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Transformation of NATO's Strategic Concept in the Post-Cold War Era:
A Historical and Analytical Inquiry

Soğuk Savaş Sonrası NATO'nun Stratejik Konseptindeki Dönüşüm:
Tarihsel ve Analitik Bir İnceleme

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ÖZET

Soğuk Savaş'ın sona ermesiyle varoluşsal rakibini kaybeden NATO, 1990'lardan itibaren insani müdahaleler ve terörle mücadele operasyonları gibi "out-of-area" görevler üstlenmiş, böylece savunma kimliğinin ötesine geçerek küresel güvenlik meselelerinde rol almaya başlamıştır. Ancak 2014'te Rusya'nın Kırım'ı ilhak etmesi, İttifak'ın Doğu Avrupa'da kolektif savunma kapasitesini yeniden canlandırması gerektiğini gösteren ilk büyük uyarı niteliği taşımıştır. Bu süreçte Galler (2014) ve Varşova (2016) Zirveleri, Hızlı Tepki Gücü ve İleri Mevzi Varlığı gibi önlemlerle NATO'nun tehdit algılarını güncellemiştir. Yine de esas kırılma, 2022'de Rusya'nın Ukrayna'ya yönelik kapsamlı işgal girişimiyle yaşanmıştır. Bu olay, büyük çaplı konvansiyonel savaşın hâlâ Avrupa'da gerçekleşebileceğini bütün açıklığıyla ortaya koyarken, NATO'yu da tam ölçekli bir stratejik dönüşüme itmiştir.

2022 Madrid Zirvesi'nde kabul edilen yeni Stratejik Konsept, Rusya'yı açıkça "en büyük ve doğrudan tehdit" olarak tanımlamakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda İttifak'ın kolektif savunma ilkesini yüksek hazırlık seviyesine taşıyacak tedbirleri de içermiştir. Finlandiya ve İsveç'in NATO'ya katılım süreci, tarihsel "tarafsızlık" yaklaşımlarının değiştiğini göstermekle beraber, Doğu Avrupalı müttefiklerin güvenlik kaygılarını da kısmen gidermiştir. Öte yandan çatışmanın tetiklediği enerji krizi, mülteci dalgası ve ekonomik sarsıntı gibi faktörler, İttifak içi dayanışmayı hem güçlendirmiş hem de zorlamıştır. Sonuç olarak NATO, terörle mücadele döneminde geliştirdiği esnek operasyon kapasitesini korurken, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı'nın yarattığı tehdit ortamına adapte olmak üzere kolektif savunma rolüne büyük ölçüde geri dönmüştür. Bu dönüşüm, İttifak'ın gelecek on yıllar boyunca transatlantik güvenlik mimarisindeki yerini belirleyecek kalıcı etkiler doğurabilecek potansiyele sahiptir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: NATO, Stratejik Konsept, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı, Kolektif Savunma, Madrid Zirvesi

ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has grappled with redefining its purpose amid changing threats and missions. Although the Alliance expanded its role to include humanitarian interventions and counterterrorism operations—particularly after 9/11—Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea signaled a renewed need for collective defense along NATO’s eastern flank. Initial responses, such as the Readiness Action Plan and Enhanced Forward Presence, underscored a partial return to deterrence, yet it was Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that truly transformed NATO’s strategic outlook. Suddenly, large-scale conventional warfare was no longer a distant possibility but an active crisis on European soil, prompting Allied capitals to accelerate defense spending, intensify joint exercises, and refine command structures.

At the 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO’s new Strategic Concept identified Russia as “the most significant and direct threat,” formalizing a decisive pivot toward high-readiness collective defense. The accession process for Finland and Sweden reflected the severity of security concerns and marked the end of long-held neutrality within Northern Europe. However, the war’s ripple effects—a massive refugee influx, spiraling energy prices, and heightened nuclear tension—forced the Alliance to confront multifaceted challenges extending beyond mere territorial defense. These developments also revived debates on Europe’s long-term security architecture and the delicate balance between deterrence, diplomacy, and broader global commitments. While retaining lessons learned from the War on Terror period, NATO has effectively recalibrated around conventional defense, positioning itself for an era where state-based aggression and hybrid warfare converge. The transformation now underway may well define the Alliance’s strategic relevance for decades to come.

Keywords: NATO, Strategic Concept, Russo-Ukrainian War, Collective Defense, Madrid Summit

INTRODUCTION

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has navigated a tumultuous trajectory since the end of the Cold War. Originally established in 1949 as a bulwark against Soviet expansion, it lost its existential foe with the collapse of the USSR in 1991, forcing the Alliance to grapple with a core question: How can NATO remain relevant in a radically altered security environment? (Freedman, 2017). Initial answers emerged in the early 1990s, when NATO pivoted toward crisis management and peace-support operations in the Balkans. Yet no sooner had it embraced a broader security agenda than the attacks of September 11, 2001, propelled the Alliance into a leading role in the War on Terror, exemplified by its engagement in Afghanistan. These “out-of-area” missions shaped NATO’s strategic identity for over a decade, expanding its operational horizons far beyond Europe and spurring debates about burden-sharing, expeditionary capabilities, and the legitimacy of nation-building tasks (Kay, 2006).

A second major shift materialized in 2014, when Russia’s annexation of Crimea jolted NATO into reemphasizing collective defense. The subsequent summits in Wales (2014) and Warsaw (2016) reflected a partial return to deterrence, marked by the Readiness Action Plan, Enhanced Forward Presence, and renewed attention to Article 5 commitments (NATO, 2014a; 2016). Despite these adjustments, many Allies presumed that large-scale war in Europe had become an anachronism—until February 2022, when Russia’s full-blown invasion of Ukraine shattered such assumptions (Freedman, 2022). The war not only revived the specter of conventional aggression on the continent but also underscored the evolving interplay of hybrid, cyber, and economic threats. Confronted by the conflict’s humanitarian, energy, and geopolitical repercussions, NATO found itself compelled to adopt a far more comprehensive stance on European security, culminating in the 2022 Madrid Summit, where the Alliance identified Russia as “the most significant and direct threat” and committed to ambitious force postures (NATO, 2022).

This historical and analytical inquiry examines the transformative arc of NATO’s strategic concept from the 1990s to the present day, paying particular attention to how successive crises—humanitarian interventions, the War on Terror, and Russia’s resurgence—shaped Alliance doctrine, force planning, and political cohesion. This study will be organized in 5 sections. Section 1 outlines the theoretical and analytical

framework, contrasting realist and institution-based perspectives on alliance formation and adaptation. Section 2 charts NATO's early post-Cold War transformations, focusing on the 1991 and 1999 Strategic Concepts. Section 3 addresses the Alliance's "out-of-area" engagements after 9/11, highlighting the operational and political lessons gleaned from Afghanistan. Section 4 then delves into Russia's resurgence, culminating in the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the far-reaching consequences that prompted NATO's Strategic Concept to pivot at Madrid. Section 5 explores how an evolving multipolar landscape, coupled with shifting global power balances, might shape NATO's future role. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes these findings, arguing that the Alliance's enduring capacity to adapt—while retaining its core principle of collective defense—demonstrates both its resilience and the sobering recognition that major-power conflict in Europe has reemerged as a defining security challenge.

By tracing NATO's strategic evolution through these watershed moments, the article illuminates how an organization born from bipolar confrontation recalibrated itself for humanitarian, counterterror, and eventually renewed territorial-defense missions. Far from a neat linear progression, NATO's adaptation underscores the shifting demands of an international system where threats no longer adhere to a single ideological axis. The Russo-Ukrainian War, in particular, reveals that high-intensity warfare remains a pressing concern, compelling the Alliance to confront not just kinetic threats but also interlinked crises of energy security, economic stability, and democratic resilience. In this sense, NATO's story in the post-Cold War era stands as a testament to both the fluidity of global security and the enduring necessity of collective action in defending shared values against contemporary forms of aggression.

1. Theoretical and Analytical Framework

1.1. Realist and Power-Transition Approaches

Realist scholars have traditionally argued that alliances take shape in response to concrete threats and shifts in the distribution of power (Walt, 1987). From this vantage point, NATO's founding mission was primarily about deterring the Soviet Union, a task that appeared largely moot after 1991. Offensive realism goes further by asserting that major powers incessantly seek relative gains, while secondary states form alliances to balance against looming hegemonic threats (Mearsheimer, 2001). In NATO's case, post-Cold War interventions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and beyond could thus be interpreted as ways to maintain cohesion and address emergent security risks.

