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SUMMARY

NATO's evolution after the dissolution of the USSR

The relevance of the North Atlantic Alliance in the current international security context

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Content

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a multilateral structure conceived to ensure the defense of Western liberal democracies against the threat posed by the Soviet Union, its allies, or any international actor intending to jeopardize the security of the Western world. It is a defensive military alliance, regarded as the most successful in history. At the moment of the USSR's dissolution, NATO had fulfilled the primary purpose for which it was created, thus entering an identity crisis in the absence of a threat capable of endangering the security of its Western European members and the United States. NATO has endured to the present day, undergoing major shifts in its approach to the concept of "security" in line with new threats in the international system. However, the mere existence of the alliance does not automatically guarantee its continued relevance.

In the last three decades, the alliance has had to adapt to new threats, such as terrorism, cyber-attacks, climate change, and hybrid warfare, in the absence of a clearly defined state adversary. Moreover, NATO has pursued the integration of former communist states, a move that pushed the allied borders right up to the Russian Federation's doorstep; intervened in the Balkans and the Middle East to eliminate potential security risks posed by politically unstable regions; attempted an outreach to Russia, only to see it suddenly reclassified as a "threat" in 2022; and begun the process of defining China as a potential danger to Europe and the United States. Accordingly, this thesis aims to investigate, on the basis of current conditions and the geopolitical developments since the USSR's demise, whether NATO can still function as a military alliance capable of safeguarding its members' political, territorial, social, and economic integrity. The research offers a comprehensive analysis of NATO's actions that have given rise to political and academic perspectives suggesting the alliance no longer constitutes an absolute security benchmark in the transatlantic area. Furthermore, it will identify, based on this analysis, the fundamental measures NATO must implement to reinforce its standing as a still-relevant transatlantic institution.

At the time the research initiative was launched in 2021, NATO found itself at a difficult juncture in terms of justifying its continued existence in the North Atlantic area. Europe was moving toward a policy of strategic autonomy from the United States, seeking to transform the

European Union into a security and defense actor. At the same time, the United States was aiming to partially decouple from its commitments to Europe's defense in order to reallocate significant resources to compete with its new strategic adversary, China. In other words, NATO was overshadowed by the specter of strategic irrelevance, driven by a lack of confidence in the alliance's ability to continue safeguarding the North Atlantic area. Under these circumstances, an analytical process was undertaken to identify the potential new directions NATO should pursue, culminating in the NATO 2030 report, which formed the basis for the 2022 Strategic Concept. The new strategy, radically different from its predecessor, represented a compromise between the European powers and the United States in addressing emerging security challenges, particularly those posed by Russia and China. Furthermore, new domains of security were formally defined as strategic: climate change and cyber security. The way member states relate to the alliance also shifted with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as the reactivated Russian threat strengthened the perception of NATO's growing relevance among its members.

Building on geopolitical developments, the question of NATO's relevance in the future is complex and may vary from year to year depending on the actions of both state and non-state actors. Research on NATO's future can be framed by examining Russia's activities, security breaches that hybrid tactics might create within NATO member states, as well as considerations of nuclear and societal security. All these factors contribute to an unpredictable security environment, the management of which requires a high level of cooperation and coherence.

The thesis offers both a historical overview of NATO's evolution and, more importantly, research and analysis of the recent past, the period that has generated the most debate regarding the alliance's relevance. The work also examines the impact on NATO of new concepts in international relations, such as minilateralism, which reshaped the center–periphery dynamic through groups of members who, leveraging this new concept, have advanced fresh perspectives. Furthermore, it is undoubtedly essential to conduct an in-depth study of the security interests of NATO's principal military and economic powers, namely the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, in order to understand how NATO can continue to evolve to meet these states' security needs; without these core members, the alliance could not survive.

Methodology and Literature Review

The central hypothesis of this thesis is as follows: NATO remains a relevant and, at the same time, crucial North Atlantic institution for the security and defense of its member states. Formally, the paper aims to answer the following primary research question: *"Under the current conditions of international security, can NATO still be a crucial institution for ensuring the security of its members and, by extension, of the Euro-Atlantic area?"*. The research objectives target all elements that may influence NATO's strategy, the external objectives of NATO member states that could have a major impact on the alliance's future, and the identification of potential new threats to the transatlantic area. Accordingly, it is necessary to break down the main objective in order to more precisely synthesize the intentions of the thesis:

- Analysis of the post-USSR period from the perspective of NATO's strategic evolution: it is important to understand the strategic developments that took place during this time and their impact, which made the debate on the alliance's relevance possible.

