readiness Action Plan, October 2015.

condemned by NATO, also terminated cooperation with Russia and introduced a range of sanctions. NATO remained in theory in support of a cooperative approach to Russia.[31]

The lack of adequate attention to the Eastern flank's defence needs following the Russian annexation of Crimea, led to the establishment of the so-called Bucharest 9 (B9) in November 2015 as a platform for dialogue and consultation between the members on NATO matters. Unsurprisingly, the group has continuously called for a greater military presence along the flank.[32]

Only at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, when NATO adopted the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) to strengthen NATO's presence on the Eastern flank and simultaneously declared that this was to 'unambiguously demonstrate… Allies' solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate allied response to any aggression', did the North-eastern flank to a large extent succeed in moving NATO towards a territorial defence and bolstered deterrence posture.[33]

The sense of being vulnerable frontline states remained in place past the 2016 Warsaw Summit and was reinforced following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In fact, the invasion has to a large extent reinforced old perceptions and is seen as proof that the North-eastern flank's immediate post-Cold War assessment of both Russian intentionality and NATO's need of a bolstered forward defence and deterrence posture is indeed correct.[34]

At the same time, the North-eastern flank countries continue to believe that within NATO there is still a cooperative sentiment in place, meaning that the flank experience a lack of shared understanding of the international between the Allies – which in turn increases uncertainty about the future and thus paves the way for fear-based polices. When consulting NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept there is indeed a co-existence of the immediate post-Cold War strategy to create a shared understanding with Russia and simultaneously a recognition of the Russian threat:

> The Russian Federation has violated the norms and principles that contributed to a stable and predictable European security order. We cannot discount the possibility of an attack against Allies' sovereignty and territorial integrity.

31 Wales Summit Declaration 5 September 2014.

32 As the Russian invasion has unfolded the group has become more prominent, hosting among others NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg and President Zelenskiy in their meetings.

33 Para 40, Warsaw Summit Communique.

34 Robyn Dixon, 'Baltic Nations Long Warned about Russia. Now, Maybe the West Is Listening.', The Washington Post, 12 October 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/12/baltics-poland-russia-warnings-nato/; Stuart Lau, '"We Told You so!" How the West Didn't Listen to the Countries That Know Russia Best', Politico, 9 March 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/western-europe-listen-to-the-baltic-countries-that-know-russia-best-ukraine-poland/.

Followed by:

> However, we remain willing to keep open channels of communication with Moscow to manage and mitigate risks, prevent escalation and increase transparency. We seek stability and predictability in the Euro-Atlantic area and between NATO and the Russian Federation.[35]

4. Conceptions of security

Although the Russian war against Ukraine to some extent has brought NATO members closer together, the findings from our workshops reveal that the dichotomy continues to exist in the Alliance – at least in the perception of the North-eastern flank countries.[36] It underscores that despite the alleged unity there is no shared understanding of Russia's intentionality (or Russian threat) and how the Alliance should manage the relationship with Russia between the allies. This is particularly evident when looking at how the North-eastern flank asses risk reduction, deterrence and alliance cohesion in the context of NATO-Russia relations.