Yet this emphasis on external threats alone may not capture the evolving geopolitical landscape, in which multiple challengers—both state and non-state—contest established powers. Power-transition theorists warn that periods of rising challengers, such as a fast-growing China, can heighten the risk of conflict if dominant powers and their allies fail to accommodate shifting realities (Allison, 2017). Viewed through this lens, NATO's recent focus on cybersecurity, strategic communications, and broader partnerships reflects an attempt to adapt in anticipation of a more multipolar order. While Russia's resurgence has revived a familiar sense of deterrence on Europe's eastern flank, potential competition with China underscores NATO's uneasy expansion of its strategic horizon.

One prominent illustration of the realist outlook is found in Mearsheimer's (2001) argument that NATO's expansion was less an altruistic invitation to new democracies and more a strategic maneuver aimed at containing a weakened Russia. By this account, the Alliance capitalized on a unipolar moment to cement Western influence in Central and Eastern Europe before Moscow could reassert itself (Mearsheimer, 2014). From a power-transition perspective, proponents of this view contend that NATO's open-door policy implicitly perpetuated a balance-of-power logic, signaling that any potential challenger—be it Russia or an emerging power elsewhere—would confront a robust, ever-enlarging alliance. While critics accuse Mearsheimer of overlooking the normative pull of liberal democracy, he maintains that states ultimately prioritize relative gains in an anarchic system. The historical pattern of NATO interventions—

from the Balkans to Afghanistan—allegedly fits the realpolitik motif, reinforcing the idea that the Alliance’s moves are driven by hard security rationales rather than purely liberal ideals.

Additionally, scholars who emphasize power-transition theory often point to NATO’s expansion as a preventive strategy to forestall the rise of a revisionist Russia (Zakaria, 1998; Schweller, 1999). Under this rationale, Western capitals sought to integrate vulnerable states like Poland or the Czech Republic into the Alliance’s institutional and military structures before they could be drawn into Russia’s orbit. Such an approach, while aligning with Mearsheimer’s realist logic, has sparked debates about whether NATO unwittingly fueled Russian resentment by eroding Moscow’s former sphere of influence. Hence, the realpolitik impetus behind NATO enlargement becomes evident: a preemptive containment posture to ensure that any future power shift—whether in Russia or beyond—would not go unchecked. This perspective contrasts sharply with liberal-institutionalist narratives, which underscore the role of shared values and collective identity, a theme we explore in next section.

1.2. Identity, Norms, and Institutional Dynamics

A different strand of scholarship stresses that NATO’s longevity cannot be explained solely by material power calculations. Constructivist theorists point to shared values and collective identities that bind member states, suggesting that NATO functions partly as a “security community” rather than a mere balancing coalition (Wendt, 1999). Alongside formal obligations enshrined in the Washington Treaty, the Alliance promotes democratic governance and rule of law—normative anchors that may help sustain unity even in the absence of a single, existential foe.

Institutionalist analyses underscore how NATO’s command structures, joint decision-making, and integrated defense planning create self-reinforcing routines over time. By embedding cooperative habits among diverse member states, the Alliance can retain cohesion against threats that evolve or recede (Huntington, 1996). This endurance derives not just from rational threat responses but also from the internalization of rules, procedures, and a shared sense of purpose.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that NATO’s post–Cold War evolution emerges from a convergence of realpolitik considerations and normative commitments.

On one hand, tangible shifts in the global balance of power—ranging from Russia’s assertive moves to China’s rapid rise—necessitate flexible strategic concepts. On the other, institutional practices and collective identity reinforce NATO’s cohesion in ways that pure threat-based explanations cannot fully capture. Recognizing both dimensions is essential for a deeper understanding of how and why the Alliance has adapted since 1991, and it frames our analysis of NATO’s historical trajectory in the sections that follow.

In contrast, liberal-institutionalist thinkers such as Keohane (2012) emphasize that NATO’s post–Cold War expansion was propelled not only by threat perceptions but also by the desire to embed newly democratic states into a “community of values.” From this perspective, NATO acted as a conduit for liberal norms—transparency, rule of law, and collective governance—that ultimately transcended mere geopolitical calculations. Arbatov (2000) and Lukyanov (2018), prominent Russian commentators, have derided this normative framing as a façade for power politics, suggesting that the West leveraged ideals of democracy to legitimize its encroachment into Russia’s traditional sphere of influence. Nonetheless, liberal theorists counter that integrating states like Hungary or Poland served to stabilize the broader Euro-Atlantic region, thereby reducing the likelihood of nationalist backsliding or regional conflict. Thus, if realists see NATO as primarily a vehicle for security maximization, liberal-institutionalist analyses highlight the Alliance’s aspirational dimension, where enlargement is as much about shared identity and democratic solidarity as about hard deterrence.

2. Early Post–Cold War Transformations (1991–1999)

2.1. The 1991 Strategic Concept and the Search for a Role

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact in 1991 forced NATO to grapple with the abrupt disappearance of its defining adversary. No longer could the Alliance justify its vast military apparatus solely on the basis of deterring Soviet aggression; instead, NATO had to articulate a broader mission that addressed emerging instabilities both within and beyond Europe. This evolution found formal expression in The Alliance’s New Strategic Concept, adopted at the Rome Summit in November 1991 (NATO, 1991). Although it reaffirmed collective defense under Article 5, the document

introduced crisis management and cooperative security as additional pillars, acknowledging the complex and unpredictable security environment of the early 1990s.

Several analysts argue that NATO's revised posture in 1991 was less about concrete threats and more about preserving Western unity during a time of dramatic political change (Yost, 1998). By emphasizing dialogue and partnership—especially through the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC)—NATO sought to project stability eastward and foster relationships with former Warsaw Pact countries (NATO, 1991, p. 3). This pivot reflected the Alliance's recognition that unresolved ethnic conflicts, political fragmentation, and economic turmoil in Central and Eastern Europe could pose serious risks to the broader region (Freedman, 2013, p. 412). While critics questioned whether NATO was straying from its original collective defense core, proponents argued that such adaptation was vital for safeguarding the “peace dividend” of the post-Cold War era.

2.2. Enlargement and the 1999 Strategic Concept

A defining feature of NATO's search for relevance in the 1990s was its eastward enlargement—a process kick-started by the Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative in 1994, followed by the accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999 (Asmus, 2002). Proponents saw enlargement as a historic opportunity to “erase Europe's artificial dividing lines” and extend stability to newly democratic states (Asmus, 2002, p. 27). Yet detractors warned that expanding NATO risked antagonizing Russia, thus sowing the seeds of future confrontations.

By the time NATO unveiled its 1999 Strategic Concept, the Alliance had undertaken its first major combat operation (in Bosnia) and witnessed the unraveling of Yugoslavia—events that tested its unity and operational capacity (NATO, 1999). This new Strategic Concept retained collective defense as a core tenet while explicitly acknowledging the necessity of crisis response operations and cooperative security mechanisms to manage unrest in Europe's periphery. The Kosovo intervention later that year underscored NATO's willingness to use military force outside its traditional geographic boundaries—a marked shift from its original Cold War design (Yost, 1998, p. 56). Although some members expressed concern about “mission creep,” the 1999 Concept solidified NATO's role as a multifaceted security provider in a region still reeling from post-communist transitions.

Taken together, these transformations between 1991 and 1999 highlight NATO’s efforts to remain indispensable despite the absence of a monolithic Soviet threat. Moving beyond collective defense, the Alliance balanced engagement with former adversaries against the imperatives of crisis management and enlargement. Whether this adaptation ultimately strengthened or diluted NATO’s strategic clarity remains an ongoing debate—one that would only intensify in the decades ahead, as new security challenges and geopolitical dynamics came to the fore.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of NATO’s Strategic Concepts (1991, 1999, 2010, 2022)¹