- Identification of the rationale behind NATO's actions over the past 30 years: this is necessary due to the absence of a clear overarching strategic objective since the fall of the USSR, with multiple official justifications having been presented for the alliance's behavior during this period.

- Independent identification and analysis of the areas of action that NATO must address in order to provide an affirmative response to the main research question.

- Evaluation of the effectiveness of NATO's external diplomatic actions since the dissolution of the USSR, in order to determine whether these actions remain relevant and beneficial for the alliance's future.

- Identification of new areas of interest for NATO. The research into potential new fields of action will take into account medium- and long-term security needs, as well as whether these new elements can contribute to the alliance's sustainability and future evolution.

The main research question stems from the central hypothesis, namely: "Under the current conditions of international security, can NATO still be a crucial institution for ensuring the security of its members and, by extension, of the Euro-Atlantic area?" The main secondary questions that can be derived from this central question are:

- Is there a significant difference between the security environment that emerged immediately after the fall of the USSR and the current one?
- What type of relationship exists between NATO and the Russian Federation?
- How has the attitude of member states toward NATO changed over the past 30 years?
- Is it necessary for NATO to reduce its military focus in favor of non-military security in order to maintain its relevance?
- What have been the most effective measures taken by NATO since the dissolution of the USSR in terms of strengthening the security of its members?
- How have security threats changed with NATO's expansion to the east?
- To what extent is NATO capable of resolving its internal coherence issues?

The research methodology used was primarily based on the analysis of both theoretical and empirical data. The data was sourced from both primary and secondary sources. Official documents were utilized (those from NATO, member states, or other international actors), audio-video recordings of significant interviews and academic dialogues, data from official statistical databases such as NATO, the European Union (Eurostat), and member states, historical archives, and international treaties. In the case of secondary sources, it was essential to explore relevant academic works in the field, as well as to use media sources for tracking significant geopolitical developments. To enhance the accuracy of the arguments, the thesis also made use of older sources containing theoretical perspectives, selected based on their relevance, as well as articles published in non-academic specialized journals.

In addition to data analysis, the research also required an analysis of the discourse of elites in order to determine the intentions of member states or other decision-makers with influence at the NATO level. A concrete example of this would be the analysis of statements and speeches made since 2017 by French President Emmanuel Macron, a leader whose discourse had a major impact on identifying the need for reform within the alliance. In many cases, elite speeches are limited in terms of useful information, but they can reveal certain messages that can be interpreted and lead to speculation. Additionally, a SWOT analysis was used, albeit to a lesser extent, in the chapter dedicated to examining the impact of minilateralism on NATO, particularly by attempting to identify the characteristics of each format analyzed.

An important clarification is the temporal delimitation of the thesis, necessary to maintain the relevance of the research topic and the results obtained. Therefore, the research begins with the London Summit of 1990, which concluded with the London Declaration, in which the end of the Cold War was officially recognized within the alliance. The opposite temporal boundary is represented by the Vilnius Summit in July 2023, considering this moment as a relevant analytical endpoint given the subsequent geopolitical developments. More precisely, the period of a "soft NATO" ends at Vilnius, and the alliance returns to a strategy more akin to the Cold War era, with a deterrence concept based on conventional military power in greater numerical proportions than what NATO leaders had implemented in the pre-Vilnius 2023 period. These new developments are of a complexity that requires a separate analytical and research approach. The delimitation ensures methodological coherence, avoids conceptual dispersion, and allows the research objectives to remain precise, manageable, and relevant to the study of NATO's post-Cold War doctrine.

The history of NATO after the fall of the USSR. Strategic concepts and evolution

The first chapter of the thesis examines the effects of the transition from the Cold War geopolitical logic to a new configuration of the international system. It analyzes the significance of the most important international meetings held between 1989 and 1991, during which the decision was made to reinvent NATO as a military alliance rather than to dissolve it. Member states considered the new security environment too unpredictable to justify a complete break with the past through the abandonment of NATO, and thus opted to restructure the alliance on new, more flexible foundations. At the London Summit, four pillars of reform were outlined: establishing partnerships with former adversaries, restructuring conventional forces into agile units, reducing the European nuclear arsenal, and promoting the OSCE as a complementary security forum. Between 1990 and 1991, the development of the new Strategic Concept spanned 16 months, culminating in Rome in November 1991, where NATO embraced a multidimensional vision: in addition to collective defense, security was now to be pursued through dialogue, cooperation, and crisis management, with a focus on risk assessment rather than traditional threat evaluation.

