

Russian Aggression in Europe: Is NATO's Deterrence Dwindling?



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Abstract

While prior studies have explored deterrence as a concept related to individual member states, this study set out to get a deeper understanding of deterrence in the context of NATO in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This led to the following research question: *To what extent has Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the increasing use of hybrid threats challenged NATO's deterrence?* In order to answer this research question, the project applied a theoretical framework consisting of Deterrence Theory, Alliance Theory, and the complementary insight the two theories offer in combination. In addition to the theoretical framework, the project found document analysis methodologically relevant, as this method is ideal for researching complex real-world phenomena such as NATO, the individual member states, and adversaries such as Russia. Methodologically, this project adopts a critical realist framework, which enables deeper insights when analysing public documents not originally produced for academic research. The project found indications that NATO's deterrence has both increased and decreased since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Conventionally, it can be argued that NATO's deterrence stands stronger since the invasion. Deterrence and Alliance theoretical factors, such as defence spending, deployed troops, and accession of new member states, indicate that NATO has enhanced its deterrence. However, within the same theoretical framework, the project found signs that NATO's deterrence may also be deteriorating. Factors such as internal friction and Russian hybrid threats. All in all these findings raise questions regarding whether NATO's current defence structure is suitable to handle newer forms of warfare, such as hybrid operations, U.S. commitment to the alliance and the rationality of Russia.

Problem Area

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a fundamental turning point in European security and NATO's strategic environment. While the invasion has contributed to increased defence spending, increased military cooperation, and alliance expansion, it has simultaneously intensified the long-term cohesion of the transatlantic alliance. As a result, NATO faces a security situation characterised by both renewed military unity and growing strategic uncertainty. The following section outlines the key developments shaping NATO's deterrence and internal alliance dynamics as a consequence of the war in Ukraine.

NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty, signed in Washington on 4 April 1949, established NATO as a political and military alliance designed to ensure the security of its member states through collective defence. The treaty was concluded by twelve countries from Europe and North America in the early stages of the Cold War, when Western governments sought a coordinated response to the perceived threat posed by the Soviet Union (NATO, 2022a). The core idea of the alliance was that collective security would discourage potential aggression against any member state. Deterrence lies at the heart of NATO's founding logic. The treaty establishes a system in which the security of each member is tied to the security of all others. This principle is codified in Article 5, the alliance's collective defence clause, which states that an armed attack against one member in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against all members (NATO, 2022a). Each ally therefore, commits to assisting the attacked state, including potentially through the use of armed force, in order to restore and maintain security in the North Atlantic area. This collective commitment is intended primarily to prevent conflict rather than to fight it. By signalling that any attack would trigger a coordinated response from the entire alliance, NATO raises the expected costs of aggression for potential adversaries. In deterrence terms, the alliance seeks to convince opponents that the consequences of attacking a member state would outweigh any possible gains. The credibility of this deterrence is reinforced by the military capabilities of the alliance and by the ongoing commitment of its members to maintain and develop their defence capacities, as expressed in Article 3 of the treaty. Since its creation, NATO's deterrence strategy has combined political solidarity with military preparedness (NATO, 2022a). During the Cold War, this meant maintaining integrated forces and

nuclear capabilities to deter the Soviet Union. Today, the alliance continues to frame deterrence and defence as its central mission, relying on a combination of conventional forces, nuclear capabilities, and multinational cooperation to prevent aggression against its members (NATO, 2022a).

The conflict in Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped NATO's priorities, becoming the overarching theme of the transatlantic alliance since 2022. This transformation is not only a response to the immediate existential threat posed by Russian aggression but also a result of a hardening stance from the United States. For years, the U.S. has acted as the primary guarantor of Western security, but it is now decisively pushing its allies to bridge the defence spending gap. This American pressure has transformed defence budgets from a matter of national policy into a mandatory commitment to collective resilience, forcing member states to accelerate their military investments at a pace unseen since the Cold War (NATO, 2022b). Therefore, we have generally seen a significant increase in the defence spending within NATO since 2022. While some member states have increased their spending quite substantially in the years since the war, others take a more modest approach due to factors such as threat perception and economy (NATO, 2026). In addition to increased defence spending, NATO has expanded with the accession of two new member states. Finland joined the alliance in April 2023 after its relationship with Russia deteriorated in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine. Historically, Finland maintained stable relations with Russia after World War II, despite losing territory such as Karelia. However, the parallels between Russia's aggression in Ukraine and Finland's own history led to a firm stance against Russia. This triggered a dramatic shift in Finland, where the previous consensus against NATO membership was replaced by an overwhelming majority in favour of joining the alliance after 2022 (NATO, 2023). Sweden became a member of the alliance in 2024, marking a historic departure from over two centuries of military non-alignment. Unlike Finland, Sweden's long-standing policy of neutrality stretched back to the Napoleonic Wars, a stance that remained intact throughout both World Wars and the Cold War. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 fundamentally altered the Swedish perception of regional security. The perceived threat to the Baltic Sea region prompted a swift political realignment, leading Sweden to apply for membership alongside Finland. Although its accession process faced delays due to prolonged negotiations with Turkey and Hungary, Sweden officially became NATO's 32nd member in March 2024,

significantly strengthening the alliance's strategic presence in Northern Europe (NATO, 2024).

