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NORTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL
BACKGROUND GUIDE

- Peace, Strength, and Unity – Reconstructing Nuclear Deterrence Policy
- Reactions and securitization - restructuring NATO's role in the future of the war in Ukraine
- NATO's core purpose in an age of multipolarity: Balancing deterrence and competition



Introduction to the North Atlantic Council

The North Atlantic Council (NAC) is the political decision-making body of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The NAC is comprised of Permanent Representatives from all NATO member states. It was established under Article 9 of the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO's founding document) and it is currently the only NATO committee that explicitly draws its authority from the Treaty. The North Atlantic Treaty gives the NAC the power to set up subsidiary bodies for various policy functions, including the other committees present at this conference. Any policy, decision, or action that NATO undertakes is discussed and approved by the NAC on a unanimous basis. The meetings of the NAC are chaired by the Secretary General of NATO. Each Member State represented at the NAC or on any of its subordinate committees retains complete sovereignty and responsibility for its own decisions.

At Carleton Model NATO, the NAC retains the role as the principal decision-making body of the Alliance. Any communiqües passed by the other committees during the weekend will be reviewed by the NAC during the final plenary session of the conference, and either approved unanimously or rejected. During this session, delegates from other committees will be present at the NAC and will have the opportunity to consult with and advise their NAC delegates. This provides a great deal of emphasis on achieving consensus in the subordinate committees, even though it is not explicitly required, as a delegate who is opposed can simply request that their NAC colleague vote down the communique when it is reviewed in plenary.

Topic A: Peace, Strength, and Unity – Reconstructing Nuclear Deterrence Policy

Introduction

Nuclear deterrence has been central to NATO strategy since its founding, combining U.S. strategic forces with European nuclear-sharing arrangements to prevent aggression and reassure Allies. The credibility of this posture has historically rested on political cohesion, shared risk, and the integration of nuclear and conventional capabilities. Today, this framework faces mounting pressure from a rapidly changing security environment.

Russia's aggressive posture—marked by its invasion of Ukraine, expanded reliance on non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons, deployment of dual-use missile systems, and repeated escalation rhetoric—has reintroduced the risk of nuclear coercion and miscalculation in Europe (NATO, 2025). At the same time, China's accelerated nuclear expansion and movement toward a full nuclear triad suggest the emergence of a more complex, multipolar nuclear order that could create indirect or long-term strategic pressures on NATO from a potential two-front challenge (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022).

These developments are unfolding alongside the erosion of key arms control agreements. The collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and uncertainty surrounding the future of New START have reduced transparency, predictability, and confidence-building mechanisms between nuclear-armed states (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2022). As global nuclear modernization continues among major powers, the risk of renewed arms competition has increased (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2025).

Against this backdrop, NATO must reassess how to modernize its nuclear deterrence doctrine in a way that maintains credibility, avoids escalation, preserves Alliance unity, and remains consistent with its long-standing commitment to arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation.

NATO's Role in Nuclear Deterrence

NATO plays a unique role in nuclear deterrence as a political-military alliance built on collective defence and consensus-based decision-making. NATO's nuclear posture integrates U.S. strategic forces, forward-deployed U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, and the independent nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France. This arrangement is designed not only to deter adversaries but also to bind Allied security together through shared responsibility.

A central element of this posture is NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangement, under which U.S. nuclear weapons are hosted by selected European Allies and delivered by dual-capable aircraft. While militarily limited, this system carries significant political value by reinforcing transatlantic cohesion and ensuring Allied participation in nuclear decision-making through consultation mechanisms such as the Nuclear Planning Group (NATO, 2025). However, these arrangements remain politically sensitive in several member states, reflecting differing domestic attitudes toward nuclear weapons.

In response to the deteriorating security environment, NATO has emphasized deterrence and defence while avoiding steps that could unnecessarily escalate tensions. Rather than expanding its nuclear footprint, the Alliance has focused on strengthening conventional capabilities, enhancing readiness, and reaffirming the defensive purpose of its nuclear forces. At the same time, NATO continues to support arms control and risk-reduction efforts, recognizing that deterrence and dialogue are complementary rather than contradictory.