In the process of defining the principles on which NATO would rely in the future, there were groupings of states with distinct interests, with the main stake being the direction of one of NATO's most important future policies: enlargement. The unification of Germany was, in fact, the

first enlargement process, which triggered the first significant post–Cold War dispute. The United Kingdom and France represented the group of skeptics, who did not see the inclusion of a unified Germany in NATO as a guarantee of stability in Europe. France, in particular, proposed the creation of a new European security structure to replace NATO, one that would also include the Soviet Union. However, the United States and Germany leaned toward maintaining NATO as the main instrument of collective security in Europe, thus legitimizing the effort to redefine the alliance's role - an effort that was formalized through the 1991 Strategic Concept.

The study and analysis of NATO cannot be separated from its strategic concepts, which have guided the Alliance's evolution. The three general strategies (with the exception of the 2022 one, which is analyzed separately) represent gradual evolutions rather than conceptual revolutions. The 1991 Strategic Concept marked a departure from the realist logic of defense, shifting toward a model aligned with constructivist paradigms, in which the security of societal values gained greater importance than the strict defense of the state. Concepts such as dialogue, cooperation, and crisis management were prioritized over collective defense, leading to a significant reduction in the military component. Through this strategy, the Alliance aimed to bring Russia closer to European values through dialogue and cooperation, a goal that ultimately proved unsuccessful. Also, for the first time in a major official document, the idea appeared that Europe should contribute more significantly to its own security, an intention that did not materialize in any meaningful way until after 2022.

Under the pretext of creating potential new threats to Europe's geopolitical stability and preventing genocide in Bosnia, NATO intervened militarily in the Yugoslav war. However, the Allies only agreed on the need for intervention to stop a genocide, the coherence of visions regarding Yugoslavia's political future was ultimately decided by the United States. Europe remained dependent on the U.S. in this new geopolitical era, and NATO continued to be a key vehicle for advancing American interests on the European continent. Another conclusion from the intervention in Yugoslavia is that it marked the first step toward antagonizing Russia, reviving a sense of perpetual insecurity that had been temporarily suspended by the Soviet Union's collapse and subsequent democratization efforts. "From this moment on, NATO's actions in Central and Eastern Europe, including enlargement, would be perceived by Moscow as hostile measures against Russia's security. Additionally, Russia opposed NATO's intervention in Kosovo,

understanding from it that the Alliance no longer required a United Nations framework to act, which significantly undermined the potential for cooperation offered by the newly formed NATO–Russia Council. These events shaped the thinking of future Russian leader Vladimir Putin, whose public hostility toward NATO, expressed at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, was based on the conviction that Russia could no longer influence NATO decisions that might affect its interests in its near abroad.

Both the 1999 and 2010 Strategic Concepts represent updates of the original post–Cold War strategy rather than fundamental shifts in NATO's approach. The 1999 Strategic Concept adapted NATO's foundations to the geopolitical developments of the previous decade and prepared the Alliance for the enlargement decided by the Clinton administration and accepted by European members. It reiterated the intention to foster European security autonomy, through the European Union, but in a complementary role to NATO. NATO leaders decided to continue military interventions aimed at stabilization and conflict prevention, introducing terms such as "crisis management" and "conflict prevention." The 2010 Strategic Concept built on its predecessor, with several key modifications. First, Russia's aggression in Georgia sent a strong signal that stalled the enlargement process, prompting Allies to negotiate regional and global partnerships instead. Second, the concept of "collective defense" was expanded to include new threats that had caused human and material harm within the Alliance, namely terrorism and cyber-attacks. Third, the Allies made a significant geopolitical miscalculation by deeming conventional threats no longer a fundamental priority for NATO. This misjudgment was one of the reasons Russia believed the West would react passively to Moscow's attempts to reassert political control in its near abroad.

The shortcomings of the 2010 Strategic Concept, along with the slow progress in deterring Russia, led to NATO's crisis of confidence between 2017 and 2021. The 2022 Strategic Concept was intended to revitalize the Alliance even without the unexpected impetus of the war in Ukraine. Europe succeeded in securing continued American commitment, but did not fully comply with the U.S. request to internationalize NATO in order to involve European powers in the geopolitical competition with China. Although NATO had a new strategic framework adapted to the emerging geopolitical realities, transatlantic cohesion was still lacking; paradoxically, however, NATO's importance grew in the eyes of its members, especially those on the Eastern flank. The Russian threat forged a European NATO cohesion, bolstered by Sweden's and Finland's accession, but this

did not eliminate the need for direct U.S. involvement to ensure Europe's security.