Dimension	1991 (Rome)	1999 (Washington)	2010 (Lisbon)	2022 (Madrid)
Core Threat Perception	Emphasizes post-Soviet “risks of instability,” no singled-out adversary; aims at cooperative security (NATO, 1991, paras. 4–10).	Sees regional crises in Europe’s periphery (Balkans). Russia not explicitly a foe, but residual concerns remain (NATO, 1999, paras. 6–9).	Identifies terrorism, WMD proliferation, and cyber threats; Russia deemed a potential partner but notes tension if cooperation fails (NATO, 2010, paras. 5–7).	Declares Russia as the “most significant and direct threat”; also flags China’s growing influence as a strategic factor (NATO, 2022, paras. 7–11).
Operational Emphasis	Shifts from pure collective defense to crisis management and partnership outreach (NATO, 1991, paras. 11–14).	Crisis-response operations (e.g., Kosovo). Continues enlargement debate, retains collective defense core (NATO, 1999, paras. 10–16).	Out-of-area missions institutionalized (Afghanistan). Stresses comprehensive approach, deeper global partnerships (NATO, 2010, paras. 8–14).	High-readiness collective defense reasserted; expanded presence on eastern flank; acknowledges need for both defense and crisis response but prioritizes deterrence (NATO, 2022, paras. 15–19).
New Threats & Hybrid Domain	Mentions emerging “risks” (ethnic strife, proliferation) but little on cyber/hybrid (NATO, 1991).	Balkans conflict recognized, but cyber or hybrid warfare not yet prominent. Some mention of information ops post-Kosovo (NATO, 1999).	Integrates cyber defense, missile defense, and energy security. Considers hybrid aspects more systematically (NATO, 2010, paras. 20–25).	Explicit focus on hybrid warfare (cyber, disinformation) and potential nuclear coercion. Highlights multi-domain competition with Russia, growing concern about China’s tech footprint (NATO, 2022, paras. 20–26).
Partnerships & Enlargement	Initiates North Atlantic Cooperation Council (later EAPC). No formal “enlargement plan” yet, but open to new partnerships (NATO, 1991, paras. 15–18).	First major post–Cold War enlargement (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic). PnP as stepping stone; invites Russian cooperation but uneasy (NATO, 1999, paras. 22–24).	Continues “open-door” policy, adding Croatia/Albania. Extends partnerships in MENA via Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (NATO, 2010, paras. 30–35).	Historic move to include Finland and Sweden; reaffirms open-door stance. Emphasizes network of global partners (Australia, Japan, etc.) for shared security goals (NATO, 2022, paras. 27–32).
Collective Defense vs. Crisis Management	Retains Article 5 as central but introduces notion of crisis management, cooperative security (NATO, 1991, paras. 19–23).	Kosovo exemplifies crisis intervention. Collective defense remains essential, though overshadowed by Balkan ops (NATO, 1999, paras. 25–28).	Afghanistan underscores large-scale crisis management capacity, but Lisbon Concept reiterates collective defense as “fundamental core” (NATO, 2010, paras. 36–40).	Ukraine conflict reignites full-scale collective defense. Crisis management still relevant but overshadowed by defense posture shift to counter a direct state-based threat (NATO, 2022, paras. 33–37).

¹ Note: This table is derived from NATO’s official Strategic Concept documents (see References). It highlights key differences in how each Concept defines threats, operational scope, new domains (e.g., cyber), partnerships, and the balance between collective defense and crisis management.

Table 1 underscores NATO's evolving threat perceptions and operational mandates from 1991 to 2022. While the Rome Concept (1991) reoriented the Alliance around cooperative security after the Soviet collapse, Washington (1999) formalized crisis-response roles and the first post-Cold War enlargement. By 2010, terrorism and other asymmetric threats had become central, yet the Lisbon Concept still framed Russia more as a partner than a direct foe. The 2022 update, in contrast, designates Russia as the primary threat, with hybrid warfare and China's global ambitions prominently cited. These shifts illustrate NATO's ongoing recalibration between collective defense and broader crisis management, shaped by both regional and global power dynamics.

From the Russian viewpoint, expansion was neither benign nor merely value-driven. Karaganov (2018) contends that NATO's 1990s moves irreversibly shifted the regional balance, undermining the geopolitical buffer zones that Moscow historically viewed as critical for its security. Similarly, Kortunov (2017) warns that successive enlargements—particularly the accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999—fueled perceptions of encirclement and mistrust within Russian policy circles. Scholars like Lukyanov (2018) go further, accusing the Alliance of exploiting Russia's post-Soviet weakness to push Western institutions to Russia's doorstep, effectively limiting any future rapprochement. These critiques paint NATO's open-door policy as an encroachment on Russia's historical sphere of influence, challenging the liberal narrative that enlargement was a consensual integration of new democracies.

Although Western policymakers often framed enlargement in cooperative terms—offering PfP frameworks and NATO-Russia Council dialogues—Russian analysts interpreted these overtures as insufficient to offset the erosion of Moscow's strategic depth (Arbatov, 2000). Even after the 1999 Strategic Concept expanded NATO's operational scope beyond collective defense, the underlying tension remained: was the Alliance truly forging an inclusive "European security architecture," or consolidating a new balance-of-power regime that marginalized Russia? This divergence helps explain the intensifying friction that would later erupt in the 2000s and culminate in crises like the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War. In essence, while NATO viewed its eastward expansion as a stabilizing force, many in Russia perceived it as the latest chapter in a historical pattern of Western encroachment, foreshadowing deeper confrontations.

3. NATO and the War on Terror (2001–2010)

3.1. The 9/11 Attacks and Out-of-Area Engagements

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, proved a transformative event in NATO’s history. For the first time since the Alliance’s formation, Article 5 was invoked—demonstrating unequivocally that an assault on one Allied nation would be treated as an attack on all (NATO, 2001). Yet the adversary now was not a conventional, state-based threat envisaged during the Cold War, but rather al-Qaeda, a global terrorist network operating from within the weakly governed territory of Afghanistan. This shift in threat perception catalyzed a fundamental reexamination of NATO’s strategic and operational priorities, eventually propelling the Alliance into its largest-ever “out-of-area” military engagement.

Almost immediately, debates surfaced about the nature and scope of NATO’s role in the War on Terror. While the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) began in October 2001 with a swift overthrow of the Taliban regime, NATO’s collective military structure was not formally engaged in the initial phase of combat operations (Isby, 2010, p. 56). Instead, the Alliance gradually assumed responsibility for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a UN-mandated mission initially limited to providing security in and around Kabul (United Nations, 2001). By August 2003, NATO had taken command of ISAF and commenced a series of mission expansions that, over the next three years, extended its reach across the entirety of Afghanistan (NATO, 2003, paras. 2–4). These expansions represented a significant departure from NATO’s core tradition of defending Allied territories in the Euro-Atlantic region and entailed a degree of operational risk far beyond the Alliance’s prior experiences in the Balkans (Freedman, 2007, p. 312).

A critical aspect of this out-of-area engagement was the multiplicity of troop-contributing nations and the variety of “national caveats” placed on their forces. By 2007, ISAF comprised contributions from nearly 40 countries—most of them NATO members, but also partner nations such as Australia and New Zealand (NATO, 2007). The United States remained the largest single troop contributor, but European Allies like the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands played prominent roles in specific regional commands (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2006).

Nevertheless, many contingents arrived with caveats limiting the scope or geography of their engagement. Germany, for instance, faced stringent parliamentary restrictions preventing its forces from conducting offensive operations outside the northern provinces (Münkler, 2011, p. 28). The result was an operational mosaic in which certain Allies (such as Canada or the UK in the south) faced more intense combat, while others focused on training, reconstruction, or stabilization tasks in relatively less violent regions.

This fragmentation fueled transatlantic tensions over burden-sharing, mission objectives, and strategic coherence. U.S. policymakers criticized perceived European reluctance to engage fully in combat operations, arguing that Alliance solidarity rang hollow if a handful of states bore the brunt of the fighting (Kay, 2006, p. 104). European capitals, in turn, highlighted domestic political constraints and insisted that a comprehensive stabilization campaign demanded a balance of military and civilian efforts—an approach sometimes at odds with Washington’s initial emphasis on kinetic counterterrorism (Dobbins et al., 2013, p. 73). These divergences reverberated at NATO Summits, as Allied leaders sought to reconcile an evolving counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine with the pragmatic realities of limited resources and diverse political mandates. The tension was compounded by parallel international crises, especially the 2003 Iraq invasion, which splintered transatlantic consensus and arguably diverted attention and resources from the Afghan theater (Freedman, 2007, p. 329).

Nevertheless, Afghanistan became a proving ground for NATO’s capacity to mount large-scale, long-duration missions beyond its geographical heartland. By 2009–2010, the total number of ISAF troops surpassed 130,000 (O’Hanlon & Livingston, 2010, p. 2), reflecting a substantial international commitment not only to suppressing al-Qaeda and Taliban insurgents but also to the broader aims of state-building and security sector reform (DSSR). The Alliance engaged in efforts to strengthen the Afghan National Army (ANA) and police forces, foster local governance structures, and coordinate civil-military projects—though success in these domains was patchy at best (Jones, 2009, pp. 89–92). Notably, NATO faced persistent challenges integrating multiple command structures—Operation Enduring Freedom remained under direct U.S. control, overlapping geographically and sometimes operationally with ISAF (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2006). Critics contended that the lack of a unified chain

of command blurred strategic objectives and wasted resources. Proponents, however, argued that NATO's willingness to operate alongside a parallel coalition demonstrated flexibility in cooperating with U.S.-led missions outside the Alliance's formal remit (Kay, 2006, pp. 110–113).

