

Stability Through Caution: NATO'S Evolution Under the Doctrine of Strategic Restraint

Стабільність через обережність: еволюція НАТО в рамках доктрини стратегічного стримування

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Purpose. To examine NATO's evolving strategic posture in future, focusing on how the Alliance balances deterrence, defense, and diplomatic restraint in a rapidly changing security environment.

Method: Comparative analysis, and synthesis.

Findings. Finland's accession in 2023 and Sweden's in 2024 significantly strengthened NATO's defensive posture in Northern Europe and the Baltic region by expanding the Alliance's traditional and asymmetric capability potential. The enlargement followed a thorough assessment of political and security risks, underscoring the Alliance's prioritisation of stability and cohesion. The aspirant countries—Georgia, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova—remain outside the enlargement process due to high escalation sensitivity and the risk of direct confrontation with Russia. NATO applies a calibrated approach to provocations, prioritising consultations, diplomacy, and surveillance. Incidents such as the 2025 Estonian airspace violation or the interception of drones by Poland illustrate this differentiation: low-level threats are neutralised, while actions with a high risk of escalation are avoided. Despite growing defence expenditures, the Alliance faces persistent personnel shortages, complicating the implementation of regional defence plans. Operational capabilities remain unevenly distributed among member states, and European rapid-deployment forces continue to depend on U.S. strategic assets. The strategic focus increasingly encompasses cyber defence, hybrid threats, artificial intelligence, and modern missile defence systems, reflecting NATO's shift toward flexible deterrence and technological superiority.

Theoretical implications. The study demonstrates that NATO's strategic restraint, selective enlargement, and reliance on technological superiority offer a nuanced theoretical framework for understanding alliance cohesion, modern deterrence, and the role of third-party mediation in protracted conflicts.

Practical implications. The study suggests that NATO can enhance alliance cohesion, crisis responsiveness, and conflict management by combining strategic restraint, selective enlargement, technological investment, and robust third-party mediation mechanisms.

Value. The study provides critical insights into NATO's strategic restraint, selective enlargement, and adaptive responses to modern threats, offering both theoretical contributions to alliance behavior and practical guidance for policymakers navigating contemporary security challenges.

Paper type. Theoretical.

Мета дослідження. Дослідити еволюцію стратегічної позиції НАТО в майбутньому, зосереджуючись на тому, як Альянс врівноважує стримування, оборону та дипломатичну стриманість у швидкозмінному середовищі безпеки.

Метод дослідження. Порівняльний аналіз і синтез.

Результати дослідження. Вступ Фінляндії (2023) і Швеції (2024) суттєво посилює оборонну позицію НАТО в Північній Європі та Балтійському регіоні, розширивши потенціал традиційних і асиметричних спроможностей. Розширення відбулося після ретельної оцінки політичних та безпекових ризиків, що підкреслює пріоритет Альянсу на стабільність і згуртованість. Країни-аспіранти — Грузія, Україна, Боснія і Герцеговина, Молдова — залишаються поза межами розширення через високу ескалаційну чутливість і ризик прямої конфронтації з Росією. НАТО застосовує виважений підхід до провокацій, віддаючи перевагу консультаціям, дипломатії та спостереженню. Інциденти, як-от порушення повітряного простору Естонії (2025) чи перехоплення польською стороною дронів, демонструють диференціацію: загрози низького рівня нейтралізуються, а дії з високим ескалаційним ризиком уникаються. Попри зростання оборонних витрат, Альянс стикається з нестачею персоналу, що ускладнює реалізацію регіональних планів оборони. Оперативні спроможності залишаються нерівномірно розподіленими між державами-членами, а європейські сили швидкого розгортання залишаються залежними від стратегічних можливостей США. Стратегічний фокус дедалі більше охоплює кібероборону, гібридні загрози, штучний інтелект та сучасні системи ПРО, що відображає перехід НАТО до гнучкого стримування й технологічної переваги.

Теоретична цінність дослідження. Дослідження демонструє, що стратегічна стриманість НАТО, вибіркове розширення та опора на технологічну перевагу формують багатовимірну теоретичну рамку для розуміння союзницької згуртованості, сучасного стримування та ролі посередництва третіх сторін у затяжних конфліктах.

Практична цінність дослідження. Дослідження свідчить, що НАТО може підвищити рівень союзницької згуртованості, швидкість кризового реагування та ефективність управління конфліктами шляхом поєднання стратегічної стриманості, вибіркового розширення, інвестицій у технології та зміцнення механізмів посередництва третіх сторін.