The paper also addresses the dynamics of the NATO–EU relationship, which has evolved from the failure of the Berlin Plus arrangements to cooperation hampered by a mosaic of distinct interests, as well as by the initial idea of Strategic Autonomy. In fact, the Berlin Plus agreement proved too advanced for the moment at which it was attempted, and it was very little utilized; the main cause being divergent interests and even conflictual situations among states that do not belong to both organizations (for example, Turkey–Cyprus or Greece–Turkey). The next significant attempt to develop a functional EU–NATO partnership is represented by the 2016 Joint Declaration. In this case, the partnership focuses on areas of expertise, with a clear distinction: military implications are managed by NATO, while non-military areas are shared and fall under the partnership. Thus, NATO remains the main pillar for collective defense. At the same time, the EU can strengthen defense capabilities in non-traditional domains and provide the technical and human means by which NATO can bolster Europe's defense capacities.

NATO and addressing non-traditional aspects of security

Addressing the non-traditional aspects of security was essential to this research. Over the past 30 years, NATO has emphasized these types of threats as the correct interpretation of future geopolitical challenges, such as the cyber domain and climate change. This study focused on these two security dimensions because they are the most significant in the context of hybrid warfare (for cyber-threats) and represent one of the most pressing challenges of the future (climate change).

Cyber-threats primarily target critical civilian infrastructures, energy, healthcare, and banking, with potentially catastrophic effects on state functioning. The integration of cyber security into the Alliance's structures unfolded in two major phases: from 1999 to 2010, when the foundations were laid by training experts and gathering intelligence to launch the first protective measures; and post-2010, when the cyber domain was incorporated into overall defense planning, creating a unified strategic framework. Subsequent measures included a general cyber-space policy in 2011, a real-time response team in 2012, and the publication of the Tallinn Manual, which provided NATO with a doctrinal framework for defensive cyber operations. However, the strategic decision that gave the Alliance real relevance in Euro-Atlantic cyber security was to allow the

invocation of the collective-defense clause in response to high-intensity, complex cyber-attacks. Defining the cyber domain as a "theater of war" helps justify such an invocation, yet NATO has not established clear criteria for the threshold of intensity that would automatically trigger Article 5. As a result, member states remain reluctant to initiate a collective proceeding, often preferring Articles 3 and 4 for preliminary consultations, and decisions on invoking Article 5 are made on a case-by-case basis. This strategic ambiguity has, on one hand, delayed common responses (the Albanian example in 2022 illustrates this), and on the other, underscores the need for a unified evaluation and response framework to maintain deterrence and Alliance cohesion.

In terms of climate change, it is difficult to assess the extent to which NATO can have a meaningful impact in mitigating its effects. Global warming and extreme weather events degrade ecosystems and critical infrastructure (energy, health care, and transportation), generating competition for resources, forced migration, and potential armed conflicts. Uninhabitable areas can produce waves of climate refugees and social tensions, weakening state institutions and military capacity to respond to traditional threats. Thus, climate change becomes "a disruptive force that affects every aspect of life," threatening the internal cohesion of NATO and its members. The Alliance addresses climate change on two levels: adaptation and prevention, by integrating climate considerations into the planning of missions, exercises, and military infrastructure, as well as developing humanitarian response capabilities for natural disasters; and mitigation, by reducing greenhouse-gas emissions generated by military activities and equipment, aiming for climate neutrality by 2050 with an interim 45% reduction by 2030, targets adopted at the Madrid Summit in 2022.

Following the research, the main obstacles preventing NATO from making a significant contribution to countering the effects of climate change were identified: the absence of uniform criteria for reporting military emissions; the prioritization of conventional threats due to the geopolitical context; and inconsistent political will at the national level. Although technical initiatives exist (the Innovation Fund, DIANA), their success hinges on coherent adoption and implementation by member states, which continue to delay the launch of climate reforms with a real impact on Allied capabilities.