Russia and Active Measures

The concept of Active Measures originates from Soviet strategic practice during the Cold War, where the KGB developed a repertoire of covert and non-military tools aimed at influencing and sabotaging foreign societies and governments. Rather than relying on direct military confrontation, Active Measures encompassed disinformation, propaganda, political subversion, and the manipulation of public opinion abroad. As shown in *Beyond Propaganda*, these activities were not ad hoc, but rather institutionalized instruments of statecraft embedded within Soviet foreign policy (Abrams, 2016, Pp. 6-8). Although the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, the strategic logic underpinning Active Measures has persisted and evolved within the Russian Federation. In the contemporary security environment, these practices have developed into what is now commonly referred to as hybrid threats. Hybrid threats combine informational, cyber, economic, and political tools into coordinated campaigns that operate below the threshold of conventional warfare. This allows states to pursue strategic objectives while maintaining plausible deniability and avoiding direct military escalation (Shala, Jackson, Hui, & Sprague, 2022, P. 1). The Baltic region provides a particularly clear example of this evolution. Here, Russia has employed a broad spectrum of hybrid tools, including disinformation campaigns targeting Russian-speaking minorities, cyber-attacks against state institutions, and economic coercion through energy dependencies. The 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia, following a political dispute over the relocation of a Soviet-era monument, represent one of the earliest large-scale state-linked cyber operations. Similarly, in Latvia and Lithuania, Russia has conducted coordinated information operations involving fabricated narratives about NATO troops, falsified historical claims, and media manipulation aimed at fuelling ethnic tensions and undermining institutional legitimacy (Shala et al., 2022, Pp. 3–4). Importantly, these actions follow a deliberate strategic logic rather than representing isolated or opportunistic behaviour. Russia's objective is not immediate territorial conquest, but rather the creation of sustained pressure along NATO's Eastern flank. Through continuous disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, and political interference, Russia seeks to cultivate what has been described as a "zone of insecurity", in which the NATO states remain politically and socially vulnerable, and NATO's deterrence posture is persistently tested (Shala et al.,

2022, Pp. 5–6). This long-term approach aligns with broader ambitions to weaken Western cohesion and reassert influence within former spheres of control.

While Russia's actions in European countries have long been defined by "Active Measures" and hybrid threats, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a fundamental shift in European security architecture. Where Russia previously operated below the threshold of open warfare to maintain a degree of plausible deniability, the assault on Ukraine demonstrates that the Kremlin is no longer afraid to conduct conventional, high-intensity war on the European continent. This escalation is not a departure from the strategic logic of Soviet-era practices, but rather an ultimate extension of them. By merging familiar disinformation campaigns and political subversion with massive military force, Russia has signalled its willingness to enforce its strategic objectives through violence when hybrid tools alone fail to secure its sphere of influence.

USA and NATO Commitment

9/11 stands at a pivotal point in NATO's history. It remains the first and only time Article 5 has been invoked since the conception of the North Atlantic Treaty. After the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, NATO committed to aid the U.S. both domestically, in the form of patrolling the airspace, and in the Middle East, where more than 50,000 NATO troops were deployed to fight the war on terror in the wake of 9/11 (Daalder, Burns, Lute & Smith, 2026). However, since then, the U.S. commitment to NATO has somewhat fluctuated. Generally, relations between the U.S. and other NATO members remained cordial throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Nevertheless, Washington consistently pressured allies to increase defence spending. This frustration was clearly articulated as early as 2011 by U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, who bluntly warned that American taxpayers would not indefinitely carry the financial burden for allies unwilling to invest in their own defence (Gates, 2011). This pressure eventually culminated in the 2% GDP pledge formalised at the 2014 Wales Summit in the wake of the Crimean crisis (NATO, 2014). However, because the pledge was a political declaration rather than a legally binding mechanism, it initially met with modest to no reaction from most European members of the alliance, who lagged behind in implementation due to domestic economic priorities (Alozious, 2021, Pp. 476-477). The pressure from the U.S. to increase defence spending escalated with the first Trump administration. Unlike previous administrations that relied on traditional diplomacy, Donald Trump and his administration adopted an overtly calculated

and confrontational approach to the alliance (Olesen, 2020). The Trump administration interpreted the 2% GDP guidelines from the 2014 Wales summit not as voluntary long-term goals, but as binding membership fees or financial obligations to the United States, and directly threatened to decrease its commitment to NATO. By repeatedly casting doubt on NATO's core Article 5 collective defence guarantee and labelling the alliance "obsolete", the Trump administration escalated a standard debate over financial burden-sharing, raising concerns regarding the credibility of American security guarantees (Jakobsen & Ringmose, 2017). Although the sharp rhetoric towards NATO lessened somewhat during the Biden administration's time in office, the pressure on Europe to adapt the pledged defence spending remained constant across administrations, due to it becoming a general priority in American foreign policy (Schmidt, 2021, Pp. 150-151). Though the U.S. pressure on Europe was maintained, the overall defence spending only increased slightly throughout this period. However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine would be the catalyst for a historical increase in defence spending by the European NATO countries, which accelerated a substantial shift in the European threat perceptions and defence priorities (NATO, 2026). The relationship between the United States and NATO soured once again during the second Trump administration, a shift set in motion at the June 2025 NATO summit in The Hague. There, under intense pressure from Washington, European allies were pressured to commit to an unprecedented 5% GDP defence spending target by 2035. This aggressive stance was later made clear in the 2025 National Security Strategy, which solidified an "America First" approach as the fundamental tenet of U.S. foreign policy. The strategy revived sharp rhetoric alluding to European free-riding and explicitly made future U.S. security guarantees conditional upon allies fulfilling the financial commitments (Bolouri, Lohse & Qari, 2026, Pp. 86-87).