Despite sporadic successes—such as temporarily stabilizing certain provincial centers and training thousands of Afghan security personnel—NATO's ultimate impact on Afghanistan remained fiercely debated. By late 2009, insurgent violence had surged in many areas, prompting the United States to launch a “troop surge” under President Barack Obama, while NATO Allies were urged to contribute additional forces, training teams, and financial support (Dobbins et al., 2013, pp. 71–73). The Alliance's internal strains persisted, reflecting a broader discord about how deeply NATO should commit itself to nation-building tasks that exceeded its original defensive orientation. Some European states publicly questioned the mission's feasibility, citing widespread corruption, weak local governance, and limited public support at home (Münkler, 2011, pp. 33–35). Others insisted that failure in Afghanistan would undermine NATO's global credibility, demanding a decisive demonstration of unity (NATO, 2009).

A particularly pivotal challenge was the COIN doctrine itself, which required a nuanced blend of military, political, and socioeconomic strategies—areas in which NATO possessed uneven or insufficient expertise (Kilcullen, 2009). Implementing such an approach meant forging partnerships with civilian agencies, NGOs, and Afghan tribal structures, tasks that many Allied militaries found daunting (Dobbins et al., 2013, p. 52). Varying national rules of engagement, differing risk tolerances, and limited interoperability in specialized areas (e.g., counter-IED units, medical evacuation) underscored the difficulty of forging a coherent plan among diverse Allies.

By 2010, the Alliance codified some of these hard-won lessons in the New Strategic Concept launched at the Lisbon Summit, reaffirming the need for a “comprehensive approach” integrating political, civilian, and military instruments (NATO, 2010, pp. 4–6). Afghanistan thus stood as both a cautionary tale and a testament to NATO's operational capabilities. On one hand, the Alliance showcased an unprecedented ability to mobilize multinational forces, operate over extended distances, and coordinate with a variety of partners. On the other, the mission revealed structural fault lines—uneven

burden-sharing, uncertain long-term commitments, and the inherent difficulties of stabilizing a conflict-ridden society (Isby, 2010, p. 144).

In retrospect, the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing War on Terror redefined NATO's strategic horizons, illustrating that collective defense could encompass threats well beyond Europe. They also exposed the limits of an Alliance required to accommodate over two dozen distinct national perspectives and political systems, each with its own constraints on the use of force. Critically, the debates that emerged in Afghanistan—including how to balance military intervention with nation-building goals—would resonate in subsequent crises, whether in Libya (2011), the campaign against ISIS (post-2014), or other future theaters demanding robust, multinational crisis responses.

3.2. Toward a “Comprehensive Approach” and the 2010 Strategic Concept

In the ensuing years, NATO encountered the practical realities of prolonged deployments, civil-military coordination, and governance shortfalls. The concept of a “comprehensive approach,” popularized among various Allied nations, emphasized integrated operations combining military power with civilian efforts to stabilize conflict zones (NATO, 2010). This doctrine acknowledged that modern warfare increasingly intersected with economic, humanitarian, and diplomatic spheres, demanding a more holistic strategy than purely military action could provide.

By 2010, the Alliance had crystallized these lessons in its New Strategic Concept, unveiled at the Lisbon Summit. The document reaffirmed expeditionary capabilities yet also prioritized partnerships with organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union (NATO, 2010, pp. 5–6). Nonetheless, doubts lingered over NATO's capacity to manage an expansive global agenda alongside the enduring need for collective defense. Analysts pointed to Afghanistan's logistical hurdles and uneven political support among member states as cautionary tales for future interventions (Sloan, 2012, p. 74). Ultimately, NATO's ambition to function as a global crisis manager—while still retaining its core security commitments in Europe—laid the groundwork for renewed introspection in the decade to come.

4. Russia's Resurgence and Hybrid Threats

4.1. The Russo-Ukrainian War: Catalyst for NATO's Strategic Realignment (2014–Present)

The Russo-Ukrainian War ranks among the most consequential European conflicts since the end of the Cold War, reshaping NATO's threat perceptions and security postures in ways rivaled only by the Balkan wars of the 1990s and the post-9/11 interventions. Initially framed as a localized dispute following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, it steadily evolved into a sprawling, multi-domain confrontation that, by 2022, had escalated into the largest armed conflict on European soil since 1945 (Freedman, 2022, pp. 4–5). This section examines the conflict's origins, the gradual intensification of hostilities, and its profound impact on NATO's strategic calculus—culminating in the reassertion of collective defense as the Alliance's primary mission, a shift that reversed much of its emphasis on out-of-area engagements and galvanized unprecedented unity among Western nations in defense, economic, and energy policies.

The first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian confrontation began in late February 2014, when unidentified Russian special forces—infamously dubbed “little green men”—seized control of key infrastructure in Crimea (Sakwa, 2015, p. 143). Russia justified its actions on grounds of defending “compatriots” and securing its historic naval base in Sevastopol, while NATO and most Western powers condemned the annexation as a violation of international law (Mearsheimer, 2014). Despite the immediate imposition of Western sanctions and the suspension of NATO-Russia Council activities, the conflict then appeared partially “frozen,” centered in Crimea and the Donbas region. Separatist entities in Donetsk and Luhansk, heavily supported by Russian military matériel and personnel, sustained a low-intensity war with Ukrainian forces, resulting in over 13,000 fatalities between 2014 and 2021 (OHCHR, 2021).

Yet, even during these years, localized outbreaks of violence periodically flared—most notably the Debaltseve encirclement in 2015, which exposed both the Ukrainian Army's vulnerabilities and Moscow's willingness to deploy advanced weaponry (e.g., BM-30 Smerch rocket launchers, T-72B3 tanks) clandestinely (Karagiannis, 2016, p. 48). Efforts to stabilize the region via the Minsk Agreements yielded limited success, as repeated ceasefires broke down under allegations of ceasefire violations from both sides (OSCE, 2019). While NATO increased military exercises in Eastern Europe and launched the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups, Allies remained cautious to avoid direct confrontation with Russia, contenting themselves with deterrence measures in the Baltic states and Poland (NATO, 2017). This “contained but ongoing” conflict

dynamic lulled many Western capitals into believing that a negotiated settlement—though elusive—remained the primary outcome.

The watershed moment occurred on 24 February 2022, when the Russian Federation launched a massive invasion from multiple axes, including Belarusian territory (Mankoff, 2022, p. 17). Initial Russian objectives appeared to aim for a swift decapitation of the Ukrainian government, signified by an armored thrust toward Kyiv. However, fierce Ukrainian resistance, bolstered by Western-supplied anti-tank guided missiles (like Javelins and NLAWs), inflicted unanticipated casualties on the advancing columns (Kofman & Lee, 2022). Within weeks, Russian forces had taken heavy losses in personnel and equipment, stalling the rapid overthrow strategy. This failure compelled Russia to recalibrate, shifting its main effort to consolidating control over the Donbas and southern corridors connecting Crimea to the Russian border (Freedman, 2022, p. 9). In parallel, the war's humanitarian dimension exploded: by the end of 2022, more than 8 million Ukrainian refugees had fled across borders, primarily into Poland, Germany, and other EU states, while an even larger number became internally displaced (UNHCR, 2023).

Simultaneously, Russia deployed an array of hybrid and cyber tactics, targeting Ukrainian command-and-control networks, TV broadcast towers, and civilian infrastructure with malicious software and persistent disinformation campaigns (Snegovaya & Klyszcz, 2022, pp. 21–23). Cyberattacks also rippled into NATO countries: for instance, satellite communications disruptions affected internet services in Germany and beyond during the invasion's opening salvo (Zetter, 2022). Even though the overall strategic effect of these cyber measures on the battlefield remains contested, they underscored the broader shift in modern warfare, where kinetic and non-kinetic domains blend fluidly (Adamsky, 2018).

This multi-domain confrontation forced NATO and the broader Western community to grapple with a set of unprecedented challenges: (1) the immediate operational risk of spillover if Russian strikes landed in Poland or Romania; (2) the necessity of forging a unified sanctions regime to undermine Moscow's war effort without triggering a global economic crisis; and (3) the moral imperative to assist Ukraine's defense without direct Allied boots on the ground, which could escalate into a NATO-Russia war (Major & Mölling, 2022, p. 2). The result was an extraordinary surge in Western security

assistance to Ukraine, bridging decades-old divides among Allies about arms exports to conflict zones. Notably, Germany's volte-face on lethal aid—part of its “Zeitenwende” (historic turning point)—signaled those even nations traditionally cautious about military engagement recognized the existential stakes for European security (Kunz, 2022).