Цінність дослідження. Дослідження надає ключові аналітичні висновки щодо стратегічної стриманості НАТО, вибіркового розширення та адаптивних відповідей на сучасні загрози, пропонуючи як теоретичний внесок у розуміння поведінки союзів, так і практичні орієнтири для політико-рішення у сфері сучасних безпекових викликів.

Тип статті. Теоретична.

Key words: NATO, strategic restraint, alliance cohesion, enlargement, Russia-Ukraine war, deterrence, war termination, third-party mediation.

Ключові слова: НАТО, стратегічне стримування, згуртованість альянсу, розширення, війна між Росією та Україною, стримування, припинення війни, посередництво третьої сторони.

Introduction

NATO's strategic posture and its approach to enlargement have long been central to debates on European and transatlantic security. The accession of Finland (2023) and Sweden (2024) marked a significant geopolitical shift, as both countries abandoned long-standing neutrality in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This development underscores the Alliance's careful assessment of political, security, and operational risks prior to expansion, reinforcing a broader emphasis on cohesion, stability, and deterrence. At the same time, aspirant states such as Georgia, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova remain outside NATO, reflecting the complex calculations that shape enlargement decisions.

The strategic environment confronting NATO is characterized by multi-domain challenges, including cyber warfare, hybrid tactics, and emerging missile technologies (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2020a; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2020b), alongside ongoing geopolitical tensions exemplified by the Russia-Ukraine war. NATO's operational doctrine under the "Cautious NATO" paradigm emphasizes strategic restraint: prioritizing consultation, diplomacy, and proportionate responses over immediate military escalation, as demonstrated in the handling of Russian airspace violations by Estonia and Poland. Despite substantial defense spending, NATO faces significant personnel shortfalls and a reliance on U.S. strategic enablers, highlighting persistent structural and capability gaps. This research examines how NATO's enlargement policies, operational posture, and strategic decision-making are influenced by evolving threats, alliance cohesion, and the imperative to maintain stability in the Euro-Atlantic security space.

Several studies focus on NATO's post-2022 transformation process and the New Force Model (NFM), as it is expected to remain in place for around 10 years, unless unforeseen circumstances or force majeure events require an immediate overhaul of NATO's current force structure. Z. Szenes (2023) analyzes NATO's evolving approach to deterrence and defense, comparing the 2010 and 2022 Strategic Concepts. He argues that the latter marks the beginning of a new era of great power competition for NATO. A report by Monaghan et al. (2024) evaluates the Alliance's efforts to bolster collective defense in response to emerging security challenges. The report raises an important question: while NATO may be prepared for conflict initiation, is it sufficiently equipped to sustain and ultimately win a prolonged war? Based on the commitments made in Madrid, the report assesses NATO's preparedness to endure and succeed in extended conflict. J.R. Deni (2024) explores the reasoning behind the launch of the new force model, detailing its key components, such as force organization, management, and command and control. Meanwhile, J.M. Bosica (2024) highlights improvements in the NFM compared to the old one, asserting that it enhances the rapid deployment capabilities of European Allies, enabling them to defend themselves without necessarily relying on US leadership. The views of leading experts and practitioners, including A. Lieven, R. Lüdeking, A. Thomson, J. Carden, and J. Shiffrinson, presented at the Quincy Institute's symposium dedicated to NATO's 75th anniversary, offer valuable insights into the alliance's past and future, helping to shape our understanding of its future trajectory (Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, n.d.). A report developed by NATO's Allied Command Transformation (2024) outlines major trends, drivers of change, and potential strategic shocks. It provides a baseline for assessing the future operating environment, including anticipated capability gaps and the imperative for transformational adaptation. The volume edited by Blessing et al. (2020) explores the strategic requirements NATO may face over the coming decade and beyond, addressing issues such as multipolar threats (from Russia and China), hybrid warfare, burden-sharing, operations in emerging domains (cyber and space), and the resilience of democratic institutions. M. Dembinski and H.J. Spanger (2021) examine NATO's evolving role amid external threats and internal strains, outline three possible future development paths for NATO (Transatlantic NATO minus, European defence union, NATO as toolbox). The study states that NATO's future depends on reconciling external threats (especially Russia) with internal