Knowledge Gap

Despite the growing focus on NATO following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the existing debate remains fragmented in how it interprets the broader implications of these developments.

On the one hand, the war in Ukraine has been widely understood as a facilitator for NATO's threat perception towards Russia, reflected in increased defence spending, strengthened forward presence in Eastern Europe, and the accession of Finland and

Sweden. These developments are often interpreted as evidence of a more cohesive and militarily robust alliance. On the other hand, Russia's continued use of hybrid activities across Europe, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and political interference, suggests that the security environment facing NATO has not been stabilised, but rather diversified and prolonged beyond conventional warfare. Meanwhile, persistent debates over burden-sharing and the long-term U.S. commitment to European security and NATO indicate that political cohesion within the alliance remains challenged.

However, these developments are frequently analysed in isolation from one another. Existing research tends to analyse either NATO's response to the war in Ukraine, hybrid threats, internal alliance dynamics, and U.S. strategic priorities as a separate phenomenon. As a result, there is limited integrated analysis of how these developments interact in shaping NATO's deterrence credibility and internal alliance cohesion in the post-2022 security environment.

Understanding these developments requires a framework capable of analysing both NATO's external deterrence posture and its internal political cohesion. Therefore, this project draws on Deterrence Theory and Alliance Theory to examine how hybrid threats, burden-sharing debates, and strategic uncertainty influence NATO's credibility and unity in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

This leads us to the following research question:

To what extent has Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the increasing use of hybrid threats challenged NATO's deterrence?

Theory

In this section, we will introduce the theoretical background and framework of this project. The theories have been chosen in order to gain insight into the different aspects of deterrence and what determines an increase or decrease in deterrence of hostile actors. The study found Deterrence Theory and Alliance Theory suitable for this purpose. The following section will dive further into these theories, examine how they complement each other, as well as the criticism and pitfalls these theories face when applied to real world scenarios.

Deterrence Theory

NATO defines deterrence as “The ability to alter an actor’s cost-benefit calculus so they decide against taking an undesired action”. This definition is straightforward in the sense that it clearly highlights the purpose of deterrence as preventing undesired actions from hostile actors as a choice the actor takes, based on the repercussions of the action taken. NATO highlights three rudimentary elements of deterrence: Capability, Credibility, and Communication. Capability is described as the “ability to deny gains or impose costs via the instrument of power”. This is deterrence in its most basic form and can be boiled down to the sheer military capacity of an actor. Here, it is made crystal clear to a hostile actor that an act of aggression would result in military retaliation, and if the military capability of an actor is grand enough, it should prevent the hostile act. Next, credibility is described as “consistent and visible behaviour that demonstrates resolve”. A seemingly vague description, but it should be understood as the notion that any hostile actor should believe that an act of aggression will be punished. The credibility of a given actor is therefore essential to deterring hostile actors, since they have to take this into account when conducting their cost-benefit analysis, and if they decide that an attack wouldn’t bring enough undesired retaliating actions from the actor, deterrence has failed. Lastly, communication is described as “messaging of intentions, thresholds and consequences”. This point underlines the importance of communicating the threat and consequences a hostile attack would have on a given actor (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2026). Measuring deterrence is a difficult task since the success criteria of deterrence are the absence of a hostile action. It is hard to know for sure why something does not happen

(Morgan, 2003, P. 84). However, what is possible is to assess that actor *A* abstains from taking hostile actions towards actor *B*, but we cannot be certain that this is due to deterrence. This is a theoretical challenge when using deterrence theory. However, this challenge can be overcome by using document analysis and quantitative models in the analysis. By assessing documents and relevant models, we can find signs that indicate a strengthened or weakened deterrence.

Thomas C. Schelling is a prominent scholar within deterrence theory, whose work can be considered to have shaped the modern understanding of strategic coercion. In his work, *Arms and Influence*, Schelling shifts the focus from military force to an art of coercion (Schelling, 1966, Pp. 3-4). Schelling's core proposition is based on the idea that military capacities should be viewed as more than a tool for physical destruction. Schelling argues that these capacities should be seen as an instrument for communication and persuasion, or diplomatic influence, which is what Schelling refers to as the diplomacy of violence (Schelling, 1966, Pp. 1-2). In Schelling's logic, three elements are crucial.