4.1.1. Military Aid, Economic Warfare, and Shifting Geopolitical Alignments

Underpinning Ukraine's resistance were two intertwined strategic pillars: massive arms deliveries from NATO members and an unprecedented Western-led campaign of economic warfare against Russia. As of late 2022, the United States alone had committed over \$40 billion in military and humanitarian support, encompassing not just infantry weapons but also advanced drone capabilities, HIMARS multiple-launch rocket systems, and sophisticated intelligence-sharing (Cong. Research Service, 2022). The UK, Poland, Canada, and Baltic states also contributed significantly, while Germany overcame long-standing policy taboos by sending anti-aircraft systems (Gepard), IRIS-T, and Leopard 2 main battle tanks under intense allied pressure (Kofman & Lee, 2022, p. 28). These deliveries gradually shaped the operational balance, enabling Ukrainian forces to conduct effective counterattacks in Kharkiv and Kherson (Freedman, 2022, p. 15).

Parallel to the military aid dynamic, the Western sanctions regime inflicted severe economic disruption on Russia, targeting banks, oligarchs, and entire industrial sectors (Mitrova & Boersma, 2022). Yet these measures also had repercussions for NATO Allies, particularly in the realm of energy. Russia's halting or rerouting of natural gas shipments, combined with retaliatory sabotage allegations (e.g., Nord Stream pipeline leaks), catalyzed an energy crisis that propelled Europe into double-digit inflation and triggered an urgent pivot towards LNG imports from the United States, Qatar, and Nigeria (IMF, 2023). These abrupt realignments in energy trade patterns had profound strategic implications: while diminishing Russia's leverage, they also tested European unity, revealing disparities in how different states could absorb the economic shock. Nations like Hungary and Slovakia, heavily reliant on Russian gas, voiced ambivalence about certain sanction escalations (Veebel & Ploom, 2022, p. 305).

Meanwhile, the war complicated global geopolitical alignments. China's ambiguous stance—neither outright condemning Russia nor endorsing the invasion—spurred debates about whether Beijing might exploit transatlantic preoccupation in Europe to advance its interests in the Indo-Pacific (Brattberg & Morton, 2022). Within Europe itself, the conflict exacerbated long-standing domestic cleavages regarding NATO's purpose: Eastern Allies clamored for maximum deterrence, pushing for permanent U.S. troop deployments, whereas some Western European states, apprehensive of nuclear escalation, expressed caution about indefinite entanglement (Major & Mölling, 2022, p. 4). These tensions, though overshadowed by the immediate crisis, continued to shape the Alliance's internal debates about post-war security architecture in the region.

4.1.2. NATO's Operational and Conceptual Transformation

While the Crimean annexation of 2014 had revived NATO's emphasis on Article 5 and spurred the creation of measures such as the Enhanced Forward Presence, the 2022 escalation forced the Alliance to fundamentally re-conceptualize its strategic environment. No longer was Russia viewed as a partner or a potential cooperative stakeholder in European security; the 2022 Madrid Summit officially labeled Russia the "most significant and direct threat" to Allied security (NATO, 2022, para. 8). This rhetorical shift reflected an underlying operational reality: the Ukrainian battlefield was re-demonstrating the potency of large-scale, combined-arms warfare in Europe.

Allied militaries began retooling for high-intensity conflict, reversing decades of counterinsurgency and expeditionary warfare doctrines that had dominated since the late 1990s. Procurement priorities shifted toward heavy armor, long-range fires, integrated air and missile defense, and robust logistic networks—areas that had languished during the War on Terror (Freedman, 2022, p. 21). Multinational exercises like Defender Europe expanded in scope, focusing on swift reinforcement of the eastern flank and interoperability in contested environments. Finland's and Sweden's historic applications for NATO membership—driven by the acute threat perception post-invasion—added further impetus to the Alliance's transformation, potentially transforming the strategic geometry of the Baltic Sea and putting additional pressure on Russia's Western Military District (Kunz, 2022, p. 13).

At the same time, hybrid warfare remained integral to Russia's approach, with repeated missile strikes against Ukraine's energy grid and relentless cyberattacks on critical infrastructure in the broader region. Observers noted that Moscow's combined use of drone swarms (including Iranian-manufactured Shahed-136 UAVs), disinformation about "dirty bombs," and nuclear saber-rattling accentuated the war's unpredictability (Galeotti, 2022, p. 18). NATO's response entailed augmenting StratCom capabilities, reinforcing the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, and stepping up intelligence-sharing among Allies. Yet these measures tested the Alliance's capacity to orchestrate credible deterrence in a domain where "attribution" can be murky and escalatory thresholds uncertain (Adamsky, 2018, p. 85).

In effect, the Russo-Ukrainian War functioned as a modern crucible for NATO's strategic identity. The balance between ensuring deterrence against a nuclear-armed Russia and avoiding direct Allied involvement tested the political will of over 30 democracies, each with unique risk appetites and historical experiences. While public support for Ukraine remained high in many Allied nations, concerns about "Ukraine fatigue" and the sustainability of arms deliveries mounted as 2023 rolled on (Major & Mölling, 2022, p. 7). Observers questioned whether Europe would maintain robust defense spending once the immediate crisis receded, recalling the cyclical nature of threat perceptions in democratic polities (Smith, 2022, p. 46).

Nevertheless, the 2022 war arguably reshaped the strategic environment in ways that appear more enduring than any pivot since 9/11, including: (1) the re-legitimization of conventional deterrence as NATO's core mission, overshadowing the crisis-management ethos of the early 2000s; (2) a broadened concept of security encompassing energy, cyber, and disinformation threats as direct enablers or disruptors of warfare; and (3) a partial dissolution of the post-Cold War assumption that deep economic interdependence with Russia (and by extension other authoritarian powers) could prevent large-scale hostilities.

4.1.3. Humanitarian, Political, and Economic Repercussions in the Alliance

Beyond the conventional battlefield, the Russo-Ukrainian War triggered cascading humanitarian and socio-political effects that influenced how NATO members perceived their broader security obligations. The massive influx of refugees from Ukraine

dwarfed previous migration waves, intensifying debates on burden-sharing and humanitarian corridors (UNHCR, 2023). EU mechanisms struggled to cope with the scale of displacement, although temporary protection directives sought to unify continental responses (European Commission, 2023). In parallel, inflation spiked amid surging energy prices, renewing the impetus for strategic decoupling from Russian oil and gas—a project complicated by divergent member-state dependencies (Mitrova & Boersma, 2022).

Politically, the war catalyzed a rise in euro-Atlantic solidarity, at least in the short term, as exemplified by the speed of the EU’s macro-financial assistance to Ukraine and the relative coherence of the NATO stance on lethal aid (IMF, 2023). Yet these developments also heightened internal fractures. Hungary, for instance, maintained a comparatively accommodative posture toward Moscow, reflecting historical energy ties and the government’s populist orientation (Veebel & Ploom, 2022, p. 302). Meanwhile, countries like Poland used the crisis to assert leadership within the EU, advocating tougher stances against Russia and championing more ambitious defense postures (Major & Mölling, 2022).

As the conflict ground on, concerns emerged that a prolonged stalemate could hamper Europe’s economic recovery, further destabilize global food markets (given Ukraine’s major grain exports), and embolden revisionist actors in other theaters (e.g., China vis-à-vis Taiwan). These overlapping crises demanded a level of multilateral coordination that tested both NATO’s ability to orchestrate security policies among Allies and the EU’s capacity to manage the broader political-economy consequences. The distinction between “NATO tasks” (defense) and “EU tasks” (sanctions, migration, energy policy) blurred, suggesting that the transatlantic community might need deeper institutional synergy to sustain unified action (Brattberg & Morton, 2022, p. 7).

In sum, the Russo-Ukrainian War stands as a central pivot in NATO’s post-Cold War evolution, eclipsing earlier crises—including the Balkan interventions, the Afghanistan mission, and the 2014 Crimea annexation—in terms of strategic consequences. By reigniting large-scale conventional warfare in Europe, Russia’s actions demolished the illusion that NATO’s eastern flank could be stabilized through minimal forward presence and limited deterrence. Instead, Allies found themselves compelled to rapidly adapt, from scaling up defense industrial bases to integrating new members like Finland

and Sweden, thereby enlarging NATO's front lines and strategic horizons (Kunz, 2022, p. 16).