tensions over U.S. engagement, burden-sharing and Europe's readiness for autonomy. Ellehuus (2021) delineates three potential trajectories for NATO over the coming decade. Trajectory 1 envisions a revitalized alliance characterized by strengthened cohesion and expanded partnerships. Trajectory 2 foresees a more fragmented NATO, confronted with internal divisions and external pressures. Trajectory 3 anticipates a transformed alliance, potentially redefining its purpose and structure in response to global developments. Collectively, these scenarios underscore the critical importance of both internal unity and external adaptability for NATO's future. The European Parliament report examines NATO's evolving role over the coming decade, emphasizing the importance of strengthened EU–NATO cooperation, particularly in defense and crisis management (Lațici, 2021). It highlights the need for adaptation to emerging security challenges, including cyber threats and hybrid warfare, alongside a steadfast commitment to democratic values and the rules-based international order. The report underscores NATO's continued role as the cornerstone of transatlantic security and stresses the necessity of strategic alignment with EU defense initiatives. According to Nicolò Fasola (2024), the Alliance's changing mission is not sufficiently addressed by its partnership policies, processes, and mechanisms. The author claims that, against the backdrop of ongoing competition in the world, NATO should reconsider partner engagement in order to better achieve its strategic objectives. In addition to critically analyzing the development of NATO's cooperative security policy, the author suggests how NATO may update its current partnership mechanisms.

The study further examines the dynamics of war termination, integrating both theoretical frameworks and historical case studies to analyze the Russia–Ukraine war and its implications for NATO's operational posture. By investigating the mechanisms of war termination, including negotiated settlements, third-party mediation, and unilateral action this research situates NATO's cautious approach within a broader strategic and political context. It underscores the Alliance's reliance on diplomatic leverage, technological superiority, and sophisticated crisis management to navigate complex, high-stakes security challenges.

The study hypothesizes that NATO's strategic restraint functions as an adaptive conflict management mechanism, combining selective enlargement, calibrated deterrence, and mediated resolution to preserve Alliance cohesion and prevent escalation with Russia. The central research question is: How does NATO's post-2022 strategic restraint influence its operational posture, enlargement policy, and approach to conflict management within the evolving Euro-Atlantic security environment?

Based on historical patterns, the average interval between major NATO developments has been approximately 10–12 years. Consequently, given the Alliance's consistent practice of adapting its Strategic Concept, a strategy update around 2035 appears plausible. This timeline aligns with NATO's historical cycle and allows sufficient time for the full implementation of both the 2022 Strategic Concept and the NATO NFM. However, this schedule could accelerate in response to a major geopolitical shock or significant technological transformation. While this projection remains speculative, it reflects historical tendencies and should be viewed as a predictive rather than a definitive assessment. NATO does not operate on a fixed timetable; its updates depend on evolving global security dynamics. Accordingly, this study adopts a 10–15-year analytical horizon to account for potential geopolitical, security, and technological developments that may shape the Alliance's future trajectory. For this timeframe, the study identifies a Cautious NATO as the most plausible scenario, compared to the Expanded and Fragmented/Irrelevant NATO alternatives.

Results

Strategic Restraint and NATO's Operational Posture

The doctrine of strategic restraint denotes a deliberate approach in international relations and military strategy, whereby a state or alliance consciously limits its use of force, provocative actions, or expansive military interventions to manage risk, preserve stability, and prevent escalation with

potential adversaries. This doctrine emphasizes prudence, proportionality, and careful risk management over maximalist or aggressive postures (Decker, 2025). Under this doctrine, force is employed only when necessary for defense, deterrence, or the protection of sovereignty, with military actions carefully calibrated to avoid unnecessary escalation or full-scale confrontation with powerful adversaries. In essence, the doctrine of strategic restraint emphasizes projecting power without provocation, deterring adversaries without escalation, and responding decisively without overcommitment. For NATO, this approach corresponds to a cautious, risk-aware posture, enabling the Alliance to manage relations with Russia and other potential adversaries while safeguarding collective security. In the following discussion, we substantiate the argument for why NATO is expected to maintain a cautious posture within the specified timeframe.

The security landscape is evolving at such a rapid pace that competitors are engaged in a relentless race to keep up, often striving to outpace one another in terms of technological advancements, strategic capabilities, and adaptive responses. The stark reality is that the world is no longer unipolar; it has undeniably transitioned into a multipolar order. The key question is: What are the primary poles of power, which among them wields the most influence, and how do global dynamics evolve amid their intense competition? NATO is unequivocally one of these key poles in the emerging multipolar world (Nasirov et al., 2017; Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2019). Therefore, anticipating its future developments and potential scenarios is of utmost importance in understanding global power dynamics.

A scenario can be defined as a description of a potential future state or condition within a specific domain. Scenarios are not predictions of future events; while they may occasionally provide probabilities, their primary purpose is to offer decision-makers a range of alternative futures against which different courses of action can be evaluated. The key criterion for including a scenario in a scenario set is not its likelihood of occurring, but rather the possibility that it could happen, based on certain assumptions about the surrounding context (Johansen, 2018).

