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MILITARY COMMITTEE
BACKGROUND GUIDE

- Protecting the Sea: Safeguarding NATO's Maritime and Subsea Infrastructure
- Securing the East: NATO Weaponry and Securitization along the Eastern Front
- Defending the Skies: NATO responses to Russian Airspace Violations

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Introduction to the Military Committee

The Military Committee (MC) is the senior military authority in NATO and the oldest permanent body in NATO after the North Atlantic Council, both having been formed months after the Alliance. It is the primary source of military advice to NATO's civilian decision-making bodies: the North Atlantic Council and the Nuclear Planning Group. Its advice is sought prior to any authorization for military action and, consequently, is an essential link between the political decision-making process and the military structure of NATO.

The Military Committee is charged with translating political decisions into military action, taking the direction of the political element and finding practical ways to bring about action. Delegates will be addressing some of the pressing nuts-and-bolts questions facing NATO at this time, and will be expected to provide both appropriate, reality-based recommendations, as well as practical solutions to decisions made at the political level.

Topic A: Protecting the Sea: Safeguarding NATO's Maritime and Subsea Infrastructure

Introduction

The Atlantic Ocean and its marginal seas form a critical artery of global trade, connecting continents, markets, and commercial networks. The vast majority of global trade, approximately 90%, moves by sea, with critical routes and ports of NATO states concentrated in the Atlantic Ocean. (Shipping Data, 2025). Furthermore, the Atlantic Ocean is vast, connected to vital seas such as the Baltic and strategic waterways like the English Channel, which serve as key arteries for global trade. In recent years, these critical shipping lanes have come under serious threat as maritime crises and incidents have become more frequent. In 2024, suspected Russian shadow fleet vessels were accused of damaging several undersea cables in the Baltic Sea, marking an unprecedented escalation in NATO waters that are vital to global shipping routes (Finland Charges Captain of Russian "shadow Fleet" Tanker over Baltic Sea Cable Sabotage, 2025)

An increased adversarial presence and the risk of sabotage have placed NATO and its member states on heightened alert across the maritime domain, from surface waters to the seabed. In an effort to deter and defend against threats in the maritime domain, including to subsea infrastructure, NATO has intensified its efforts to uphold freedom of navigation, protect maritime trade routes, and safeguard the Alliance's critical lines of communication. As members of the Military Committee, protecting the sea by safeguarding NATO's maritime and subsea infrastructure is integral to ensuring that the Alliance can effectively address maritime threats and challenges and collectively defend its members.

NATO's Role

Maritime security, specifically the safeguarding of maritime and subsea infrastructure, is integral to the Alliance's broader commitment to ensuring collective defence against all threats, from all directions, across all domains. Today, one of NATO's primary threats is Russia, an enduring threat to the Alliance's security. Across the surface, subsurface, and within the maritime domain, Russia has significantly strengthened its naval forces by introducing advanced technologies, such as enhanced underwater reconnaissance and sophisticated underwater warfare capabilities. (Alliance Maritime Strategy, n.d.) Coupled with growing cooperation with the People's Republic of China, Euro-Atlantic maritime security is increasingly challenged, placing the safety and stability of Allied populations, forces, and territories at risk.

In response to increased threats to NATO's maritime and subsea infrastructure, the Alliance has undertaken significant measures to adapt to the changing maritime security landscape to defend NATO populations. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO has strengthened its presence in the Atlantic and surrounding waters, guided by key strategies and operations. Regarding subsea infrastructure, in the wake of the Nord Stream pipeline sabotage in September 2022, NATO established the Critical Undersea Infrastructure

Coordination Cell to facilitate engagement among NATO Allies, partners, and the private sector. In an effort to collectively bolster the security of critical infrastructure, the Alliance established the NATO-EU Task Force (NATO's Maritime Activities, n.d.). This culminated in the launch of Operation Baltic Sentry in January 2025, aimed at protecting critical undersea infrastructure through the deployment of the likes of frigates, maritime patrol aircraft, and naval drones (NATO's Maritime Activities, n.d.). This operation has been integral to detecting and deterring undersea threats facing the Alliance. Together, NATO's overarching strategy and coordinated multinational operations in the Baltic Sea are essential for safeguarding the Alliance's broader security and maintaining the free flow of trade to the Atlantic Ocean. Alliance security efforts in and around the Baltic Sea will remain critical, as the region is most affected by Russian shadow vessels and suspicious incidents involving undersea infrastructure (Rarick, 2025).