NATO also faces the challenge of integrating emerging technologies—such as missile defence, cyber capabilities, and advanced conventional weapons—into its deterrence posture without undermining strategic stability. Managing these interactions will be critical to preserving credible deterrence while minimizing the risk of misperception or escalation.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Reconstructing NATO's nuclear deterrence policy requires balancing peace, strength, and unity in an increasingly contested strategic environment. While nuclear weapons remain a core component of NATO's deterrence posture, their primary purpose is political: to prevent war, not to fight one. Ensuring credibility will require continued modernization, robust consultation mechanisms, and a clear articulation of deterrence as a last-resort tool.

At the same time, arms control diplomacy should remain an integral part of NATO strategy. Although traditional bilateral treaties face significant challenges, innovative approaches to transparency, confidence-building, and multilateral engagement may help reduce risks in a multipolar nuclear landscape. Strengthening conventional deterrence and integrated defence across all domains may also allow NATO to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons over time. Maintaining Alliance unity will be essential. Differing threat perceptions and political views on nuclear weapons among Allies underscore the importance of consultation, shared decision-making, and clear communication. NATO's ability to adapt its deterrence posture while preserving cohesion will shape its credibility and effectiveness in the years ahead.

Guiding Questions:

- How should NATO modernize its nuclear deterrence doctrine in a multipolar nuclear environment?
- Should NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements be expanded, reduced, or restructured?
- What role should arms control and risk-reduction diplomacy play in NATO strategy?
- How can NATO integrate emerging technologies without destabilizing deterrence?
- How can the Alliance maintain unity amid differing political views on nuclear weapons?
- What balance should NATO strike between conventional and nuclear deterrence?

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Topic B: Reactions and Securitization - Restructuring NATO's Role in the Future of the War in Ukraine

The War in Ukraine: An Evolving Conflict

Russia's invasion of Ukraine sparked significant destabilization of the country. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed, Ukrainian infrastructure severely damaged, and millions of refugees have left the country.¹ The initial Russian offensives into the country mostly focused on capturing important cities such as Kyiv. However, poor logistics, an overall lack of preparedness, and stiff Ukrainian resistance forced Moscow to abandon these plans. Instead, Russia shifted its focus to Eastern Ukraine.

While there were successes for Russia, casualties were heavy and manpower was dwindling. This state of affairs continued for several months until Ukraine launched two successful counteroffensives in the Kherson and Kharkiv regions, pushing Russian forces back.² Moscow had spent several months insisting that the conflict was not a war but a Special Military Operation, relying on a mix of professional soldiers and mercenaries.³ However, after the two counteroffensives, Russia implemented a partial mobilisation in September of 2022, calling up hundreds of thousands of troops to be sent to the frontlines. This helped to plug the gaps in places like Kharkiv that Ukraine had so successfully exploited in their counteroffensive.

2023 saw Russia fortify its defences in the occupied Zaporizhia regions and consequently Ukrainian efforts to counterattack there were bloodily repulsed.⁴ Despite further setbacks including the mutiny of the Wagner Group of mercenaries, Moscow continued to bet that it could win a war of attrition against Ukraine and its Western partners. Russia has been able to continually expand its troop presence in Ukraine and has also significantly improved its ability to equip its formations. Russia has gone to great lengths to acquire more troops, such as recruiting foreign fighters, offering large signing bonuses, and even offering prisoners freedom in exchange for their service on the frontline.⁵ Ukraine, while fighting valiantly, has been slowly losing ground with casualties mounting. This has contributed to a reduction in support for the war, with many Ukrainians wanting to see some kind of fair settlement to end the fighting.⁶

¹ NATO, "NATO's Support for Ukraine." NATO.int, 2020. <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/natos-support-for-ukraine>

² Cancian, Mark F. "What Does Russia's 'Partial Mobilization' Mean?" CSIS, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-does-russias-partial-mobilization-mean>

³ McDermott, Roger N. and Bartles, Charles K "Defining the 'Special Military Operation,' ' North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/defining-the-special-military-operation/>

⁴ Zafra, Mariano and McClure, Jon. "Four Factors that Stalled Ukraine's Counteroffensive," Reuters, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/UKRAINE-CRISIS/MAPS/klvygwawvg/>

⁵ Vorobyov, Niko. "Despite huge manpower losses, how is Russia replenishing its military?" Al Jazeera, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/26/despite-huge-manpower-losses-how-is-russia-replenishing-its-military>

⁶ Vigers, Benedict. "Ukrainian Support for War Effort Collapses," Gallup, 2025. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/693203/ukrainian-support-war-effort-collapses.aspx>