Future scenario planning is essential for NATO, enabling the alliance to anticipate, adapt to, and effectively address emerging security challenges. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, military technologies advance, and global power dynamics shift, NATO must prepare for a range of plausible futures to maintain its strategic relevance and deterrence capabilities. An “issue of concern” in our study is the alliance’s ability to maintain cohesion and relevance amid evolving geopolitical challenges. This may include concerns about NATO’s capacity to adapt to emerging threats, such as cyber warfare, hybrid threats, and the rise of its opponents, while balancing the interests and priorities of its diverse member states.

NATO’s most recent enlargement occurred with the incorporation of Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024, both of which had long considered neutrality a core aspect of their national identity. These countries declared their NATO ambitions shortly after Russia’s attack on Ukraine, marking a significant geopolitical shift. Their accession reaffirms that NATO carefully assesses both the risks and benefits before any expansion. In contrast, Georgia and Ukraine have long expressed strong aspirations for NATO membership, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Moldova, actively engaged in extensive preparations. However, their ambitions have yet to materialize, highlighting the complex political and security considerations that shape NATO’s enlargement decisions. The inclusion of Finland and Sweden significantly strengthens the security framework in the Baltic Sea region and the broader Nordic area. Their membership enhances a unified and coordinated defense posture in Northern Europe, benefiting all NATO members. Additionally, Finland and Sweden contribute substantial military capabilities to the alliance, boasting advanced armed forces, modernized equipment, and strategically important geographical positions. Sweden ranks 27th out of 145 countries in the annual Global Firepower (2025) review. Upon joining NATO, it rose to 9th place among the alliance’s 32 members, while Finland ranks 48th globally and 15th within NATO. Sweden and Finland have defense budgets of \$13 billion and \$6.8 billion, respectively, with combined active personnel of

approximately 50,000. Their advanced air forces, comprising over 300 combat aircraft, and modern naval capabilities significantly bolster NATO's operational strength in the Baltic Sea region. Additionally, Finland possesses one of the most powerful artillery systems in Europe, further enhancing NATO's overall military capabilities. In 2024, NATO members collectively spent approximately \$1.5 trillion on defense, accounting for about 55% of global military spending. European allies contributed \$693 billion to this total, marking a significant increase in defense spending (Liang et al., 2025).

Given NATO's cautious approach to enlargement, the alliance in the stated time frame (10-15 years) will remain cohesive yet risk-averse, focusing on deterrence and defense rather than expansion. It is worth noting that, for the first time in NATO's 76-year history, a member state – Poland engaged a Russian threat in its airspace on September 9, 2025. The incident underscored Moscow's willingness to test NATO defenses and reveal vulnerabilities in the alliance's readiness. On September 19, 2025, just ten days after the Polish airspace incursion, three Russian MiG-31 fighter jets violated Estonian airspace near Vaindloo Island for approximately 12 minutes. The aircraft had no flight plans, their transponders were switched off, and they failed to respond to air traffic control (news.err.ee, 2025). In response, Estonia invoked Article 4 of the NATO Treaty, calling for consultations with its allies (cnbc.com, 2025). This incident marked the fourth Russian airspace violation over Estonia in 2025, following earlier breaches involving a Su-35 fighter, a transport aircraft, and a helicopter (Szymański et al., 2025). A notable historical precedent also exists on November 24, 2015, Turkish F-16s shot down a Russian Su-24 after it violated Turkish airspace for only 17 seconds near the Syrian border (hurriyetdailynews.com, 2015). A comparison of the two cases highlights contrasting dynamics. The Turkish case of 2015 illustrates a markedly different approach: although a NATO member, Türkiye acted unilaterally and forcefully by downing a Russian Su-24 after a brief 17-second violation. This response lies outside the "Cautious NATO" paradigm and underscores the risks of escalation when strategic restraint is not exercised. By contrast, the Estonian case of 2025 demonstrates NATO's more measured posture: despite a serious 12-minute violation with transponders switched off, the alliance refrained from military escalation. Instead, this reflected a preference for strategic restraint, signaling resolve while avoiding direct confrontation. Taken together, these cases suggest that under the "Cautious NATO" scenario, the alliance is more likely to prioritize collective consultation, diplomatic measures, and enhanced surveillance over immediate military retaliation. Such an approach aims to preserve stability, maintain alliance cohesion, and uphold the strategic balance while minimizing the risk of incidents spiraling into open conflict with Russia. One might then ask why Russian drones were intercepted in Polish airspace. At first glance, this may appear inconsistent with the "Cautious NATO" scenario, since Poland did in fact resort to force. However, this represents a distinct case. Shooting down uncrewed drones constitutes a measured response: it neutralizes the immediate threat without carrying the same escalatory risks as downing a manned fighter jet. NATO members generally regard drones as expendable, low-value assets, so their destruction does not entail the same diplomatic consequences as the loss of Russian pilots. In the "Cautious NATO" scenario, restraint does not equate to inaction. Rather, it entails avoiding steps that could trigger uncontrolled escalation. By intercepting drones, Poland signaled its determination to defend sovereignty while carefully avoiding direct confrontation with Russian personnel. Estonia's recourse to Article 4 illustrates the emphasis on consultation and restraint, whereas Poland's drone interceptions highlight flexible, proportionate responses tailored to the nature of the threat. Both cases align with the "Cautious NATO" model: the alliance demonstrates readiness to protect its members, yet deliberately refrains from escalatory actions such as targeting manned aircraft. Within this framework, drones may be intercepted or destroyed because such measures are low-risk, defensive, and proportionate. By contrast, the downing of manned aircraft would be deemed excessively escalatory, prompting NATO instead to rely on consultations, diplomacy, and visible deterrence to manage tensions.