Critically, the war spotlighted the interconnectedness of traditional military threats with hybrid and economic dimensions—cyberattacks, energy blackmail, and global supply-chain disruptions all coalesced into a single, multi-faceted front (Galeotti, 2022, p. 11). This dynamic forced NATO to broaden its strategic concept and refine operational doctrines for an era in which the threshold between war and peace becomes fuzzier, yet the potential for massed combined-arms assaults remains very real. Undoubtedly, the conflict's final resolution (be it negotiated settlement, frozen lines, or continued attritional campaigns) will further mold the Alliance's posture. But even in the absence of a definitive outcome, the Russo-Ukrainian War has already cemented NATO's renewed emphasis on collective defense, validating the Allies' concern that Russia's posturing could escalate beyond "hybrid aggression" into full-scale invasion—a scenario that European security architecture had long deemed improbable.

Perhaps most important, the war revealed a capacity for transatlantic unity that many had doubted existed. Faced with the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe in generations and a clear challenge to the norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity, NATO members coalesced around a broad-based strategy of military support and economic pressure. Whether that unity endures if the conflict drags on for years—or if domestic backlashes to rising inflation and energy costs erode public support—remains an open question. Nonetheless, the legacy of the Russo-Ukrainian War for NATO's strategic transformation is already unmistakable: it ended nearly three decades of "peace dividend" assumptions, catalyzing a radical reassessment of the Alliance's purpose, posture, and long-term readiness for an era in which great-power rivalry has reemerged in Europe's heartland.

4.2. NATO's Strategic Concept: From Wales to Madrid (and Beyond)

The period following Russia's initial incursions into Ukraine in 2014 triggered a profound reorientation in NATO's strategic thinking—one that evolved through a series of high-profile summits and conceptual shifts aimed at recalibrating the Alliance's posture in the face of a resurgent Russia. Although the Wales Summit (2014) first

reaffirmed the primacy of Article 5 defense, subsequent gatherings at Warsaw (2016), Brussels (2018, 2021), and London (2019) underscored the gradual intensification of collective defense measures. Yet none fully anticipated the cataclysmic impact of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War, which transformed NATO's deterrence framework and culminated in the Madrid Summit—a pivotal event enshrining a revised Strategic Concept.

4.2.1. Wales and Warsaw: The Early Return of Collective Defense

In the immediate aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea, NATO leaders convened at the Wales Summit in September 2014. While the summit was initially expected to address post-Afghanistan transition issues, events in Eastern Europe overshadowed other agenda items (NATO, 2014a). The resulting Readiness Action Plan (RAP) marked an important, if partial, step toward revitalizing large-scale deterrence in Europe. It included measures such as the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF)—comprising roughly 5,000 troops able to deploy within days—and expanded exercises across the Alliance's eastern flank (Major & Mölling, 2015). This pivot reversed the rhetorical emphasis on expeditionary crisis management that had dominated after 9/11, instead reaffirming the notion that territorial defense remained NATO's bedrock. However, the relatively modest scale of these adaptations suggested that many Allies still viewed Russia's adventurism as geographically limited and possibly containable.

By the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, the Donbas conflict and broader Russian activities—from snap exercises near the Baltic States to the reported deployment of advanced missile systems in Kaliningrad—had elevated concerns among Eastern Allies (Kofman et al., 2017). Here, NATO declared its Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), stationing multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to deter any spillover of hybrid or conventional aggression (NATO, 2016, paras. 40–47). While the eFP battlegroups totaled around 4,000 troops—symbolically significant yet militarily modest—this decision carried deeper implications for the Alliance's credibility. Multiple Allies contributed combat-ready forces, making any act of aggression against one battlegroup a de facto aggression against several NATO members (Freedman, 2017, p. 23). Still, internal debates over escalation risks persisted: some Western European nations, notably Germany and Italy, cautioned against over-

securitizing relations with Moscow, hoping diplomatic avenues might eventually mend the rift (Major & Mölling, 2015, p. 4).

4.2.2 Incremental Adjustments and the Limits of Pre-2022 Posturing

Between Warsaw (2016) and the onset of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, NATO's strategic concept remained anchored in its 2010 formulation—one that identified Russia as a potential partner, at least nominally, while acknowledging terrorist and cyber threats as primary emerging challenges (NATO, 2010). Attempts to update the conceptual framework at subsequent summits were overshadowed by divergent threat perceptions, the rise of populism in some Allied states, and internal Alliance frictions (Smith, 2019, p. 41). The Brussels Summit in 2018, for instance, saw heated exchanges regarding defense spending commitments, with the U.S. administration pressing European Allies to meet the 2% GDP benchmark. Although rhetorical unity about Russia's provocative behavior persisted, the actual capacity and willingness of Allies to expand conventional deterrence varied widely (Brattberg & Morton, 2022, p. 5).

Military exercises such as Trident Juncture 2018 and Defender Europe 2020 sought to refine NATO's ability to deploy large formations rapidly. Yet the Alliance's overall force posture in Europe still hinged on rotational deployments, short-term exercises, and limited forward positioning. Intelligence-sharing improvements and newly formed StratCom (Strategic Communications) teams within NATO sought to counter Russian disinformation, but many analysts noted that the hybrid warfare dimension demanded more robust civil-military coordination—a realm where national-level agencies, rather than NATO, took the lead (Galeotti, 2018, pp. 26–29). Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021 diverted resources and political focus away from large defense outlays, exposing a gap between rhetorical commitments to collective defense and the actual readiness to fund it (IMF, 2021).

4.2.3. The Shock of 2022: Redefining Threat Perceptions

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 obliterated the assumption that Moscow would limit itself to “frozen conflicts” or sub-threshold actions. The scope and brutality of the offensive, along with the rapid displacement of millions of refugees,

starkly illuminated NATO's eastern flank vulnerabilities (UNHCR, 2023). Within days, multiple Allied governments publicly invoked the need for massive deterrence expansions, including permanent force stationing along the eastern boundary and accelerated rearmament plans (Freedman, 2022, p. 10). Germany's "Zeitenwende," announcing a €100 billion defense fund, constituted a paradigmatic shift for a nation historically reticent about military assertiveness (Kunz, 2022, p. 14). Baltic states clamored for the doubling or tripling of NATO battlegroup forces; Poland pursued a major arms procurement spree, acquiring advanced tank and missile systems from the United States and South Korea (Ministry of National Defence Poland, 2022).

Critically, the war also undermined any lingering illusions about the possibility of a stable *modus vivendi* with Russia, at least under its current leadership. NATO's intelligence estimates showed repeated instances of Russian nuclear saber-rattling, including references by senior Kremlin officials to "defensive" nuclear doctrines that might justify first use if Russian territory (or newly annexed regions in Ukraine) were threatened (Galeotti, 2022, p. 20). Such rhetoric heightened the sense of existential peril, compelling NATO to revisit Cold War-era nuclear deterrence policies, nuclear planning, and the readiness of allied ballistic missile defense networks (Major & Mölling, 2022, p. 3).

4.2.4. The 2022 Madrid Summit: A New Strategic Concept

Against this backdrop, NATO convened the Madrid Summit in June 2022 with an urgency unmatched since the early 1990s. The resulting Strategic Concept replaced the 2010 edition, explicitly naming Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security," discarding ambiguous partnership language (NATO, 2022, para. 8). It committed to expanding the NATO Response Force to a notional 300,000 troops at higher readiness and increasing the scale of eFP deployments in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. For the first time in decades, NATO's official documents also highlighted systemic challenges from China, reflecting concerns about Sino-Russian strategic alignment and the global interplay of authoritarian powers (Brattberg & Morton, 2022, p. 7).

Among the summit's most dramatic developments was the acceptance of Finland and Sweden's membership applications, effectively ending decades of Nordic neutrality (Kunz, 2022). This enlargement—while still undergoing ratification processes at the

time—promised to extend NATO’s footprint along the Baltic Sea and, in the case of Finland, create a 1,300-kilometer shared border with Russia. For Eastern Allies like Estonia and Latvia, the addition of Finland and Sweden represented a strategic boon, deepening maritime situational awareness and complicating Russian naval operations in the region (Smith, 2022, p. 42). Nevertheless, Allies recognized that Russia might interpret this enlargement as yet another provocation, further heightening tensions.

The Madrid Strategic Concept went beyond territorial defense, emphasizing hybrid and cyber domains, as well as the need for resilience in critical infrastructure, supply chains, and societal unity (NATO, 2022, paras. 14–16). The energy dimension, in particular, occupied a central place: with European states scrambling for non-Russian gas supplies, NATO documents stressed the importance of “energy security” as integral to collective defense (Mitrova & Boersma, 2022). This alignment with the European Union’s push for strategic autonomy in defense and energy illustrated a new synergy between NATO and EU institutions, despite prior turf battles over security competences (Brattberg & Morton, 2022, p. 9).