The impact of minilateralism on NATO's evolution

The analysis of minilateralism provided a clear picture of the division of interests within NATO, the Alliance's regional shortcomings, and the difficulty peripheral countries face in influencing decisions made at the center. Minilateralism is defined as a form of international cooperation in which a limited number of states, enough to reach the necessary "critical mass", coordinate their efforts on a specific set of issues within a defined time frame. Unlike rigid, bureaucratized multilateral formats (e.g., the UN, the OSCE), minilaterals favor internal cohesion, rapid decision-making, and innovation, thanks to their lack of complex institutionalization and smaller membership. In the Euro-Atlantic space, NATO has become the hub of multilateral security, and minilateral formats have often emerged as complements that can swiftly address specific regional issues. By offering "ex-ante" channels of dialogue among allies with convergent interests, minilaterals have facilitated the harmonization of positions before formal negotiations, thereby reducing potential public disputes and accelerating the decision-making process. The thesis examined four of the most representative such formats.

Alongside the Three Seas Initiative, the Bucharest Nine is the main minilateral format on NATO's Eastern flank. The B9 (Romania, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Hungary) operates as an informal platform for consultation and cooperation, designed to highlight its members' specific security needs within NATO and to draw Western powers' attention to the region's vulnerabilities. The format has played an important role in supporting Ukraine and in backing Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO, becoming a relevant actor in the Transatlantic security dialogue. The B9 has been effective in fulfilling its primary objective, developing a common voice for the Eastern flank and compelling Western powers to increase their engagement in securing Alliance members in Russia's immediate neighborhood.

Complementing the B9 is the Three Seas Initiative. Launched in 2015, the 3SI is a regional cooperation platform among states located between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas, aimed at developing joint projects in infrastructure, energy, transportation, and information technology. Its objectives include improving regional connectivity, reducing energy dependence on Russia, and countering China's influence in the region. The 3SI indirectly contributes to the security of NATO's Eastern flank by facilitating military mobility and enhancing member states' resilience. Key projects such as Rail-to-Sea and Via Carpatia are essential for the movement of troops and

military equipment. However, the Initiative faces challenges related to funding and the pace of project implementation. The 3SI provides the Alliance with the necessary infrastructure to enable timely military intervention when needed. Thus, the Eastern flank has organized itself on two important levels to develop an Allied presence there, with NATO regarded as an indispensable institution for Central and Eastern European states.

The third minilateral format analyzed is the Visegrád Group. The only notable advantage it brought to the Alliance was facilitating the regional political cooperation of its members (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary) for integration into NATO and the EU. After achieving that goal, the format reoriented itself toward regional cooperation in various fields, including security and defense. A second achievement was the creation of a joint battle group in 2016; however, this was made available to the EU and did not play a significant role in NATO's rapid-reaction capability. The V4 was included in the analysis to demonstrate that a once-successful format can become irrelevant if major divergences arise in the regional interests of its member states.

The final minilateral format discussed is the Northern Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO). It brings together Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, and Norway with the aim of strengthening national defense, exploring common synergies, and facilitating efficient military solutions. In other words, NORDEFCO is the response of the Northern European states to NATO's limited engagement in the region, effectively substituting for the Alliance's strategy. Initially, NORDEFCO's activity was limited, but Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent war in Ukraine revitalized the format, directing it toward addressing Russian challenges and improving joint military capability in close coordination with NATO. NORDEFCO facilitated the operational rapprochement of Finland and Sweden with NATO, contributing to their rapid accession. Among its successes are agreements on military mobility and joint air surveillance. The NATO membership of all its members has opened new prospects for cooperation and for strengthening security in the Arctic and Baltic regions.

Geopolitical Strategies and Public Opinion since February 2022 among the Major

NATO Powers

The final chapter of the thesis examines NATO's current geopolitics by exploring both the regional and international conduct of its leading Western powers, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, and by presenting public-opinion data from these countries on their perceptions of the Alliance and its key security issues. In the second part, it addresses three theaters where NATO faces notable gaps in defense and deterrence: the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Arctic Ocean.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted Germany to fundamentally rethink its strategic paradigm, breaking with a long period of geopolitical ambiguity and caution built around a privileged relationship with Moscow. That relationship, strengthened by Germany's reliance on Russian hydrocarbons and its domestic nuclear-phase-out policy, had been a major obstacle to Germany's active participation in NATO's collective deterrence efforts, undermining the Alliance's responsiveness and cohesion in the face of Russian aggression. After 2022, the Scholz government declared a *Zeitenwende* (turning point), committing to raise defense spending to 2 percent of GDP and to reduce energy dependence on Russia by diversifying imports toward partners such as the United States, Qatar, and Norway. However, these measures have been implemented in a piecemeal and slow fashion, encountering domestic opposition from the SPD's pacifist wing and from public opinion, especially in the former East, where attitudes toward Russia and NATO remain ambivalent.