Apart from it, NATO continues to face a significant shortfall in personnel, limiting its ability to implement regional defense plans or effectively deter Russia. Allies struggle to recruit and retain sufficient troops, despite Russia's substantial manpower losses. For instance, Germany's Bundeswehr is short approximately 20,000 troops from its target of 203,000, with plans to expand to 230,000 (Reuters, 2024). Similarly, Lithuania plans to increase its defense spending to 5% of GDP by 2026, but faces challenges in recruiting and retaining personnel to meet this ambitious goal (Dapkus, 2025). In response to growing security concerns, Croatia has reinstated compulsory military service with the purpose of equipping young citizens with basic military and crisis response skills, addressing staffing shortages and enhancing national defense capabilities (apnews.com, 2025). Poland plans to implement military training for all adult males to bolster its defense capabilities (Reuters, 2025). Reports indicate that NATO's new force model, which aims to provide up to 300,000 combat-capable troops at high readiness, is hindered by insufficient personnel (Loorents, 2025). Experts warn that gaps in personnel and readiness could erode NATO's deterrence and defense posture, increasing the risk of Russian opportunistic aggression (Kendall-Taylor et al., 2025). These challenges are further compounded by demographic decline and a widening civil-military gap. In 2021, the EU's crude rate of natural population change was -2.7 per 1,000 people. At the NUTS 3 level, 980 of 1,164 regions reported a negative natural population change. Countries such as Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Portugal, and Romania experienced negative rates across all regions (Eurostat, 2023). As of January 1, 2024, over 21.6% of the EU population was aged 65 and over, with the median age reaching 44.7 years. This ageing trend is expected to continue, with the working-age population (15–64 years) projected to decline from 265 million in 2022 to 258 million by 2030 (Eurostat, 2025). Nearly all EU+ rural regions, 335 out of 423 are projected to experience population decreases by 2050. This trend is particularly pronounced in Eastern European countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, and Bulgaria, where more than 25% of rural regions are expected to see population decline (Eurostat, 2021). Central and Eastern European countries are projected to face the largest overall population declines due to a combination of low birth rates, migration patterns, and demographic structures shaped by past trends (Joint Research Centre, 2025). Even as the UK's population is projected to increase by 4.9 million (7.3%), from 67.6 million to 72.5 million (Office for National Statistics, 2025), and Türkiye's to reach 88.19 million (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024), both countries face significant demographic challenges, including ageing populations and shifting age structures. Even with new pledges to allocate 5% of GDP to defense, manpower shortages are likely to persist. On average, NATO members dedicate approximately 36% of their defense budgets to personnel, with some, such as Italy, spending nearly 60% (Wagner & Taylor, 2025). NATO's operational effectiveness still heavily depends on a small number of countries' forces, such as the U.S., Poland, and Türkiye, which stresses the alliance's overall readiness.

NATO in Transition: Emerging Threats, and Alliance Cohesion

While NATO continues to enhance its military capabilities and strengthen collective security, it refrains from integrating high-risk candidates such as Georgia, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova to avoid direct confrontation with adversaries, particularly Russia. However, the Alliance continues to adapt to changing geopolitical dynamics, especially the rise of new threats like cyber warfare, hybrid tactics and advanced missile technologies. NATO also focuses on improving its crisis management mechanisms to address emerging threats without engaging in high-stakes confrontations. Technological superiority is a key element of NATO's strategic approach. The alliance channels efforts into cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence integration, and the development of agile, rapidly deployable forces that are capable of responding to localized crises rather than large-scale military confrontations. Political divisions within the alliance persist, hindering consensus on long-term strategic objectives. To succeed in this scenario, NATO requires an adaptive strategy that balances deterrence with diplomacy by expanding diplomatic backchannels and strategic dialogues, while simultaneously strengthening resilience and ensuring long-term strategic autonomy. This

approach leverages cyber capabilities, next-generation missile defense systems, intelligence operations, and hybrid warfare countermeasures, alongside reinforced crisis management mechanisms to prevent misunderstandings with key adversaries, particularly Russia.