NATO's Role in Supporting Ukraine

NATO has supported Ukraine for many years, providing valuable training to Ukrainian troops after the Russian annexation of Crimea. The invasion in 2022 saw a massive increase in support from NATO, with countries across the alliance sending significant amounts of aid. This includes but is not limited to air defence, anti-tank missiles, helmets, food for soldiers, vests, and fuel.⁷ This early aid was crucial as Russian forces stormed into the country. Ukrainian troops made great use of weapons such as the Javelin anti-tank missile, which played an important role in disrupting Russian armoured convoys.⁸

However, there were several key pieces of equipment missing in the early days of aid. Tanks were not sent with the United States arguing that Ukrainians were unfamiliar with their tank systems. Fighter jets were also not sent, though spare parts were provided.⁹ This would eventually change but initial NATO aid avoided “big ticket” items. This was part of an overall strategy by NATO in general and the Biden administration in particular to manage escalation and avoid the conflict spiralling into a Third World War. There had been calls for NATO to enforce a no-fly zone over Ukraine but actions such as that would likely lead to significant escalation and destruction.¹⁰

Before and during the war, Russia issued several nuclear threats, and while it is not possible to know their veracity, it is essential to take them seriously.¹¹ There would be no deployment of NATO troops on the ground in Ukraine, with all support limited to aid.¹² Even then, there were limits: certain NATO weapons systems in Ukrainian hands had range limits on them for quite some time to avoid strikes deep into Russia. While most of these have since been removed, some feel that they could have made more of a difference if they were delivered without restrictions in the first place.¹³ Additionally, efforts to build up European industries have not been exceptionally effective. The alliance has indeed grown: Finland and Sweden, rankled by Russian expansionism, have both joined NATO.¹⁴

⁷ “NATO, Western Countries begin arm supplies to Ukraine,” AA, 2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-crisis/nato-western-countries-begin-arm-supplies-to-ukraine/2517942>

⁸ Debusmann, Bernd Jr. “What Weapons has the US given Ukraine - and how much do they help?” BBC, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60774098>

⁹ Debusmann, Bernd Jr. “What Weapons has the US given Ukraine - and how much do they help?” BBC, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60774098>

¹⁰ Axe, David. “Ukraine’s F-16s Will Reinforce, or Replace, a Dizzying Array of old MiG and Sukhoi Fighters,” Forbes, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2024/01/23/ukraines-f-16s-will-reinforce-or-replace-a-dizzying-array-of-old-mig-and-sukhoi-fighters/?sh=46d54977737d>

¹¹ Stein, Janice. “Escalation Management in Ukraine: Assessing the US Response to Russia’s Manipulation of Risk,” Munk School, 2023. [Escalation Management in Ukraine: Assessing the U.S. Response to Russia’s Manipulation of Risk | The Munk School](https://www.munkschool.ca/escalation-management-in-ukraine-assessing-the-u.s.-response-to-russia-s-manipulation-of-risk)

¹² Taylor, Paul. “How effective has NATO been in Ukraine” EPC, 2024. <https://www.epc.eu/publication/-How-effective-has-NATO-been-in-Ukraine-5c1e08/>

¹³ Siddiqui, Usaid. “US, Europe lift ‘range restrictions on Ukraine missiles: why it matters.” Al Jazeera, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/27/us-europe-lift-range-restrictions-on-ukraine-missiles-why-it-matters>

¹⁴ Taylor, Paul. “How effective has NATO been in Ukraine” EPC, 2024. <https://www.epc.eu/publication/-How-effective-has-NATO-been-in-Ukraine-5c1e08/>

It would be a mistake, however, to simply write off Russia as hopelessly stuck in Ukraine. The Russian military has built up a substantial arsenal of drones and ballistic missiles, both of which being areas that many NATO member states lag behind in.¹⁵ Russia has expended considerable time and resources attacking Ukrainian energy infrastructure in an effort to hamper the country's operation and weaken support for the war, which shows how dangerous these kinds of weapons can be.¹⁶ The war continues to drag on, and with the new US administration attempting to coerce Ukraine into ceding territory, the future of the conflict is uncertain.¹⁷

Conclusion and Next Steps

Russia's decision to attack Ukraine has had massive implications for the security of NATO member states, especially in Eastern Europe. There are two ways that one can view NATO's response. From one perspective, Russia's invasion has seen defence spending rise across the alliance and members of the Eastern Flank have been reinforced with troops and aircraft from many different countries. The alliance has expanded in Scandinavia, bringing two members with notable military capabilities.