On the military level, Germany's contribution to supporting Ukraine has been significant financially but restrictive regarding offensive weaponry, reflecting fears of possible escalation. The divergences between Germany and France over support for Ukraine have undermined NATO's political unity, while internal discrepancies between East and West Germany have perpetuated strategic ambiguity. Opinion polls show growing support for strengthening defense and the transatlantic relationship, but also a low perception of the risk of war, suggesting that the drive toward rearmament is fueled more by deterrence than by belief in an imminent threat. Although Germany has abandoned policies favorable to Russia, it remains reluctant to assume a strategic leadership role in Europe and within NATO, despite its privileged economic and demographic position. For NATO, this German uncertainty complicates the implementation of major objectives, such as the development of the 300,000-strong Response Force, and calls into question the

Alliance's ability to ensure a coherent and effective defense on its Eastern flank.

The position of France toward NATO has evolved significantly over the past decades, oscillating between strategic autonomy and active reintegration into the Alliance's structures. Traditionally, French strategy drew inspiration from former President Charles de Gaulle's doctrine, centered on rejecting subordination to U.S. strategic hegemony and advocating for an autonomous European defense. After returning to NATO's military structures in 2009 and amid internal NATO reforms, France gradually became a proactive actor, engaging in key areas such as cyber security, space defense, and the strengthening of the Eastern flank. Nevertheless, its stance toward NATO remained ambiguous, swinging between cooperation and criticism, most notably in President Macron's 2019 remark about the Alliance's "brain death".

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine prompted a profound transformation in France's strategy. France gradually abandoned its hesitations about NATO and adopted an active policy of support for Ukraine, becoming the framework nation for the eFP mission in Romania and participating in air policing on the Eastern flank. France has advocated for operational flexibility and mobility rather than permanent troop deployments, in order to preserve its strategic freedom in other regions such as the Sahel.

Domestically, French public opinion has been fluctuating toward NATO: support increased after 2022, but trust levels remain lower than in Eastern Europe. The lack of a clear NATO identity, as well as perceptions of the U.S. as a global hegemon, have fueled French skepticism. France has moved from an ambivalent stance to active engagement within NATO, without fully abandoning the idea of European strategic autonomy. Its evolution reflects a pragmatic adaptation to new geopolitical realities, consolidating its role as a key actor in European security while maintaining a doctrinal line distinct from its Allies.

In contrast to France, the United Kingdom has played an essential role as a bridge between Europe and the United States within the transatlantic Alliance. The "special relationship" between London and Washington, historically strong, has endured even after Brexit, reflecting a deep strategic convergence. The British security agenda has traditionally aligned with the American one, as highlighted by the signing of the new Atlantic Charter in 2021. This relationship drives strong confidence in NATO and reluctance toward European autonomous defense initiatives, especially those promoted by France.

Post-Brexit British strategy includes a global dimension, manifested in commitments in the Indo-Pacific, such as participation in AUKUS. However, an analysis of oral evidence from the British Parliament reveals a mismatch between geopolitical ambitions and actual capabilities: a declining troop strength, equipment shortfalls, and modernization delays all undermine the ability to manage multiple fronts simultaneously. This reality strains the relationship between strategic vision and available resources. Despite these deficiencies, the United Kingdom is a leader in adapting its armed forces to NATO's climate objectives. Initiatives such as the "Prometheus" project and the use of sustainable aviation fuels in military aircraft demonstrate a transition toward a sustainable defense model without compromising security commitments. This effort takes place in a context where other NATO members treat the climate issue as secondary.

Regarding public opinion, support for NATO dipped temporarily between 2017 and 2019, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine reversed the trend: by 2023, 75 percent of Britons viewed NATO as a security guarantee. Nevertheless, confidence remains contingent on the U.S. commitment to Europe, a U.S. withdrawal could significantly undermine positive perceptions of the Alliance. Still, NATO remains the central pillar of the United Kingdom's post-Brexit security policy, underpinned by its privileged relationship with the United States.