NATO's NFM anticipates a shift from large-scale, high-visibility deployments to agile, rapidly deployable units capable of responding to localized crises. This transition necessitates increased investment in interoperability and force mobility, ensuring that NATO forces can deploy swiftly while avoiding regional instability. According to Sven Biscop, Europeans should take full responsibility for conventional deterrence and defense in the European theater. The 300,000 high-readiness troops envisioned under NATO's NFM for the eastern flank should be entirely European, requiring only one American to function effectively – the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) (Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, n.d.). However, in reality, these forces still rely heavily on U.S. strategic enablers, including intelligence, transportation, and long-range strike capabilities. To achieve true operational independence, European allies must surpass NATO's current capability targets and develop these critical enablers themselves. Therefore, this scenario demands internal unity and consensus-driven decision-making, fostering European defense autonomy within NATO to reduce dependence on U.S. military support while maintaining transatlantic cohesion. Given the reluctance of some leading European nations to increase their defense spending, achieving this goal will require a flexible burden-sharing mechanism that ensures all member states contribute meaningfully to collective security.

Another significant factor shaping this scenario is the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, the duration of which remains a critical question for political scholars and military analysts. Two principal theories of war termination are particularly relevant. James Fearon's bargaining failure theory explains why states may persist in conflict despite high costs, highlighting the challenges of reaching a negotiated settlement even when it would serve their interests. The global leadership theory, in turn, emphasizes that competition for supremacy, influence, and control in international affairs can generate disputes and conflicts, as states vie for dominance within the global system. It is no secret that the primary catalyst for the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war was Ukraine's aspiration to join NATO, which Russia perceives as a significant threat to its national security. This dynamic is aptly explained by the modern theory of "failure in bargaining". A pertinent question arises: would the conflict have been averted if Kyiv had clearly articulated a non-alignment stance and declared its neutrality? While the answer remains highly debatable, one undeniable reality is that timing is crucial in strategic decision-making. Although Russia possesses a substantially larger and better-funded military, Ukraine's defense has been reinforced through international support and the efficient utilization of its resources. Consequently, Ukraine's resilience, bolstered by extensive Western aid, has enabled successful counteroffensive operations and the liberation of occupied territories, while Russia's initial advantages have been curtailed by logistical constraints, high casualties, and effective Ukrainian resistance. Rudolph J. Rummel (1979) asserts that war concludes when a new balance of power is established, making such a balance both a prerequisite and a sufficient condition for termination. But what constitutes this new balance of power? According to Rummel, it first requires a mutual equilibrium between the interests of the conflicting parties, between their wants, desires, goals, and intentions, down to tangible matters such as whose flag will fly over contested territory. The actors in war can be categorized into three groups: the people, the government, and the military, what Clausewitz famously termed the "trinity". These elements interact dynamically, shaping the potential outcomes of conflict. For war to be a viable instrument of policy, the political objectives, military means, and popular will must all be aligned. A theory that ignores any of these components, Clausewitz contends, would be fundamentally incomplete (Iskandarov et al., 2024).

Negotiated settlement and unilateral action constitute the two primary mechanisms through which wars are brought to an end. Negotiated settlements typically involve dialogue,

compromise, and the establishment of mutually acceptable terms between conflicting parties, often facilitated by mediators or third-party actors. Unilateral action, by contrast, entails one party imposing an end to the conflict through the use of force, coercion, or other independent measures. As illustrated in Table 1, Paul Pillar (1983) further refines these broad approaches into six more specific categories, highlighting the nuanced strategies and instruments available to states and actors in pursuit of war termination. This typology underscores that war termination is rarely monolithic and often involves a combination of diplomatic, military, and coercive tools, tailored to the political, strategic, and territorial contexts of the conflict. Understanding these differentiated pathways is essential for analyzing both historical case studies and contemporary conflicts, as it illuminates the conditions under which each method is most likely to succeed.