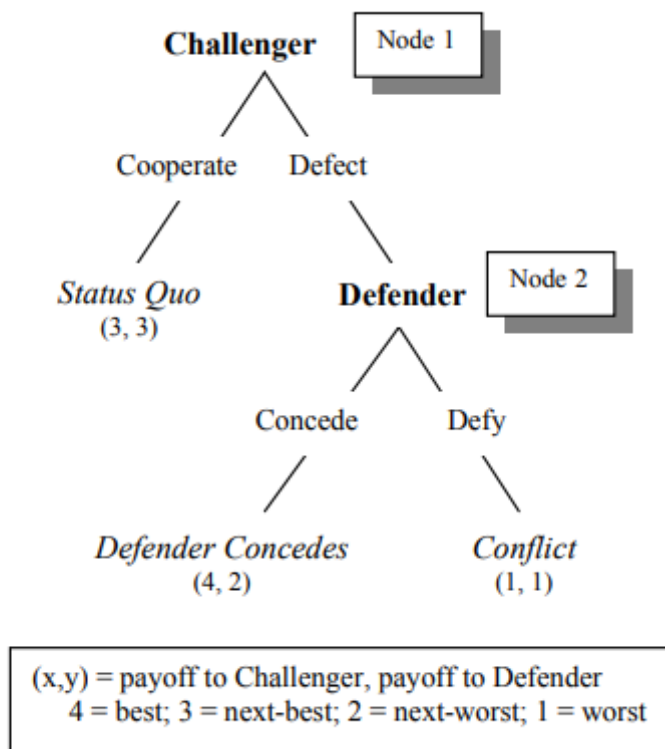
According to Schelling, the first primary elements are capacity and communication. He defines this capacity as the ability to inflict damage, or the 'power to hurt, which is used strategically to influence an opponent's behaviour. Schelling argues that the damage itself is not the most important, but rather the expectation of more violence if the opponent does not comply (Schelling, 1966, Pp. 3-4). Furthermore, Schelling argues that this capacity must be communicated effectively. For military actions to serve as a form of bargaining rather than mere brute force, the opponent must receive this communication of intent clearly and reliably (Schelling, 1966, P. 161). The second element is credibility. A central point from Schelling is that a threat only acts as a deterrent if it is credible. This often requires one to tie oneself to a certain action, resulting in it being difficult to withdraw from. Schelling describes it as the necessity of creating a situation where the opponent understands fully that there will be a reaction, even if it is costly (Schelling, 1966, P. 36). The third element is rationality. Schelling's model is fundamentally based on the assumption that actors are rational and make decisions by weighing the costs of an action against its potential gain. For deterrence to be effective, the opponent must be able to receive information, evaluate the risks, and make rational logical decisions to avoid further escalation (Schelling, 1966, P. 4). Schelling views this as a conscious process, where both

parties understand the idiom of military action, allowing them to engage in strategic bargaining rather than senseless destruction (Schelling, 1966, P. 162).

Scholars within this field have tried to explain deterrence through multiple key factors such as: the assumption of a very severe conflict, the assumption of rationality, the concept of a retaliatory threat, the concept of unacceptable damage, the notion of credibility, and the notion of deterrence stability (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 742-743). Theorists such as Patrick M. Morgan argue that all of the above factors explain the same theory, deterrence theory. He argues that, though they evidently involve varying approaches to the subject, they all pivot around similar matters and presumptions. However, this argument is disputed by other theorists such as Frank Zagare, who argues that even much of the Classical Deterrence Theory can be categorised as being a single theory. However, he also argues that due to the varying assumptions and approaches, the Classical Deterrence Theory segment can also be divided into two separate segments, which he calls: Structural Deterrence Theory and Decision-Theoretic Deterrence Theory (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 742-743). The first of Zagare's Classical Deterrence Theories, Structural Deterrence Theory, is rooted in realist theory. This perspective suggests that a balance of power fosters stability. When two states possess equal capabilities, they are effectively deterred because neither can secure a decisive advantage over the other. Moreover, it also suggests that nuclear deterrence is naturally stable. Unlike conventional warfare, where a high probability of success might encourage an attack, here it argues that the possibility of nuclear retaliation is enough to deter a hostile actor. Consequently, once a second-strike capability is established, the catastrophic costs of nuclear war render any intentional attack irrational. Under this framework, the only genuine threat to peace is an accidental launch. In contrast, Decision-Theoretic Deterrence Theory roots more in expected utility and game theory in order to set up models for deterrence. Although their approaches diverge, decision-theoretic scholars share the structuralist view that nuclear war is irrational, treating conflict as the ultimate worst-case scenario (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 742-743).

Classical deterrence can be analysed using game theory, which models the strategic interaction between a challenger and a defender in a sequential decision-making process. A typical Classical Deterrence model is described by Stephen L. Quackenbush as having a Challenger and a Defender. In this model, the challenger is seeking to change the status quo, and the defender is seeking to deter such actions. Quackenbush generally describes

it as a game where the challenger starts by deciding whether to cooperate or engage in hostilities towards the defender. If the challenger chooses to cooperate, the status quo persists, but if the challenger chooses to engage in hostilities, the defender now has two choices: to concede or to defy. Both parties' worst-case scenario would be if the defender chooses to defy, since this would result in conflict, which is the worst outcome for both the defender and the challenger. The different choices are ranked as seen in this model:



Source: Deterrence theory: where do we stand? (Quackenbush, 2010a)

In this scenario, the defender has to confront a predicament often described by theorists as "The paradox of mutual deterrence". The defender's paradox is that if you choose to concede, it provides a better immediate payoff than the cost of open conflict. However, if the Challenger perceives the Defender's willingness to yield as a certainty, the motivation to attack becomes greater since you effectively guarantee success, and therefore make deterrence impossible. Theorists offer two solutions to this issue. The first solution offered to the paradox revolves around a "hardline strategy". This means that the defender commits to an irreversible standpoint, where the option to back down is eliminated, despite it being a valid option in some cases. This leaves the challenger with the choice of either status quo or conflict (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 745-747). This leaves us in a situation where the best outcome for both parties is the status quo and what Quackenbush

describes as a "Nash equilibrium" leading to an upholding of the status quo. However, should the challenger choose to attack, the defender would be forced to concede in this scenario. The second solution offered by theorists revolves around leaving the prospect of war to chance. By leaving the prospect of war to chance, the defender deters the challenger from making irrational decisions. This is because the possibility of an uncontrolled escalation to a nuclear confrontation is highly undesirable to the challenger. However, it should be noted that threats involving a calculated risk only work if both sides believe the situation could actually slip into an unintended war (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 745-747).