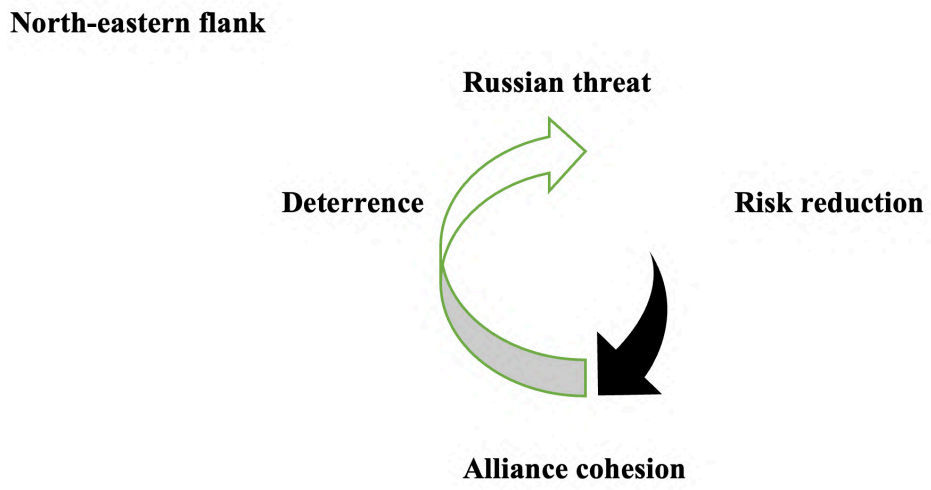


Figure 1. North-eastern flank security concept

4.1 Deterrence

The North-eastern flank countries believe that the main purpose of NATO's deterrence is to stabilise NATO's relationship with Russia, and that the risk of conflict between Russia and NATO depends on NATO's ability to strengthen and adjust its deterrence posture and

35 NATO, 'NATO 2022 Strategic Concept' (Brussels: NATO, 29 June 2022), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_210907.htm

36 Chatham House, 'Seven Ways Russia's War on Ukraine Has Changed the World', 20 February 2023, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/02/seven-ways-russias-war-ukraine-has-changed-world.

forward defence. The North-eastern flank believes that the only way to manage Russia is from a position of strength, and they make no bones about the Russian threat.[37] For example, Russia was described as a 'challenger to the system, which has the political will and intent to use force', and participants spoke about the Baltic countries being next on Russia's list.[38]

In this light, it is hardly surprising that workshop participants underscored continuously both prior to and after the invasion that there is no room for a cooperative approach to Russia. Rather, there are risks associated with 'overdoing stability with Russia', as some of their Western allies were seen to be doing when they attempted to discuss the European security architecture 'directly' with Russia. The North-eastern flank fears that the CEE's assessment of Russian intentionality is overlooked by their allies and that the risk reduction the Western allies were attempting 'may mean that we are weakening our deterrence at the same time where the Russians are doing nothing or doing kind of token or symbolic measures'.[39] After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this assessment was dramatically reinforced. A Polish government official commented in their personal capacity that:

> … deterrence must be credible, and NATO posture in that regard must be … coherent. NATO is not a place for diplomatic compromises [between West and East NATO members], like the OSCE is. NATO is not a place for constructive ambiguities.[40]

But also, and reflecting on the acute sense that their Western allies are not in agreement with the North-eastern flank's assessment of the necessity of a position of strength and ultimately, the Russian threat, a Polish expert explained:

> we [NATO] need to have a strategy on how we want to deal with Russia from the position of strength. … we need to have a really strong and credible defence and deterrence. We need to think about defence and deterrence not only about limiting the risk of conflict, being able to defend ourselves, and to respond to different scenarios, but our territory is sacrosanct.[41]

Thus, a position of strength is primarily – if not exclusively –from their perspective reached by reinforcing NATO's forward defence and deterrence posture along the Eastern

37 Lithuanian government expert 2, September 2021; also Polish government official 1, September 2021.
38 Polish government official 1, September 2021; Estonian expert 2, March 2022; Lithuanian expert 4, March 2022; Latvian expert 1 online 2021.
39 Polish expert 2, September 2021.
40 Polish government official 2, March 2022; Polish expert 1, March 2022.
41 Polish expert 4, March 2022; Lithuanian expert 1, March 2022.

flank. However, the North-eastern flank countries face two issues with this in their understanding. One is to define what a 'position of strength' is, and the other is to actually get the necessary reinforcements from their allies.

In terms of the latter, the North-eastern flank countries see alliance cohesion as the starting point of a sufficient deterrence posture, essentially making alliance cohesion a vehicle for delivering the forward defence capabilities. Alliance cohesion is understood to be a shared understanding of Russian intentionality, i.e., the Russian threat, and how the Alliance should manage this threat. The idea is that if the Western allies can be brought to a greater sense of solidarity with the North-eastern flank by getting closer to a shared understanding of Russian intentionality, the necessary capabilities will arrive. However, there is a clear perception that their current (and past) deterrence needs extend beyond what their Western allies are willing to deliver, and that the war against Ukraine has only opened a small window of opportunity for the flank to capitalise on their allies' so-called 'enthusiasm for beefing up NATO capabilities'.[42] As one Polish expert explained it:

> the support for a bigger allied presence [in the region] will not be there forever. So that's … more the reason that we should try to capitalise on this now as much as we can.[43]