Under the direction of the NATO Military Committee, the Alliance recently refreshed its overarching maritime framework with the introduction of the Alliance Maritime Strategy in October 2025. The updated strategy provides a comprehensive framework for maritime security across the Alliance, particularly in the Euro-Atlantic region, aiming to strengthen capabilities, leverage emerging technologies, enhance lethality, and ensure readiness to prevail in conflict (Securing the Seas, n.d.). To counter the growing maritime threats, the Alliance is prioritizing enhanced readiness, improved situational awareness, and a strengthened maritime posture to confront naval adversaries along its coasts. The core aims of the strategy include, but are not limited to, strengthening credible nuclear deterrence, scaling a responsive maritime force across the Atlantic, exercising high-end warfare capabilities to control sea lines and project power, and enhancing persistent situational awareness across the maritime, space, and cyber domains (Alliance Maritime Strategy, n.d.). This maritime strategy aims to effectively support NATO's overarching objectives both now and in the coming decades, as allied coastal waters face increasingly serious threats.

Conclusion and Further Research

Given the continuously evolving, increasingly complex nature of maritime threats, it is imperative that NATO continually adapts and strengthens its maritime security posture. This includes safeguarding critical subsea infrastructure, maintaining the integrity of vital shipping lanes, and ensuring the safe, uninterrupted passage of vessels throughout the Euro-Atlantic region. While early efforts are underway, the alliance should prioritize deeper integration of relevant emerging technologies, such as autonomous underwater vehicles and advanced sensor networks, to fulfill its duty to detect and deter alliance threats. Multinational exercises emphasizing undersea protection, maritime shipping security, and cyber resilience will remain key areas of focus for NATO moving forward. With maritime threats and sabotage efforts ever increasing, protecting the Atlantic Ocean and surrounding seas will be a focal point for the Military Committee and NATO as a whole.

However, NATO faces a range of challenges in safeguarding its maritime and subsea

infrastructure. Currently, the alliance is contending with adversaries who are developing and deploying increasingly sophisticated warfare systems both above and below the sea. Furthermore, the alliance continues to endure resource constraints and competing priorities amongst member states, which could hinder the development of high-end maritime capabilities. Political fragmentation continues to pose a significant challenge, testing the key pillars of consensus and collective responses. Climate change and the changing Arctic landscape add further stress to NATO's maritime responsibilities, placing further pressure on the alliance and its capabilities. To meet these challenges, NATO must take a proactive, flexible approach, combining strong deterrence with resilient capabilities while maintaining unity among Allies to safeguard the maritime domain as a key pillar of the NATO alliance.

Guiding Questions:

- How effective are NATO's current strategies and operations in mitigating threats to maritime and subsea infrastructure in the Euro-Atlantic region?

- Should NATO develop a dedicated subsea or seabed warfare doctrine, or integrate these concerns into existing maritime and hybrid warfare frameworks?

- What role can emerging technologies play in enhancing NATO's ability to detect, deter, and respond to hybrid threats targeting undersea infrastructure?

- What political, operational, and resource-related challenges could NATO face in sustaining and scaling its maritime security posture amid evolving threats from great power adversaries?

- Should NATO define attacks or interference with subsea infrastructure (e.g., cables, pipelines) within its deterrence and defence framework? If so, what would this definition include?

- How can intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities—including seabed sensors and maritime domain awareness tools—be better coordinated among allies?

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Topic B: Securing the East: NATO Weaponry and Securitization along the Eastern Front

Introduction

Following the devastation throughout Europe as a result of the Second World War, the Marshall Plan was instituted by President Truman's administration as a means of providing aid to a war-torn Europe. The Marshall plan extended to Eastern Europe, who was in desperate need of economic rehabilitation, but the USSR blocked their participation and formed a consolidated Eastern Bloc to preserve its regional hegemony. NATO was founded in 1949 as a means of counteracting this imperialism, and to limit any further Soviet expansion in Europe. 76 years later this reason still holds true, and while many things have changed in the geopolitical space, blocking Russian influence in Eastern Europe still remains as a leading mandate for all members of NATO.

The "Eastern Front" that NATO aims to protect generally includes:

- Poland
- The Baltic States
- Romania
- Ukraine
- The Scandinavian Countries
- Bulgaria
- Moldova
- The South Caucuses

NATO's original goal of preventing Soviet expansion has now shifted towards protecting these states at risk of Russian influence and interference. Since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Russia has acted in an increasingly aggressive and imperialistic manner. From the 2008 invasion of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and especially the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has repeatedly defied international law in order to forcefully project influence across the region. These actions highlight the need for deterrence, deployment of military forces across the Eastern Front, and implemented defence measures to prevent aggression and ensure territorial integrity for these at-risk states.

NATO must not only be able to respond to conventional military threats, but also to hybrid warfare involving cyber operations, drones, and disinformation campaigns that target political stability and public perceptions. Russia's repeated foreign interventions, military exercises near NATO borders, and coercive actions in neighboring states demonstrate the

need for a strong and united military alliance. This is the role of the military committee: to recommend measures considered necessary for the defence of the NATO area and the implementation of decisions regarding military operations (military committee, 2025).