Table 1 – Means of war termination

Means of war Termination	Explicit Agreement	Status of Peace
Negotiated before Ceasefire	By both parties	Both parties remain
Negotiated after Ceasefire	By both parties	Both parties remain
Negotiated by Third Party	By both parties	Both parties remain*
Unilateral - Capitulation	Imposed by victor	Both parties remain
Unilateral - Extermination/Expulsion	Imposed by victor	One party remains
Unilateral – Withdrawal	Imposed by victor	Both parties remain**

* Agreement drafted by the third party (or an International Organization)

** Both parties remain, however the defeated government is expelled from power.

States may engage in direct bargaining with one another or employ an intermediary, such as a mediator or a coalition of mediators. Negotiated outcomes may occur before or after hostilities, in the form of an armistice or cease-fire. Unilateral actions include capitulation, extermination/expulsion, or withdrawal. For instance, the outcome of World War II was determined by the complete defeat and unconditional surrender of the adversaries. In contrast, following the tripartite ceasefire signed on November 10, 2020, unilateral action was excluded in the context of the Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the focus shifted to negotiated solutions (Iskandarov et al., 2022).

Several rounds of negotiations aimed at ending the Russia-Ukraine war have so far proven futile, effectively ruling out the first method of war termination. With no ceasefire agreement on the horizon, the second method, negotiated armistice or ceasefire cannot be applied. The remaining unilateral options are also precluded, as both parties remain resolute in pursuing their political and military objectives. Consequently, only one option remains viable among the six categories outlined by Pillar: termination negotiated by a third party.

Termination of the Russia-Ukraine war through third party-mediated negotiations represents a complex yet arguably the most viable scenario. History provides several illustrative examples of such mediation: the Bosnian and Israel-Egypt conflicts, mediated by the United States through the Dayton Accords (1995) and Camp David Accords (1978), respectively; ceasefires facilitated by the OSCE, France, and Germany during the Minsk Agreements (2014–2015); the conclusion of the Second Karabakh War through Russia’s mediation in the trilateral statement of November 10, 2020. The May 2025 India–Pakistan ceasefire was primarily mediated by the U.S., with Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UK, and the UAE playing supporting roles. The Israel–Iran ceasefire,

which took effect on 24 June 2025, marked a pivotal moment in Middle Eastern diplomacy, facilitated by the U.S. and Qatar in a rare de-escalation between the two countries. Meanwhile, the Israel– Hamas ceasefire agreement, announced on 8 October 2025, was mediated by the U.S., Egypt, Qatar, and Türkiye, who jointly oversaw and guaranteed the deal’s initial implementation phase. Consequently, the question of which actor could serve as the third-party mediator in the Russia-Ukraine war remains critical. This role may be assumed by an international organization, global powers or a neutral, non-aligned state.

The Russia-Ukraine war’s end is highly complex, shaped by both countries’ strategic, political, and security interests, and requires major diplomatic compromise. Ukraine seeks restoration of its borders, NATO membership, and potential war-damage compensation, while Russia demands recognition of its control over Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine, eased sanctions, and limits on NATO’s presence. Even if a ceasefire and peacekeeping mission are established, deep mistrust will persist, and neither side is likely to gain a decisive advantage, making a prolonged conflict and rare stalemate probable, with lasting military, humanitarian, political, and economic consequences (Iskandarov et al., 2024).

It is important to emphasize the factor mentioned above because the outcome of the ongoing war depends heavily on Western nations, particularly NATO members. All substantial aid to Ukraine originates from NATO budgets. Between 2022 and 2025, NATO members collectively provided over €309 billion in support, encompassing military, financial, and humanitarian assistance. The United States emerged as the largest contributor, allocating €114.64 billion, of which €64.6 billion was dedicated solely to military aid (Duggal, 2025). Various sources (AP News, 2024; Arabia et al., 2024; NATO, 2025; Aries et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2024) indicate that total aid to Ukraine, including military, humanitarian, and financial assistance amounts to less than one year of combined NATO defense spending, estimated at approximately €1.2 trillion. However, the challenge extends beyond funding: it primarily concerns the depletion of critical weapons stockpiles, particularly artillery shells, air defense systems, and armored vehicles. NATO has pledged to increase artillery shell production to two million rounds annually by 2025. Even at this rate, fully replenishing stockpiles after three years of intensive deliveries is projected to require five to seven years. Replacement of advanced platforms, such as Patriot missile systems, Leopard tanks, and Abrams tanks, proceeds even more slowly, potentially taking five to ten years unless production capacities are further expanded. Kasapoglu and Rough (2025) argue that Europe’s defense industrial base remains ill-equipped to provide the continent with the capabilities necessary for genuine strategic autonomy. French President Emmanuel Macron has suggested that European countries reconsider their defense procurement choices to reduce reliance on U.S. military hardware. He proposed that nations purchasing the Patriot missile defense system should instead consider the new-generation Franco-Italian SAMP/T system. Similarly, he recommended that countries opting for the F-35 fighter jet might find the Rafale aircraft a suitable European alternative (defencesecurityasia.com, 2025). However, Kasapoglu and Rough (2025) note that, until very recently, it took up to forty months to produce just one missile for the SAMP/T system’s primary interceptor, the Aster. Even with increased investments, the SAMP/T can hardly rival the U.S.-made Patriot. The same holds true for the French Rafale. According to the authors, its technology falls short of that of the F-35, a true fifth-generation fighter. The Rafale lacks the stealth features that enable the F-35 to operate in non-permissive airspace. Additionally, it does not have the F-35’s advanced data fusion capabilities, which are essential for conducting large-scale coalition warfare and achieving information superiority in the early stages of a conflict. Dassault, the manufacturer of the Rafale, is set to deliver 188 aircraft between 2026 and 2033. While this is a significant quantity, boosted by an increase in orders, it remains challenging for Dassault to accelerate production of additional Rafales without disrupting its existing delivery timelines. Europe does have alternative options for fighter aircraft, such as the Eurofighter Typhoon and the Swedish Gripen. However,