However, one can also argue that NATO aid has not necessarily been sufficient to help Ukraine triumph on the battlefield rather than simply slow down Russian progress. As Russia's position strengthens and Ukraine's weakens, NATO member states need to decide what they want the outcome of the conflict to be. The alliance could put its finger on the scale with regard to the ongoing peace negotiations, but it could also massively increase aid to improve Ukraine's position. An important factor to consider is Russia. While Moscow's forces have taken many casualties during the course of the war, their armed forces have significantly expanded.

There is worry in many NATO countries that Russia will turn its battle-tested military against NATO once it is finished in Ukraine.¹⁸ Indeed, in many European countries there have been indicators that Russia intends to either intimidate or take action against NATO at some point. Airspace has been violated, railway networks sabotaged, and undersea infrastructure disrupted, while disinformation campaigns continue to be amplified.¹⁹ Several countries have accused Russia as being behind these efforts, with many theorizing that it is part of a strategy

¹⁵ Davikanova, Elena and Yevhenii, Malik. "NATO is unprepared for the growing threat posed by Putin's Russia," Atlantic Council, 2025. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/nato-is-unprepared-for-the-growing-threat-posed-by-putins-russia/>

¹⁶ Phillips, Aleks and Tian, Yang. "Russian strikes cause power outages for more than 600,000 in Ukraine," BBC, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2gylngx7go>

¹⁷ Ravid, Barak and Lawler, Dave. "Trump's Full 28-point Ukraine-Russia peace plan," Axios, 2025. <https://www.axios.com/2025/11/20/trump-ukraine-peace-plan-28-points-russia>

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¹⁹ Varner, Joe. "The West can no longer ignore Russian advances: Joe Varner in Real Clear World," MacDonald-Laurier Institute, 2025. <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/the-west-can-no-longer-ignore-russian-advances-joe-varner-in-real-clear-world/>

to probe, test, and wear down NATO countries.²⁰ In light of this and other challenges, it is imperative that NATO finds a way to show sufficient resolve towards not only Russia but other actors.

Guiding Questions:

- How should NATO try to influence the ongoing peace discussions?
- How much aid should NATO member states continue to provide to Ukraine?
- To what extent should NATO pool its resources to build the strength of the alliance?
- How can NATO demonstrate resolve in the face of an increasingly aggressive Russia?

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Topic C: NATO's Core Purpose in an Age of Multipolarity – Balancing Deterrence and Competition

Multipolarity in the Global Context

Russia's illegal and unjustified war in Ukraine has sparked a new era in transatlantic defence. Since February 2022, relations between NATO and Russia are at their lowest point since the Cold War. Russia seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and attempted annexations. It uses conventional, cyber and hybrid means against NATO member countries and partners. Its coercive military posture, rhetoric and proven willingness to use force to pursue its political goals undermine the rules-based international order.

Consequently, NATO has rapidly modernized its integral partnerships, strengthened strategic ties, and defined new goals to counter the threats imposed by an aggressive adversarial power. NATO stands firmly against the escalation of war, tension, and aggressive partnerships that threaten the sovereignty of all peace enjoying nations. By that token, Russia's alliance with China is of great concern to NATO. Russian weapons, guided by Chinese information and electronic systems wreak havoc on Europe's eastern flank. Additionally, economic and diplomatic support from China allows Moscow to subvert sanctions aimed to weaken the Russian aggression. NATO understands this partnership as a threat to global sovereignty, and an unsettling obstacle to peace.

Decoupling their individual objectives, however, remains crucial. China's interests lie further east; their attempted sphere of influence growing in the South China Sea, directly impacting freedom of navigation and sea lines of communication (SLOC). Failures to build diplomatic agreements between Chinese and southeast Asian diplomatic councils have resulted in an escalation in tensions in this region, in the form of naval buildups and other unwarranted maritime military presences. It is crucial, therefore, to strategically diverge NATO resources to simultaneously maintain peace in the Indo-Pacific region, whilst demonstrating a strong deterrence to Russia's continued aggression.