This quote seems to underscore the clear perception that the regional assessment of the North-eastern flank's deterrence needs is far from shared by their Western allies, and that there is no expectation that the Alliance can in fact arrive at a shared understanding, thus increasing uncertainty about the future and the international in the region. In fact, it was questioned if the North-eastern flank's partners can be trusted 'about deterrence', which is a 'very important question' that 'we ask … daily in Brussels'.[44]

So, what is a position of strength in the North-eastern flank perception? There is no clear idea 'of an end state in terms of this posture'. Participants asked 'Do we just increase? Where do we want to get? I'm not sure that I know the answer',[45] reflecting that the North-eastern flank may very well be in a constant pursuit of physical security because, as Rumelili explains, ontological security concerns can override physical concerns, making this constant pursuit 'a response to anxiety, rather than the independent primal motive'.[46] As a Polish expert explained it when asked how NATO's deterrence and defence has to evolve with the situation in Ukraine:

42 Polish government official 2, March 2022.
43 Polish expert 1, March 2022.
44 Lithuanian government official 1, March 2022; Lithuanian expert 4, March 2022.
45 E.g. Polish expert 4, March 2022; Lithuanian expert 1, March 2022
46 Rumelili, 'Integrating Anxiety into International Relations Theory'.

> it is fine to have these channels of communication so that if there is some kind of accident, again intentional escalation, not accidental one is the main worry for me, so deterrence comes first … So forward defence is one. The other one in the nuclear domain, it might be very well that the modernisation programme NATO countries have right now will be completely sufficient for deterrence, but for somebody [that] comes from a frontline state I'd just say that I'd always feel better with more deterrence and more capabilities, not less.[47]

4.2 Risk reduction

Thus, the best risk reduction measure is widely believed among the participants to be a stronger deterrence posture, simply because it will stabilise the deterrence relationship between NATO and Russia.[48] This also means that NATO's engagement in different risk reduction measures towards Russia in general terms is seen as misplaced (as it reflects the cooperative approach towards Russia), or it is indeed silly to think 'risk reduction measures can be designed and can even be introduced between the nuclear weapons states at the P5 framework, also in the bilateral relations between the United States and Russia'.[49] After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the 1997 Founding Act and its principles of cooperation is seen as long gone, having no relevance 'whatsoever' on the current situation. Keeping the diplomatic channels open is more a formality 'just in case'.[50] However, risk reduction measures such as transparency, arms control and hotlines serve different purposes than actually reducing risks.

Transparency around exercises and deployments for instance is not intended to reduce any risks, mostly because it is strongly believed that Russia is not inclined to reciprocate. Instead, transparency is a means to gain the moral high ground, i.e., almost the opposite to a cooperative approach. Indeed, transparency is:

> our big asset, because that's one area where we can say that our record is consistently better than the Russian one. Of course, we won't be transparent in everything … I'm happy to have transparency about the Cold Response exercises, because that is clearly our way to say that we are different and we are better than the Russians.[51]

47 Polish expert 1, October 2022.
48 Polish expert 2, September 2021; Estonian expert 1, September 2021; Polish government official 1, September 2021; Polish expert 1, October 2022.
49 Polish expert 2, September 2021.
50 Polish government official 2, March 2022; Estonian expert 2, March 2022.
51 Polish expert 2, March 2022; Polish expert 1, October 2022.

Arms control is similarly not about reducing risks and enhancing cooperation, rather it is about enhancing the deterrence posture. As one Polish government official outlined it, the divergent views within the Alliance on arms control and 'how to use arms control in our general approach towards Russia' were causing problems internally, because the Western allies failed to see that arms control is solely a tool to enhance the deterrence and defence posture, and failed to see that there is a risk that arms control will limit NATO's posture, thus reflecting how the flank is constantly chasing an ever-stronger posture of more physical security.[52]

However, at the same time, arms control is about accommodating the Western allies to enhance alliance cohesion and thus increase the probability of their willingness to deliver the necessary reinforcements.[53] A Polish expert explained this instrumentality of arms control:

> it is very often not well understood how important it [arms control] is for keeping the NATO cohesion, that you really need to have the second track and you need to demonstrate that not only you strengthen your defence and deterrence, but you also try to de-escalate tensions and … this is our homework that we should do in our region.[54]

Much along the same lines, having some sort of communication with Russia is not about Russia-NATO relations because Russia will 'not respond', rather it is because 'some of our [Western] allies would insist'.[55] Risk reduction is thus more – if not exclusively – about accommodating the Western allies to facilitate an open-ended delivery of reinforcements.