4.2.5. Beyond Madrid: Ongoing Challenges and the Future of NATO

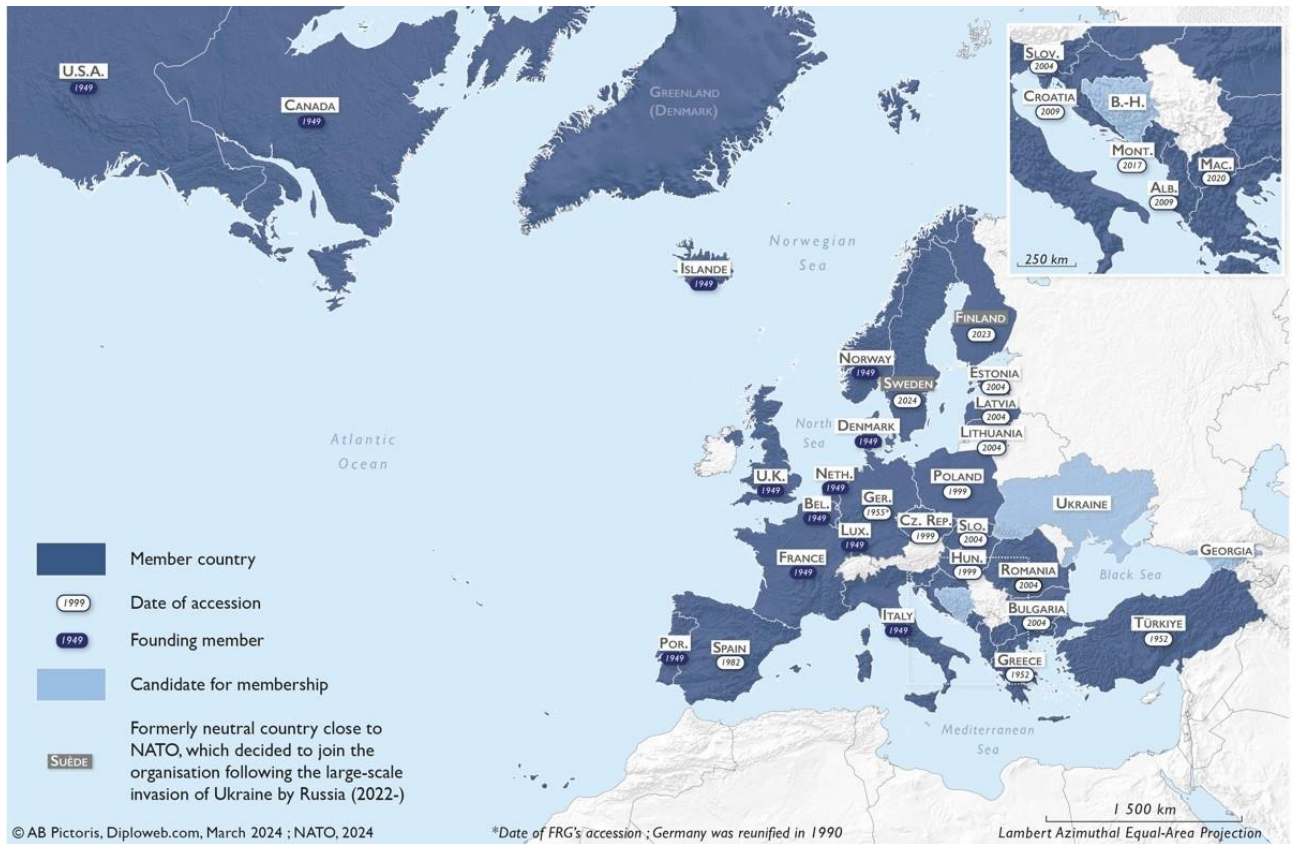
Although the Madrid Summit solidified a united front in response to Russian aggression, numerous challenges loom for NATO as the war grinds on. The cost of sustaining large-scale defense mobilization—amid inflationary pressures and potential public fatigue—could test Allied resolve if the Russo-Ukrainian War stretches into years or devolves into a stalemate with high attrition (Major & Mölling, 2022, p. 6). Divergent domestic politics also threaten unity: Hungary’s hesitance to endorse certain sanction packages, Turkey’s veto over Swedish NATO accession, and broader populist sentiments across Europe all risk fracturing the cohesive line established in early 2022 (Veebel & Ploom, 2022, p. 306).

Further, the intensification of Sino-Russian cooperation in the economic and technological realms may compel NATO to define its stance on the Indo-Pacific, a geographical pivot that not all Allies welcome (Brattberg & Morton, 2022, p. 11). Debates about whether NATO should remain strictly Euro-Atlantic or evolve into a more global actor are likely to escalate if tensions escalate around Taiwan or in the South China Sea. From a resource standpoint, simultaneously deterring Russia in

Europe and hedging against rising powers in Asia could strain NATO’s capacity, unless the Allies significantly boost defense budgets beyond the 2% GDP guideline (Freedman, 2022, pp. 19–21).

Finally, questions about long-term European security architecture persist. If the Russo-Ukrainian War ends in a messy ceasefire or partial settlement that leaves Russian forces occupying territory, NATO may need permanent fortress-like deployments along a new “iron curtain,” reversing decades of demilitarization (Kofman & Lee, 2022, p. 29). Conversely, a collapse of Russian power could introduce new instabilities, including the specter of loose nuclear materials or internal fragmentation in the Russian Federation. In either scenario, NATO’s institutional agility and ability to forge consensus among more than 30 democracies will be tested by the demands of extended deterrence, high-readiness force structures, and indefinite sanctions or reconstruction efforts for Ukraine.

Figure 1. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2024²



² Note: Adapted from AB Pictoris, March 2024.

The current NATO membership layout anticipates a significant shift by 2024, particularly given Finland's recent entry and Sweden's pending accession (AB Pictoris, 2024). These developments not only expand NATO's northern flank but also underscore the Alliance's evolving deterrence posture (See Figure 1) The transformation of NATO's Strategic Concept between 2014 and 202 epitomizes the Alliance's return to core deterrence principles, shaped by the stark lessons of renewed large-scale aggression in Europe. While the Wales and Warsaw Summits laid groundwork for an incremental revival of collective defense, only the cataclysmic outbreak of all-out warfare in Ukraine compelled full-scale rearmament, forward deployments, and a robust articulation of Russia as NATO's primary threat. The 2022 Madrid Summit thus served as the formal pivot point, enshrining a forward-leaning posture and prompting Allies to accept long-term burdens reminiscent of the Cold War period.

Yet the path forward is replete with strategic, political, and economic uncertainties. NATO's enlargement to include Finland and Sweden signifies a powerful statement of unity, but also deepens the border along which the Alliance must prepare for confrontation. The continuing war in Ukraine, with no conclusive resolution in sight, demands sustained defense expenditures and moral support that could waver under domestic and global pressures. Meanwhile, broader challenges—such as authoritarian alignments, mounting climate-security risks, and potential flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific—threaten to fracture Allied priorities if not managed carefully.

In this evolving context, the transformation of NATO's Strategic Concept extends beyond rhetorical changes; it represents an institutional metamorphosis. Military doctrines, force planning, industrial mobilization, and transatlantic burden-sharing are all under re-evaluation, informed by the grim realities of high-intensity war in Eastern Europe. Whether this metamorphosis endures hinges on how effectively the Allies confront diverging national interests, cope with fiscal and social trade-offs, and maintain a united front against persistent threats. After decades of crisis-management missions and counterinsurgency focus, NATO's pivot back to collective defense underscores not only the enduring salience of deterrence but also the recognition that Europe can no longer regard major land warfare as an anachronism. Madrid may thus be remembered as the summit that confirmed NATO is here to stay—but in a more

forceful, complex, and globally attuned form than at any time since the end of the Cold War.

5. NATO in a Multipolar Age: Toward a Post-National Alliance?

5.1. Great-Power Competition and the Limits of Collective Defense

Observers of international relations increasingly emphasize the multipolar character of today's global order, wherein power is dispersed among multiple centers, including the United States, China, Russia, the European Union, and other regional heavyweights (Ikenberry, 2011). In such a fluid environment, NATO's traditional notion of collective defense—focused on deterring a single, clearly defined adversary—may struggle to remain fully relevant. Earlier sections highlighted how the Alliance pivoted to address new threats, from the War on Terror to Russia's resurgence and hybrid warfare. Yet managing multiple, simultaneous challenges—cyber intrusions, maritime assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, shifting energy dependencies—exposes the limitations of a defensive framework originally calibrated for containment in a bipolar context (Keohane, 2012, p. 24).