Since its founding, the United States has been the central pillar of NATO and the primary means by which the American government pursues its geopolitical objectives in Europe. However, beginning with the Obama administration, the U.S. gradually recalibrated its foreign policy in favor of the Asia-Pacific region in response to China's rise as a global power. In an effort to drive the "pivot to Asia," the Trump administration significantly strained the U.S.–NATO relationship, criticizing the Alliance and threatening to withdraw American forces, especially from Germany. President Joe Biden restored a pro-transatlantic stance by reaffirming the crucial importance of Article 5, yet episodes such as the Afghanistan withdrawal and France's exclusion from the AUKUS pact undermined European partners' trust. At the same time, the U.S. has promoted "burden-sharing," urging European allies to invest more in their own security.

The war in Ukraine has reactivated American commitment to European security and strengthened NATO cohesion. Still, the Biden administration continues to encourage Europe's more active engagement in other regions, particularly the Indo-Pacific. European states, especially those on the Eastern flank, remain reluctant to define new security priorities, continuing to focus

primarily on the Russian threat. Consequently, the U.S. has maintained a mechanism for evaluating NATO members' contributions to collective security based on meeting the 2 percent of GDP defense-spending benchmark. This approach, emphasized under Trump, overlooks important factors such as internal resilience, energy diversification, and support for Ukraine. Proposing alternative indicators would offer a more complete picture of member states' actual efforts. Thus, to achieve an assessment aligned with current geopolitical realities, NATO should adopt a multidimensional framework that goes beyond simple budgetary allocations.

American public opinion regarding NATO is generally positive in terms of its necessity and trust in the Alliance, but it is politically divided. Recent polls show consistent support for NATO, including among Republicans, although Trump supporters are more skeptical. Overall, at any given time, Democrats' confidence in NATO is higher than that of Republican adherents. The invasion of Ukraine increased public empathy toward NATO, but this support may wane as the conflict becomes normalized. The public prefers diplomacy over harsh sanctions against non-compliant allies. American commitment to NATO is subject to pressures from a transforming geopolitical context, administrative changes, and domestic ideological differences. Although the strategic pivot to Asia is irreversible, Europe remains vital to U.S. security. Maintaining NATO as a central actor in the global security architecture depends on balancing Allied effectiveness, transatlantic solidarity, and the United States' domestic political flexibility.

NATO and Black Sea Security

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Black Sea region shifted from the stability guaranteed by Soviet hegemony and the Montreux Convention to a fragile balance, marked by the divergent interests of its six littoral states (Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, Georgia) and by external actors (NATO, the EU, the USA). The Black Sea constitutes a strategic hub between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, channeling transport corridors such as the Rhine–Main–Danube route, Rail-2-Sea, Via Carpatia, and the "Middle Corridor" to China. The importance of this area is magnified by the security risks generated by the assertive interference of regional and global powers. Russia asserts its great-power status through control of the Black Sea, reacting aggressively to NATO and EU enlargement via conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine and by maintaining its occupation of Transnistria. Likewise, although its approach is non-military,

China projects power through its Belt and Road Initiative and the 17+1 mechanism, investing in the logistical infrastructure of strategically placed ports like Anaklia and Varna to secure supply chains. Moreover, through hybrid warfare, Russia and China seek to reshape political narratives in the littoral states in favor of authoritarian regimes.

Until 2014, NATO largely neglected the Black Sea, with its involvement confined to ad-hoc dialogues and a 'gradualist' approach. Beginning in 2016, at Romania's initiative, multinational structures were established, yet without the permanent presence seen on the Northern Flank. The 2022 Strategic Concept's emphasis on bolstering the Eastern Flank calls for force augmentation but fails to clearly delineate the Black Sea region. The absence of a shared vision among Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, and the strict application of the Montreux Convention, undermines Allied cohesion and the adoption of a coherent deterrence policy.

Accordingly, measures are required in the Black Sea to offset the Montreux Convention's constraints by developing autonomous capabilities: maritime drones, A2/AD systems, ISR (intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance), and by reinforcing land infrastructure, such as at Mihail Kogălniceanu. It is also essential to deepen bilateral and trilateral cooperation among NATO littoral states, and to conduct regular exercises in naval mine-countermeasure operations.