As already explained, the conception of deterrence concerns an effort to prevent an attack by threatening unacceptable damage so that in the attacker's cost-benefit calculations, the best choice is not to attack (Morgan, 2003, P. 44). This presumes that the challenger is a rational actor. In a deterrence situation or when preparing for one, the deterrer will also be expected to be a rational actor. However, Morgan points out that one thing is how it "should be" according to the theoretical assumptions, but in practice it might not be the case. The emphasis on rationality in deterrence theory is at odds with the way deterrers sometimes feel about their opponents, who often can be considered to be irrational. (Morgan, 2003, P. 45).

Morgan's major contribution is that he challenges the assumption that the actors are rational. He makes the argument that we really cannot talk about deterrence situations between fully rational actors. Instead, we have to start with the assumption that the actors are in some way irrational, since they are not able to be wholly rational. Actors can lack sufficient time or the information necessary to be rational. According to Morgan deterrence is used not because the opponent is rational but in hopes of shocking or scaring the adversary to do the right thing (Morgan, 2003, P. 59). One can identify numerous examples throughout history of cultures and individuals who in certain situations did not value rationality but who instead believed in fate or God's protection (Morgan, 2003, Pp. 59-60). Morgan's opinion that the rationalist assumption known from deterrence theory lacks impact when assessing actors and conflicts throughout history has influenced our view on rationality in deterrence. When the actors are sharply different ideologically or culturally, and they have a highly developed hostility, the rationality can also be expected to be weakened. When hostility is high, then irrational behaviour will also be expected to

be more plausible (Morgan, 2003, P. 60). Since this study examines NATO's deterrent effect since 2022, it is natural to think about NATO and Russia, which historically have had a strained relationship. We therefore find that Morgan's assumptions about rationality are particularly relevant for this study.

Another important version of deterrence theory is offered to us by theorists such as Zagare and is known as "Perfect deterrence theory". This version of deterrence theory challenges the principles in classic deterrence theory by highlighting the importance of rationality in credibility. In other words, a threat is more credible when it is rational to carry out. This means that if a defender can successfully communicate to a challenger that their least preferred outcome isn't conflict, but to concede, the challenger will choose the status quo rather than conflict. The perfect equilibrium in this scenario, argued by Zagare and Kilgour, lends its name to the theory. This means that even though Morgan states that only one deterrence theory exists, perfect deterrence theory and its theorists argue otherwise. This is but one explanation of the difference between classical and perfect deterrence theory, yet it offers a great insight into the prognoses and interpretations of the two (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 747-748). When analysing both classical and perfect deterrence theory, the overlap between how deterrence is described by theorists and NATO is indisputable. While NATO doesn't outright state that its understanding of deterrence is grounded in either classical or perfect deterrence theory, it is clear that it borrows elements of both when communicating how it defines the concept. Therefore, this project will proceed with an understanding that NATO utilises a mix of classical and perfect deterrence theory when they make decisions on the matter.

The literature also points to three categories of deterrence, where two distinctions of deterrence are put against each other. This entails unilateral vs. mutual deterrence, Nuclear vs. conventional deterrence, and general vs. immediate deterrence. The first category, unilateral vs. mutual deterrence, revolves around the idea of the challenger and the defender and the status quo in a given situation. As explained above, the concept of deterrence depends on whether a challenger seeks to alter the status quo or not. This means that in situations where no actor seeks to alter the status quo, the need for deterrence disappears. This means that deterrence only becomes relevant when an actor seeks to alter the status quo. A scenario in which a challenger seeks to alter the status quo while a defender aims to preserve it is typically described in the literature as unilateral

deterrence. However, there are also cases in which both actors (defender and challenger) seek to change the status quo. This is a situation commonly referred to as mutual deterrence. Generally, the literature is clear on the fact that unilateral deterrence is the most desirable situation for a state to be in. This is due to the instability brought on by being in a state of mutual deterrence with another state. In order for states to move from mutual to unilateral deterrence, the state simply has to make the decision to refrain from altering the status quo, and the need for deterrence disappears (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 749-750). Secondly, nuclear vs. conventional deterrence. This category revolves around the notion that nuclear weapons provide a state with a much higher deterring factor than conventional weaponry would, due to the theoretical stabilising effect of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the countless examples of non-nuclear states engaging in hostile activities or escalatory behaviours towards nuclear states tell us that this is not the case in real world scenarios. Moreover, as classical deterrence theory prescribes, due to the immense cost of nuclear war, conflict would always be the worst-case scenario. This in turn, means that when conflict is the worst-case scenario for both parties, we end up in a situation of mutual deterrence. As the classic deterrence model prescribed, this means that when faced with a challenger, the defender always chooses to concede, and knowing this, the challenger will always engage in hostilities. Therefore, these issues show that rather than trying to interpret deterrence from the nuclear vs. conventional deterrence angle, one should try to explain the dynamics of deterrence from a more extensive point of view (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 751-752).