these aircraft include U.S.-made components, which make them subject to International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR). Notably, the Gripen's engines are supplied by General Electric (Kasapoglu & Rough 2025). According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024), between 2020 and 2024, the primary suppliers of arms to European NATO members were: the U.S. (64%), France (6.5%), South Korea (6.5%), Germany (4.7%) and Israel (3.9%). Budget gaps are comparatively easier to address. Given NATO's economic scale (GDP \approx €47 trillion), even €300 billion represents only about 0.6% of GDP over three years, which could be recovered within one to two years of normal economic growth. If NATO maintains defense spending above 2% of GDP, the financial burden of aid to Ukraine can be absorbed within a few years. By contrast, replenishing military stockpiles, particularly artillery, armored vehicles, and air defense systems will likely require five to ten years, unless NATO significantly accelerates its defense industrial base to near-wartime production levels. This reality, in turn, supports the conclusion that NATO is likely to remain cautious and strategically restrained over the next 10–15 years.

Frequent regional crises, such as hybrid attacks, grey-zone operations, and localized conflicts necessitate ad hoc, task-oriented responses rather than full-scale Alliance activation. In this environment, NATO increasingly depends on flexible and scalable coalitions while deepening its cooperation with regional partners and the defense industry to ensure rapid and adaptive responses. Although Article 5 remains the cornerstone of collective defence, the Alliance increasingly employs smaller, mission-specific formations to address emerging security challenges. In the "Cautious NATO" scenario, where the Alliance prioritizes stability and avoids provocative actions, partner engagement is essential for maintaining broad situational awareness and sharing responsibility without overextending NATO's resources. Collaboration with partners facilitates intelligence exchange, joint exercises, and capacity building, thereby reinforcing collective security while minimizing escalation risks. Moreover, partners add flexibility and legitimacy to crisis responses, enhancing NATO's capacity to address regional threats with prudence. From the partners' perspective, however, engagement serves not only to contribute to collective security but also to secure their own strategic interests. For many partners, collaboration with NATO offers access to advanced military expertise, intelligence sharing, and defense capacity building that might otherwise be unattainable. At the same time, partners may view NATO's cautious posture as a double-edged sword: while it reduces the risk of escalation, it may also limit NATO's willingness to act decisively in defense of partners' security concerns. Thus, from the partners' standpoint, engagement in this scenario is both an opportunity to strengthen their security through association with NATO and a source of uncertainty regarding the Alliance's resolve.

Conclusion

This study has examined NATO's strategic restraint and adaptation following the Russia–Ukraine war, focusing on enlargement policy, operational posture, and approaches to war termination. The findings indicate that NATO's cautious yet deliberate actions, such as the inclusion of Finland and Sweden, measured deterrence initiatives, and its reliance on diplomatic engagement reflect a calculated balance between deterrence and dialogue. This posture allows the Alliance to maintain cohesion among its members while minimizing the risk of direct confrontation with Russia. NATO's approach over the next 10–15 years is likely to be characterized by strategic caution, emphasizing deterrence, crisis management, and measured engagement rather than expansion or high-risk confrontations with Russia. The Alliance's careful handling of incidents in Polish and Estonian airspace exemplifies this operational restraint while maintaining credibility and alliance cohesion. In this evolving landscape, NATO's ability to sustain strategic restraint while enhancing readiness and cohesion will determine its continued relevance and effectiveness in safeguarding Euro-Atlantic stability.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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