NATO's Role

NATO's role in securing the Eastern Front has evolved significantly since 1949. The alliance has taken several measures to improve its deterrence and defence along the Eastern Front, reflecting a multifaceted approach that combines military, technological, and political dimensions.

One of NATO's most prominent initiatives is the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP). Launched in 2016, the eFP involves the deployment of 8 separate multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia. Each battlegroup varies in size, and is tailored specifically to the threats facing the region they serve in. The four north-eastern battlegroups (in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) are under NATO command through the Multinational Corps Northeast Headquarters in Szczecin, Poland. These battlegroups are equipped with modern weaponry, including tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and air defence systems in order to ensure rapid response and reinforcement in case of any further Russian aggression. These deployments are rotational and regularly updated to make sure that NATO's presence is consistently able to adapt to changing threats.

In addition to ground forces, NATO has implemented air policing missions over many allied states, notably including the Baltic states, which are at a heightened risk of Russian interference due to proximity and shared borders with Russia. These missions involve fighter jets that patrol and can intercept any unauthorized aircraft entering NATO airspace. A recent example of this occurred in September of 2025 when 19 Russian military drones entered Polish airspace illegally, prompting NATO air forces to mobilize and shoot the drones down. To many, this violation of airspace sovereignty appeared as a means of "testing" NATO's capabilities and response time, to which it performed exceptionally well. Air surveillance helps maintain air sovereignty and provides a rapid response against further incursions.

NATO also conducts large-scale military exercises, with the largest one in recent history being Operation Steadfast Defender in 2024, which involved over 90,000 NATO troops, 1,000 of which belonged to the Canadian Armed Forces. Steadfast Defender demonstrated the Alliance's ability to rapidly deploy troops from across North America and Europe to key European countries at risk of threat. The exercise involved land, air, sea, cyber, and space operations, and served the "dual purpose of refining defence plans, as well as acting as a deterrent against potential aggression from near-peer adversaries" (NATO, 2024).

Finally, NATO has increased its cyber defence and hybrid warfare capabilities. Modern warfare has extended beyond traditional military aggression towards the concept of hybrid warfare, which increasingly incorporates the use of cyber attacks, drones, and other non-kinetic means of combat. In light of this, the Alliance has established cyber defence centres and initiatives to protect against cyberattacks, most notably through the establishment of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE, 2025). Russia has increasingly utilized hybrid warfare in its approach towards the Baltic states and the war in Ukraine, emphasizing the need for this response. NATO's evolving multidimensional approach ensures that NATO states remain resilient against a wide range of tactics designed to undermine stability and public confidence.

Conclusion and Further Research

The challenge of securing the Eastern Front remains integral to the Alliance's purpose and mandate. While the world has evolved significantly since 1949, Russia's continued willingness to use military force, coercion, and hybrid warfare to influence nearby states demonstrates the ongoing importance of NATO. The measures NATO has implemented, including battlegroups, air policing missions, large-scale exercises, and improved cyber capabilities demonstrate an increased emphasis on deterrence. Sustaining and adapting this posture will be essential as the nature of threats that NATO states face continue to change.

Looking forward, NATO must address several potential challenges. The Alliance must continue to improve its air and missile defence, particularly against drones and missiles that Russia has deployed in the past. The September 2025 drone incursions into Polish airspace showed how Russian actions may be hard to distinguish between provocation or "testing the waters", and outright attack. NATO will need to further invest into its cyber capabilities, especially to counter future disinformation campaigns in politically sensitive regions.

Another thing to consider as a future challenge for NATO will be the possibility of NATO enlargement. NATO membership for Ukraine has become a growing topic of discussion, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia as potential future candidates. These states are at an increased risk of Russian interference, with Georgia and Ukraine already having endured Russian military invasions, and Bosnia being heavily influenced by Serbia, a close Russian ally. The prospect of Ukraine's accession to NATO was one of the justifications used for invasion by Russia, and a challenge may be Russia's unwillingness to allow these states to join NATO in the future, as Russia perceives it as encroachment within the region.

Guiding Questions:

- How should NATO approach the increased role that hybrid warfare plays along the Eastern front?

- What more can NATO do to provide security for the states at risk of Russian interference along the Eastern front?

- How can NATO approach the possibility of enlargement through the accession of at-

risk states without provoking further Russian engagement?

- Is NATO's current readiness and reinforcement model sufficient to respond rapidly to a high-intensity conflict on the Eastern Flank?

- What lessons from Ukraine and recent NATO exercises should inform future operational planning and training?