Lastly, it is necessary to distinguish between general and immediate deterrence. General deterrence simply pertains to actors who "maintain armed forces to regulate their relationship even though neither is anywhere near mounting an attack" (Quackenbush, 2010a, P. 752). Therefore, general deterrence is a much more passive concept that revolves around the decision-making process relating to conflicts of interest. On the other hand, immediate deterrence should be thought of as a high tension moment in time where a conflict could escalate at any given moment. Immediate deterrence refers to a situation in which one state is seriously contemplating an imminent attack, while the opposing state issues credible threats of retaliation in order to prevent that attack from taking place. Generally speaking, the presence of immediate deterrence would indicate that general deterrence has failed. This is due to the fact that if general deterrence thrives, no conflict will take place. In real world scenarios, we mostly see cases of general deterrence,

whereas cases of immediate deterrence are a rarer occurrence (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 753-754).

We will primarily focus on the general deterrence. Since general deterrence has been most prominent since the end of the Cold War, we find that it is most relevant to include this type of deterrence in this study.

With the intention of measuring deterrence, we find it necessary to look for NATO's military capabilities. Data from NATO indicate an increase in defence expenditure since the war broke out in Ukraine in 2022 (see Appendix A). We make use of this data in order to see the development in defence spending in NATO. This is relevant since the defence expenditure is central to the military capabilities, and these capabilities are central to NATO's total deterrent effect. A key area of focus in the analysis will therefore examine the development in defence spending over the last years in order to assess the overall deterrent effect.

Another important tool when measuring deterrence is credibility. As outlined above, credibility plays a decisive role in deterrence theory. A defence alliance can have military capabilities, but without the necessary credibility, it will not be able to achieve a strong deterrent effect. The emphasis on the importance of credibility in deterrence theory makes it relevant to assess credibility in the analysis. The developments we have seen over the last years, where the United States' strategic focus seems to have shifted are also important for NATO's overall credibility. As outlined in the problem area, the United States has shifted its focus towards Asia, and they have repeatedly claimed that the European states should be able to contribute more to NATO defence expenditure and the defence of the European continent. When the interests among NATO allies do not align, it can cause problems with the credibility of the NATO alliance. Since credibility is crucial for the overall deterrent effect of NATO, we find it suitable to look at indicators of credibility or the lack of credibility in our analysis.

Alliance Theory

When it comes to theories regarding alliance and cohesion, one of the most important authors is Glenn H. Snyder. His book from 1997 *Alliance Politics* is one of the most cited

pieces of literature within this field of study. The book *Alliance Politics* is divided into two sections: *Alliance Formation* and *Alliance Management*. In these, Snyder outlines what goes into the formation and cohesion of alliances and what it takes to manage an alliance once it's been formed.

In his book *Alliance Politics*, Snyder sets the scene by outlining what it means to be an alliance in a multipolar international system. In terms of scholarly contributions, it is argued that aspects of this subject area, such as regimes, international organisations, crises, war and order dominate the research field, but cooperation among states and military alliances lacks investigation. Snyder argues that alliances are cooperative endeavours where member states collaborate and coordinate their resources in pursuit of a common goal (Snyder, 1997, P. 1). To understand this cooperative dynamic, Snyder first establishes a critical conceptual distinction between a general alignment and a formal alliance. An alignment is a broad, often informal state of affairs where two or more states share overlapping interests or face a common threat simply by virtue of their position in the international system. By contrast, an alliance is formal, explicit and usually takes the form of a written treaty commitment to coordinate military capabilities. Snyder emphasises that the formalisation of an alliance fundamentally alters the strategic analysis of the states involved, because it introduces institutional expectations, reputational costs and a structured arena for continuous internal alliance bargaining (Snyder, 1997, Pp. 6-7).

Snyder outlines the main drivers for alliance formation as states seeking security and external threats (Snyder, 1997, Pp. 49-51). Moreover, with regard to the formation of alliances, Snyder states that actors decide whether to join an alliance based on a cost-benefit analysis. According to him, the advantages of joining an alliance are: enhanced deterrence for the actor themselves, enhanced military capabilities of the actor themselves, enhanced deterrence of the allies of the actor, deters the allied actors of looking for allies elsewhere, due to security needs being met, eradicates the likelihood of allied actors to engage in hostile activity towards the actor themselves and expands the influence and control for the actor over the allied actor(s) (Snyder, 1997, Pp. 43-44). While the benefits of joining an alliance seem generally advantageous, Snyder breaks down the costs associated with joining an alliance. The first cost of joining an alliance revolves around the risk of the commitment to assist your allies in a conflict in situations where the actor would have otherwise deemed it non-beneficial to partake. This situation leaves the

actor in a situation where their own deterrence is at risk of collapse, and brings the possibility of a new conflict with the hostile actor. The second cost regards the danger of being dragged into a conflict when a partner state, reassured by the alliance, takes a more provocative and unyielding stance against its rivals. The third cost is the threat of triggering an opposing alliance to form. The fourth cost is the loss of diplomatic flexibility. While blocking an allied actor from joining other coalitions is advantageous, sacrificing one's own strategic freedom to align with different nations represents a significant disadvantage. Lastly, the fifth cost mentioned by Snyder is the overall reduction in strategic autonomy caused by the necessity of aligning policies with an allied actor, which often requires compromising one's own objectives to accommodate theirs (Snyder, 1997, P. 44). This cost-benefit analysis of the advantages and the disadvantages of joining an alliance gives us the foundational understanding of why states choose to engage in alliances with other states and why others choose to remain independent of these coalitions. Regarding management of alliances, Snyder argues that no alliance is static and takes constant management to function as intended. An important concept within alliance management is bargaining between the involved actors. Snyder characterizes this dynamic as an effort by the involved actors to identify overlapping goals while managing conflicting motives. Here, the most important common goal for all involved actors would be the perseverance of the alliance itself. However, another goal for an actor in this process would be to gain as much influence and control as possible in order to decrease the cost for the actor themselves. This is due to the allies often having one or more interests that are diverging or even contradicting one another. Therefore, the purpose of bargaining in an alliance context becomes to increase the benefits of all parties involved and to decrease the costs of all parties involved (Snyder, 1997, Pp. 165-166). Another important concept introduced by Snyder is the alliance security dilemma. Central to this dilemma are the concepts of *abandonment* and *entrapment*, which describe the constant balancing process within alliances. States seek strong commitments from allies to avoid abandonment, while at the same time attempting to maintain sufficient autonomy to avoid entrapment in unwanted conflicts. This, in turn means that the terms refer more to the fear of being abandoned and the fear of being entrapped. The consequences of abandonment include: decreased deterrence, the actor becoming vulnerable, and a weaker alliance in general, whereas the consequences of entrapment are manifested through a loss of control over security politics (Snyder, 1997, Pp. 180-186).