The Role of NATO in a Multipolar World

NATO can look towards continuing to build partnerships in east Asia and strengthening diplomatic and military ties whilst reinforcing inter-alliance objectives to deter further Russian aggression. The North Atlantic Council's role in consensus building and partnership cooperation with pacific nations is a crucial one. NATO has increasingly engaged politically with its partners in the Indo-Pacific region – Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea and New Zealand – notably through meetings of the North Atlantic Council, including a first meeting at the level of foreign ministers in December 2020, to discuss the shift in the global balance of power and the rise of China.¹ These NAC dialogues mostly take place through the form of foreign ministers' meetings,

¹ "Relations with partners across the globe" NATO. 2024

military dialogues with Indo-Pacific partners, and legislative agreements allowing for enhanced interoperability and vision. One such agreement is the 2022 Agenda for Tackling Shared Security Challenges to deepen cooperation in a range of areas, including cyber defence, technology and countering hybrid threats as well as maritime security and the security impact of climate change².

NATO continues to enhance multilateral security through these regional dialogues, as well as through FIVE EYES intelligence sharing, fostering strong partnerships between Australia, New Zealand, and NATO intelligence agencies. These dialogues help continue NATO's mission of peace through strength and deterrence beyond north Atlantic borders. Particularly, the Taiwan Straight is of utmost priority to NATO. Taiwan's crucial relationships with NATO allies, such as economic partnerships and intelligence sharing, as well as its strategic geographic location and territorial dispute with the PRC make it a critically important asset to safety in the Indo-Pacific region. NATO strategists estimate Chinese hostilities in Taiwan a possibility, and a strategic advancement to break NATO's ranges cannot be ruled out.³ NATO's strategic competition with China in this scope must be at the forefront of its international security dialogue alongside its continued deterrence policy on the western flank.

NATO cannot lose sight of the protections and security it upholds in Ukraine, safeguarding a safer, stronger Europe. Russian attacks have been ongoing for nearly 4 years, and though NATO's commitments remain consistent, its roles are an ever-changing endeavour.

Chinese influence over the Russian market has significantly grown since boots have been on the ground in Ukraine.⁴ China's maritime disputes also survey strategic waterways crucial to the importing of liquified natural gas and other resources to NATO allies and partner nations. With 34% of the world's LNG passing through the disputed South China sea, dominance over Russian financial markets, strategic maritime advances, and threats to Taiwanese security, Chinese aggression poses a great threat in the global balance of power and remains a topic of great interest in NATO's dialogues of renewed power competition. China's interests also lie in LNG reserves in the south China sea, undoubtedly a strategic asset network in its support of the Russo-Ukrainian war. It is therefore in NATO's interests to secure peace and diplomacy in the region to avoid hostility on two fronts, and a loss of economic and resource security in the region.

Chinese influence over the Indo-Pacific, should it continue to grow unopposed, could allow a weakened Taiwanese position, loss of partnerships, military and financial between NATO and East Asian nations, and rising military tensions in a crucial region for democratic and peaceful interests. NATO pacific partnerships, while strong, require consistent dialogue to maintain peace and security in the region, and its role must be reevaluated and affirmed.

² "Relations with partners in the Indo-Pacific region" NATO. 2025

³ NATO and a Taiwan contingency, Lee, James. 2024

⁴ "Why the Ukraine War works In China's favour". Mikovic, Nikola. 2025

Next Steps for NATO

NATO's role in turning the tides of the Russian invasion must be carefully balanced with its strategic posture toward China. The Alliance must maintain peace through strength while addressing different strategic threats on its flanks. This requires a dual-track approach: robust deterrence and defence in Europe, coupled with deepened engagement and partnership in the Indo-Pacific to ensure stability and counter coercive behavior.

Strengthening partnerships with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners—through enhanced dialogues, joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building—will be essential to uphold a rules-based order and deter aggression. At the same time, NATO must ensure that its focus on China does not come at the expense of its core deterrence mission against Russia. Alliance unity, clear strategic communication, and resource prioritization will be critical to navigating this complex multipolar landscape.

Guiding Questions:

- What partnerships can NATO look to, strengthen, and modernize to support its mission of stability in the Indo-Pacific and eastern flank regions?
- How can NATO's deterrence policy against Russia appease and deter from a multi-theatre conflict?
- How Can NATO maintain significant diplomatic, military, and economic relations with Indo-Pacific nations while maintaining a firm opposition to China's sphere of influence?
- How do Russian and Chinese partnerships grow beyond their respective borders, and what threats do they pose to global security?

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