- How should NATO's long-term defence planning adapt to the likelihood of sustained confrontation on its Eastern Flank?

- How should responsibilities for Eastern Flank defence be shared among Allies with differing military capabilities and threat perceptions?

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Topic C: Defending the Skies: NATO responses to Russian Airspace Violations

Introduction

In recent years, with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine NATO countries have faced a growing number of airspace violations by Russian military aircraft near Alliance airspace, particularly over the Baltic and Nordic regions. These incursions, which often involve long-range bombers, reconnaissance flights, and fighter jets, represent a direct threat to the sovereignty of members.[i]

In addition to routine violations, NATO has also had to address emergency situations that trigger consultations under Article 4 of the treaty, specifically during September 10th, in which Poland triggered Article 4 in response to Russian drone violating its airspace. Article 4 allows any member state to request consultations when it perceives a threat to its territorial integrity, political independence, or security.[ii] The invocation of Article 4 has become a key tool for Alliance members to coordinate responses to Russian provocations, signaling political solidarity and prompting operational readiness measures. Such consultations provide a political forum to discuss appropriate responses, ranging from increased air patrols and intelligence-sharing to deployment of additional NATO forces in affected regions.[iii] Article 4 has been invoked multiple times since the commencement of open Russian aggression in Europe in 2014, primarily occurring in response to increased Russian activity in the Baltic and Black Sea regions.[iv]

These violations are part of Russia's broader strategy to test NATO's air defence capabilities, assert strategic dominance in contested airspaces, and gather intelligence on Alliance responses.[v] The combination of frequent incursions and geopolitical tensions underscores the need for NATO to maintain robust air defence, intelligence-sharing, and rapid response mechanisms.

NATO's Air Defence and Response Measures

While NATO is current facing threats from Russia, it also has the capacity to combat them. With response measures such as NATO's air policing mission is a cornerstone of its defence against airspace violations. Since the early 2000s, the Alliance has deployed fighter aircraft on a rotational basis to patrol and monitor the skies of member states, particularly the Baltic States and Iceland, which do not maintain full-time air forces capable of independent air defence. Air policing involves the interception of unauthorized aircraft, identification of potential threats, and escorting them out of NATO airspace. These operations are coordinated through NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) system, which fuses radar data from member states and provides real-time situational awareness.[vi]

Another response measure details the NATO's Alliance Ground Surveillance (AGS) program, including the use of AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) aircraft and long-range radar networks, ensures early detection of airspace incursions. Data from these systems are shared across member states to coordinate rapid responses and inform political decisions (NATO 2024a).[vii] Intelligence sharing is critical for tracking flight patterns, identifying aircraft types, and assessing potential threats, including nuclear-capable bomber.[viii]

Finally, NATO regularly conducts multinational air defence exercises to test and enhance readiness. Exercises such as Baltic Air Policing and Ramstein Alloy simulate airspace violations, electronic warfare, and joint responses, allowing member states to coordinate fighter intercepts, ground-based air defences, and command protocols.[ix] These exercises demonstrate NATO's commitment to collective defence and serve as a deterrent to further incursions.

It is important to note that Russian airspace violations serve both military and psychological purposes. With Russia aiming to continue its trajectory of hybrid warfare, to test NATO's willingness and capabilities to deter Russian aggression. NATO's responses, including fighter interceptions, Article 4 consultations, and public diplomatic statements, aim to signal resolve and deter further provocations. Frequent airspace incursions test the political cohesion of NATO. By invoking Article 4, member states reinforce the principle of collective security, ensuring that airspace violations do not become normalized or ignored.[x] Political solidarity is as important as military readiness in maintaining credibility against Russia's actions.

Conclusion

In brief, NATO's responses to Russian airspace violations reflect the Alliance's dual approach of operational readiness and political consultation. Air policing, intelligence sharing, Article 4 consultations, and multinational exercises collectively enhance NATO's ability to defend its skies.

As Russian military activity evolves, NATO must continue to adapt, balancing deterrence with de-escalation and maintaining Alliance cohesion. The effective integration of technology, intelligence, and rapid response protocols ensures that NATO can safeguard member airspace while sending a clear signal of collective defence.

Guiding Questions:

- How can NATO further enhance air policing capabilities to respond to increasingly sophisticated Russian aerial tactics?

- How can NATO leverage technological innovations, such as hypersonic defence systems and advanced radar networks, to improve early warning and interception?

- How can NATO ensure alliance cohesion when individual members face disproportionate exposure to Russian airspace violations?

- What diplomatic measures can complement military responses to reduce the risk of miscalculation or accidental escalation?

- How can NATO more effectively deter Russian violations within Alliance Territory, and where should NATO draw the line for potential retribution?

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