Nordic Challenges: Russia's Involvement and NATO's Shortcomings in the Arctic Zone and the Baltic Sea

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia inherited an extensive network of military bases and polar infrastructure, but initially pursued an 'Arctic exceptionalism' policy focused on cooperation within the Arctic Council (1996). Since 2014, as relations with NATO deteriorated, Moscow has undertaken a systematic militarization of the region, invoking the need to protect sovereign rights and to 'counter the policies of unfriendly states.' Russia's 2020 strategy envisions exploiting natural resources, maintaining an all-year navigable trade route, and strengthening military capabilities, including nuclear forces, on the Kola Peninsula. To credibly posture its 'second-strike' nuclear deterrent, Russia is expanding its buffer from the Barents Sea toward the GIUK gap, supported by its Borei and Delta-4 submarine fleets, surface warships, air assets, and coastal troops.

Moreover, Russia and China are pursuing cooperation in the region to capitalize on natural resources and the emerging new trade hub created by global warming. China, self-declared a 'near-Arctic state' in 2018, launched its Polar Silk Road program in 2017, funding LNG projects such as Yamal and Arctic LNG-2 and investing in transport infrastructure. This partnership is predominantly economic: China provides capital and technology to develop maritime routes and extraction facilities, while Russia supplies the energy resources to Chinese customers. In the long run, Beijing's dominance could erode Russian sovereignty, creating an unsustainable dependence on Chinese investment.

Following the end of the Cold War, NATO underestimated the region's geopolitical importance, relying on 'Arctic exceptionalism' and cooperation through the Arctic Council. Delays in establishing tailored deterrence structures, geographic and climatic challenges, and a focus on the Eastern Flank perpetuated strategic gaps. Canada's and the United States' national strategies only recognized, in 2017 and 2019 respectively, the need to develop Arctic capabilities (polar-capable vehicles, early-warning radars, and the reactivation of the Second Fleet). However, a dedicated NATO command remains absent. Additionally, the shortage of icebreakers and of mechanisms to track Russian submarines beneath the polar ice cap further accentuates the Alliance's vulnerabilities. Above all, its greatest deficiency is the lack of a coherent deterrence and defense plan. Nonetheless, reform efforts are planned in the form of regional defense plans, still classified, whose development and implementation were mandated at the 2023 Vilnius Summit.

The Baltic Sea is also a vital maritime route for both NATO and Russia. For Moscow, it serves as the principal export corridor for oil and gas to Europe and as the maritime lifeline to the ice-free Kaliningrad exclave, making it a critical strategic point. Russia's 2022 naval strategy reaffirms the region's role in guaranteeing energy flows and calls for developing military capabilities to secure subsea pipelines and the ports of St. Petersburg and Ust-Luga. Kaliningrad hosts the 11th Army Corps, comprising some 12,000–18,000 personnel, armored units, artillery, and S-400 air-defense systems, supplemented by A2/AD posts designed to block any NATO transits through the Danish straits. Moreover, by blending conventional force with hybrid tactics, cyber-sabotage and disinformation, Russia seeks to weaken Baltic-state cohesion and fracture their security perceptions.

Despite becoming a "NATO lake" with Sweden's and Finland's accession, the Alliance confronts Baltic-specific challenges: multiple narrow channels, shallow waters, numerous islands, and the proximity of Russian territory. While geography inherently favors a defensive posture, effective deterrence demands anti-ship missiles, naval mines, and special-operations forces tailored for complex littoral missions. The absence of a coherent Baltic strategy and of a permanent maritime presence forces reliance on rotational deployments and bilateral exercises, and leaves undersea communications infrastructure vulnerable to sabotage, as exemplified by the Nord Stream attacks. Like in the Arctic, the Baltic Sea requires a unified Allied outlook and intensified efforts to remedy military shortfalls, upgrading deficient infrastructure and providing sufficient forces to secure the region.

Conclusions

Following the research effort, the hypothesis that NATO retains its relevance in the transatlantic security architecture, even after the disappearance of the Soviet threat, proved valid. The collected data indicate a high level of public confidence in the Alliance across Europe and North America, confirming both the effectiveness of its deterrence capability and its perception as the guarantor of collective security. NATO has not limited itself to the traditional role of conventional defense but has expanded to a multidimensional level, encompassing non-military threats as well. The recommendations emerging from this study include the need to redefine the concept of "Smart Defense," so that resources are focused on critical areas; an additional allocation of capabilities to the Northern Flank, where geostrategic vulnerabilities remain significant; and the cultivation of genuine internal cohesion through the equitable sharing of responsibilities among Allies. Although the Russian threat continues to be the principal challenge, integrating China as a secondary priority is deemed necessary to anticipate global developments. Based on these conclusions, the initial hypothesis is not only confirmed but also strengthened for the future.

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