52 Polish government official 3, March 2022; Polish government official 1, September 2021.

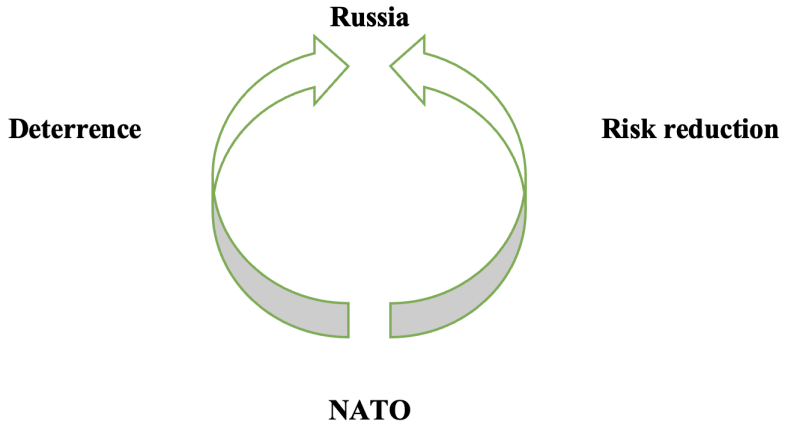
53 Lithuanian government official 1, March 2022; Polish expert 2, March 2022; Polish government official 1, March 2022; Polish government official 1, September 2021; Polish government official 2, March 2022; Lithuanian government official 1, September 2021; Lithuanian expert 2, March 2022; Polish government official 3, March 2022; Polish expert 1, September 2021; Polish government official 3, March 2022; Polish government official 1, September 2021.

54 Polish expert 2, September 2021.

55 Polish expert 2, March 2022; Polish government official 1, March 2022; Polish expert 2 September 2021; Estonian expert 1 September 2021; Polish government official 1 September 2021; Polish expert 1 at Helsinki 2022.

Figure 2

Western flank conception of security



The concerns of the North-eastern flank countries around their allies' solidarity with the region is increasing the uncertainty about the future and the international – that is, a shared understanding of the extent or nature of the threat from Russia, and therefore how the Alliance must manage Russia. For instance, there are concerns that the principle of indivisibility of security is not understood by their Western allies, and crucially a sense that the allies are not aware or willing to acquire the political understanding of the sensitivity of the North-eastern flank countries.[56] Instead, there appears to be an understanding among the North-eastern flank countries that their Western allies remain inclined to a more cooperative approach to Russia and display a willingness to employ various risk reduction measures as well as a concern that their allies may return to a more cooperative approach once the armed conflict in Ukraine is over.[57]

5. Conclusions

I have shown in this article that NATO never managed to settle how the Alliance should manage Russia in the post-Cold War era. I have also shown how an internal dichotomy that evolved from the very beginning of the era still exists in the Alliance today. The Western allies appear to behave like ontologically secure actors that embarked upon

56 Polish government official 1, September 2021; Latvian expert 1, September 2021; Estonian expert 2, March 2022, Polish expert 1, September 2021.

57 Polish government official 1, September 2021; Polish expert 1, September 2021; French expert 1, October 2022; Polish expert 1, October 2022; Latvian expert 1, October 2022.

a strategy to create a shared understanding of security in Europe with Russia through various cooperative mechanisms, such as the NRC and the Founding Act. I have shown how NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept still entailed this cooperative approach, despite the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, alongside a recognition that Russia is a threat to NATO.

In contrast, the North-eastern flank countries were and remain primarily concerned about physical security and identify Russia as a threat both prior to entering the Alliance and after. The uncertainty surrounding Russia's intentionality has resulted in a quest to secure absolute physical security both prior to alliance membership and after, and I show how their quest to secure reinforcement of the Eastern flank has been ongoing especially after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and perhaps more importantly their inability to define when enough is enough reflects how they are caught in a pursuit of absolute physical security that appears to be response to anxiety.