In summary, these dynamics illustrate that alliance participation is not a static commitment but a continuous exercise in strategic navigation. By weighing the foundational costs and benefits, states must perpetually balance the pursuit of collective security against the risks of individual vulnerability. As Snyder highlights, the interplay of bargaining and the alliance security dilemma creates a delicate equilibrium: states must manage the competing fears of abandonment and entrapment while negotiating to maximize influence. Ultimately, the survival of an alliance depends on the actors' ability to align diverging interests, ensuring that the strategic advantages of cooperation consistently outweigh the inherent costs of compromised autonomy.

Building on Snyder's and other alliance theoretical work, Patricia A. Weitsman seeks to develop a theoretical framework that focuses more on the formation and cohesion aspects of alliance theory. Although Snyder moves beyond classical structural neorealism by focusing on alliance interactions, bargaining, and perception dynamics, his analysis remains fundamentally rooted in a rationalist understanding of state behaviour. Weitsman, on the other hand, draws in perspectives from not only rationalism but also liberalist and realist perspectives. She argues that these three perspectives make up the bulk of work done up to this point in alliance theoretical work (Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 11-13). Most important for this project is her focus on alliance cohesion. She uses this definition of alliance cohesion: "*The ability of states to agree on goals and strategies for attaining those goals*". Building on this definition, she argues that states ally themselves with other states in order to overcome external threats. By banding together to overcome external threats, the alliance will in this case have a high degree of cohesion. However, in the absence of an external threat, the cohesion within the alliance will deteriorate due to the absence of a common goal. This would indicate that alliances would have less cohesion during peacetime and more cohesion during times of conflict with external actors. Moreover, it is argued that some alliances are formed due to conflict between the states, in order to ease the tension between the involved states. This however, can cause the threat to materialise from within the alliance itself. In NATO's case, it is suggested that when liberal democracies form alliances, it has less to do with an external threat and more to do with a sense of common values. This would indicate that NATO was formed in the absence of an external threat, even though the Soviet Union is often cited as the external threat that formed NATO and definitely contributed to an increased cohesion in the early years of the

alliance. Therefore, it is possible to have a relatively high cohesion within an alliance in the absence of an external threat (Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 24-25).

We can therefore identify two types of threat that can facilitate a shift in the cohesion within an alliance: external threat and internal threat. Weitsman argues that the external threat factor is rooted in a rational perspective, whereas the internal threat factor is rooted in a liberalist perspective, and by combining the two perspectives, we gain a more nuanced understanding of alliance cohesion. Concretely, this means that if an alliance has low external and internal threats, the cohesion within the alliance would be moderate to low. If the alliance has a low external threat and a high internal threat, the cohesion would be low, creating a dysfunctional alliance where the parties are bound to each other reluctantly. If the alliance has a high external threat and a low internal threat, the cohesion would be high. Lastly, if the alliance has a high external threat and a high internal threat, the cohesion would be difficult to maintain, though not impossible (Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 24-25).

To conclude, the analysis of alliance cohesion requires a multifaceted approach that accounts for both rationalist and liberalist motivations. As demonstrated through Weitsman's critique of Snyder, the strength of an alliance depends on the interaction between external and internal threats. While the presence of an external adversary, such as the Soviet Union, historically bolstered NATO's cohesion, Weitsman's framework highlights that shared values and the mitigation of internal friction allow for high levels of cooperation even in the absence of a common enemy. By categorizing cohesion through the lens of external and internal threat levels, it becomes clear that alliance longevity is determined as much by the internal "management" of its members as it is by the geopolitical environment.

Where Snyder and Weitsman primarily focus on the structural conditions for alliance formation and cohesion during peacetime, Evan N. Resnick contributes with a more modern and nuanced perspective on the internal alliance dynamics. Resnick argues that the concept of alliance cohesion is a somewhat neglected term within alliance theory and that previous scholars have focused more on different aspects within the subject. He

states that the literature on the subject can be divided into two schools: the neorealist and the liberal. According to the neorealist school, high alliance cohesion is predicated upon four key factors: the imminent threat of military defeat, a symmetrical distribution of power among partners, a shared consensus regarding the primary adversary, and a scenario where external threats outweigh internal frictions. The liberal school, by contrast, links alliance cohesion to domestic regime type, hypothesizing that democratic states are inherently more capable than autocratic ones of maintaining cohesive wartime relations (Resnick, 2013, Pp. 672-673). Ultimately, Resnick's framework serves to evaluate these competing theories against historical cases, arguing that wartime cohesion is far more volatile and dependency-driven than traditional neorealist or liberal assumptions suggest. In the context of NATO following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Resnick's framework is particularly useful for analysing whether the alliance demonstrates the conditions associated with high cohesion, especially regarding threat perception and consensus on the primary adversary. More recent scholarship has attempted to adapt alliance cohesion theory to contemporary geopolitical conditions. In this regard, Palaios and Papageorgiou argue that NATO cohesion is increasingly shaped not only by external military threats but also by economic interdependence, trade asymmetry, and institutional dynamics within the alliance. Their findings suggest that alliance cohesion in the contemporary international system cannot solely be explained through traditional military-security variables, but must also be understood through broader political and economic relationships within NATO (Palaios & Papageorgiou, 2026).