The concept of extended deterrence, long championed by the United States within NATO, faces renewed scrutiny under multipolar conditions. Rival states with regional aspirations—such as Iran or North Korea—have tested the Alliance's global relevance, raising questions as to whether NATO's membership and infrastructure can (or should) stretch beyond the Euro-Atlantic domain (Pothier, 2020, p. 15). At the same time, China's meteoric rise introduces a distinct form of systemic competition, one driven not only by military capability but also by technology races, economic interdependence, and global supply-chain dynamics (Allison, 2017). As Beijing deepens its relationships with various European countries through initiatives like the Belt and Road, NATO allies are confronted with dilemmas over how forceful a stance to adopt against a power that, unlike Cold War adversaries, is also a significant trading partner (Le Corre & Sepulchre, 2016).

The Alliance's adaptability hinges on whether member states can forge common threat perceptions under conditions of diffuse and interlinked challenges. European members more focused on territorial defense against Russia may find less urgency in addressing Chinese influence in Africa or the Arctic, while the United States increasingly regards

Beijing's technological ascendancy as a core strategic threat (Ikenberry, 2011, pp. 57–59). Such divergence risks fracturing consensus on NATO's strategic priorities. Moreover, the pivot from singular to multiple threats places a premium on political unity—an elusive commodity, given the domestic pressures and electoral cycles of 30 (and growing) democracies (Smith, 2021). If the Alliance cannot resolve these internal tensions, it could find itself neither fish nor fowl: too sprawling to excel at collective defense and too narrowly Euro-Atlantic to shape global security in a multipolar era.

Yet NATO also has latent strengths that might allow it to navigate great-power competition more effectively than critics anticipate. Chief among these is the Alliance's robust command structure, standardized procedures, and extensive network of partnerships. From Japan to Australia, countries outside the North Atlantic space are increasingly seeking security ties with NATO to hedge against regional instabilities (Rynning & Schmidt, 2020). These cooperative links hint at a proto-global security role that, if carefully managed, could position NATO as a flexible coalition of democracies, capable of engaging a range of security challenges—provided the Allies can reach a workable consensus on how far their obligations should stretch.

5.2. European Integration, Shared Values, and the Emergence of a Post-National NATO?

Beyond *realpolitik* imperatives, some scholars contend that NATO has begun to transcend the nation-state paradigm, evolving toward a “post-national” security community underpinned by shared norms, democratic values, and a collective sense of purpose (Adler & Barnett, 1998). This perspective traces its intellectual roots to Karl W. Deutsch's (1957) classic notion of a “pluralistic security community,” wherein war among members becomes unthinkable due to deep integration and mutual trust. Over time, NATO's institutionalization of defense planning, multilateral decision-making, and joint military exercises arguably fostered a socialization process that binds elites and publics alike into a community defined by more than mere strategic convenience (Wendt, 1999, p. 265).

In this interpretation, the Alliance's identity as a guardian of liberal democracy takes center stage, offering an integrative glue that might help NATO weather multipolar *realpolitik*. For instance, the European Union's push toward deeper political and economic integration resonates with NATO's emphasis on rule of law and human

rights, suggesting a “post-national” horizon where shared governance mechanisms supersede narrowly defined national interests (Keohane, 2012, pp. 35–36). Proponents of this thesis note that the Alliance has repeatedly incorporated new members that meet democratic criteria, reinforcing a cultural and normative alignment. Still, skeptics caution that such idealism may falter if major stakeholders perceive vital interests at stake—particularly in the face of economic downturns or divergent foreign policy objectives (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 14).

Tensions between normative aspirations and strategic realities become especially pronounced when addressing out-of-area threats or global power transitions. While the “post-national” concept might galvanize support for humanitarian interventions or crisis management in distant theaters, some European nations remain reluctant to incur high costs without a direct threat to their homelands. The contrast between lofty institutional visions and the day-to-day politics of defense spending exemplifies the fragile equilibrium that characterizes NATO’s evolution (Smith, 2021, pp. 42–45). Nonetheless, the notion of a post-national Alliance endures as a compelling framework for understanding how NATO can adapt beyond conventional threat-response models, transcending the bilateral U.S.-Europe dynamic and anchoring a broader liberal-democratic axis in an era of contested norms and intensifying great-power rivalries. Whether this vision can be fully realized in a world rife with populist backlashes and nationalist retrenchments remains an open question—one that will likely define NATO’s trajectory for decades to come.

Conclusion

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s post–Cold War evolution has been anything but linear. Initially tasked with justifying its existence after the Soviet threat disappeared, NATO rapidly pivoted from a purely defensive alliance to one grappling with humanitarian interventions in the Balkans and out-of-area operations in Afghanistan. The aftermath of 9/11 placed counterterrorism at the forefront of the Alliance’s agenda—an era marked by expeditionary operations, nation-building, and the challenges of extended stabilization missions. This shift, however, did not supersede NATO’s core principle of collective defense; rather, it stretched the Alliance’s operational horizon, demanding flexibility in doctrine and resource allocation. By the late 2000s, debates over burden-sharing and strategic coherence had surfaced, exposing

fractures within the transatlantic community and setting the stage for renewed focus on Europe's eastern flank.

The 2014 annexation of Crimea crystallized a new strategic fault line. Although NATO's immediate response—underpinned by the Readiness Action Plan and the Enhanced Forward Presence—reaffirmed Article 5, Russia's resurgence triggered persistent tensions over how to balance deterrence with diplomacy. Yet it was not until 2022, when Moscow launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, that the Alliance fully recognized the possibility of large-scale warfare returning to the European continent. This war has not only placed Russia at the apex of NATO's threat perceptions, but has also forced European capitals to confront deeply intertwined issues: energy dependency, mass refugee flows, and the specter of nuclear escalation. The conflict's scope and complexity exposed weaknesses in NATO's prior posture, which often rested on assumptions that Russia would be confined to hybrid or localized incursions.

In response, the 2022 Madrid Summit ratified a new Strategic Concept, formally declaring Russia “the most significant and direct threat” to Allied security and calling for large-scale reinforcement of NATO's eastern flank. As Finland and Sweden moved toward membership, the Alliance demonstrated a capacity for swift adaptation, defying Russian redlines and showcasing renewed Euro-Atlantic solidarity. This transformation underscores a central lesson of the Russo-Ukrainian War: the boundaries between conventional and hybrid threats have blurred, compelling NATO to orchestrate deterrence across physical, cyber, and informational domains. Equally crucial is the realization that Europe's energy security, supply chains, and infrastructural resilience are integral components of collective defense. These insights align the Alliance more closely with the European Union's broader crisis-management mechanisms, hinting at greater transatlantic synergy in countering authoritarian revisionism.

Nor does NATO's realignment end with the Russian threat. As the Alliance recovers from two decades of expeditionary focus in Afghanistan, new fault lines—such as great-power competition with China—cast doubt on the sufficiency of Europe-centric security arrangements alone. Simultaneously, the war's economic shockwaves have shown how domestic political concerns—ranging from inflation to populist backlash—can erode consensus. Preserving the unity forged by the Ukraine crisis may prove as

challenging as deterring future aggressions, especially if a drawn-out conflict saps public support in key Allied countries.

Ultimately, NATO's post-Cold War transformation has, in a sense, come full circle, returning with renewed vigor to its founding rationale of deterring major-power aggression on the European continent. While the War on Terror era expanded NATO's operational repertoire—demonstrating its ability to project power globally—the resurgence of large-scale territorial defense reflects a world in which great-power rivalry has reemerged. At the same time, lessons from Afghanistan and the rise of hybrid warfare underscore that no single mission set can define NATO. The Alliance must integrate diverse capabilities—ranging from rapid-reaction forces and cyber defense to energy resilience and strategic communications—into a cohesive and adaptable framework.

Whether this realignment endures depends on several uncertainties: the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the resilience of transatlantic political will, and the evolving nature of threats beyond Europe. Yet one conclusion is inescapable: NATO's strategic concept has been profoundly reshaped by the events of the last decade, culminating in a Madrid Summit that signaled the end of any lingering illusions about post-Cold War security complacency. By reaffirming collective defense while broadening its conceptual horizon, the Alliance has, in effect, revalidated the transatlantic bond—and positioned itself as a primary actor in shaping the security order of an increasingly volatile world.

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Etik Beyan / Ethical Statement

Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.

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Yazar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan ederler.

The author declares that he have no competing interests.