Taken together, Snyder, Weitsman, Resnick, and Palaios & Papageorgiou provide a multi-level framework for understanding alliance cohesion. Snyder explains the strategic bargaining dynamics inherent in alliances. Weitsman expands the concept by incorporating internal and external threat variables, while Resnick contributes a wartime perspective focused on cohesion under conditions of military pressure and asymmetric dependence and Palaios & Papageorgiou provide a direct insight into the internal dynamics that affect the cohesion within NATO specifically. Combined, these approaches make it possible to analyse NATO cohesion not merely as a response to external threats, but as an evolving political process shaped by strategic interests, institutional cooperation, and internal alliance tensions

Complimentary Theories

In this project, Deterrence Theory and Alliance Theory are used to explain different but interconnected dimensions of NATO's role as an alliance. Alliance theory is primarily applied to analyse NATO's internal cohesion, focusing on how political unity, bargaining processes, and alliance management shape collective decision-making. Deterrence theory, in contrast, is used to examine NATO's external strategic behaviour, particularly its ability to influence and deter adversarial actors such as Russia. However, the two theoretical approaches are not treated as fully separate analytical frameworks. Instead, they complement each other by addressing different levels of analysis: alliance theory operates primarily at an internal level, while deterrence theory operates at the external level. This distinction makes it possible to analyse how NATO's internal cohesion affects its external deterrent credibility, and vice versa.

Credibility is a central concept in this study. To evaluate NATO's deterrence, this paper establishes a direct theoretical bridge between alliance theory and deterrence theory. Within deterrence theory, a credible deterrence relies fundamentally on three core pillars: capability, credibility, and communication. However, alliance credibility is not an isolated variable, since it depends heavily on the internal alliance cohesion. If NATO members suffer from internal disagreement, a lack of strategic consensus, fear of abandonment, or diverging interests, the alliance inherently loses its credibility. Consequently, elements of alliance theory like cohesion and a shared threat perception directly determine the strength of deterrence mechanisms such as effective signalling and a consistent posture. Ultimately, this strong analytical connection underscores that NATO's overall deterrent effect is fundamentally dependent on cohesion and by extension the credibility of the alliance itself.

An important connection between alliance theory and deterrence theory builds on the arguments made by both Weitsman and Resnick that high levels of external threat tend to increase alliance cohesion. Combined with the deterrence theoretical assumption that stronger military unity and political resolve enhance deterrence credibility, this creates a clear theoretical link between the two approaches. Increased alliance cohesion strengthens the credibility of collective commitments, which in turn improves the alliance's overall deterrent effect. In the context of NATO, this suggests that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 theoretically contributed both to strengthening internal alliance cohesion

and to reinforcing NATO's external deterrence posture toward Russia. Snyder's concepts of abandonment and entrapment also have important connections to deterrence theory. As deterrence theory argues, deterrence only functions effectively if adversaries believe that alliance members are genuinely willing to defend one another. In this sense, alliance cohesion and credibility become closely interconnected. If alliance members fear abandonment, doubts may emerge regarding the reliability of collective defence commitments. At the same time, excessive fears of entrapment may reduce allies' willingness to fully support collective policies or military responses. Together, these dynamics can weaken the perceived credibility of the alliance in the eyes of external adversaries, thereby undermining the alliance's overall deterrent effect. In other words, internal alliance insecurity can weaken external deterrence credibility.

Another important concept introduced by Snyder is bargaining within alliances. Through bargaining processes, alliance members negotiate issues such as military contributions, defence spending, strategic priorities, and the distribution of costs and responsibilities within the alliance. These bargaining dynamics directly influence the alliance's overall military capabilities. From the perspective of deterrence theory, visible and credible military capabilities constitute a central component of effective deterrence. Consequently, successful alliance bargaining can strengthen deterrence by improving the alliance's collective military capacity and its ability to signal resolve to external threats.

Lastly, another important connection between alliance theory and deterrence theory concerns the role of communication and strategic signalling. As deterrence theory argues, deterrence depends not only on military capabilities but also on the ability to clearly communicate intentions and the consequences of hostile actions. In the context of alliances, this process becomes significantly more complex, as communication must reflect a unified and coordinated position among multiple member states. Alliance theory therefore, contributes by explaining how internal cohesion and consensus influence an alliance's ability to project credibility externally. If alliance members disagree on strategic priorities, threat perceptions or the appropriate response to hostile actions, the alliance may send inconsistent or ambiguous signals to adversaries, thereby weakening deterrence credibility. Conversely, high levels of alliance cohesion and strategic consensus strengthen the alliance's ability to communicate resolve and maintain a credible deterrent posture. In NATO's case, this highlights the importance of maintaining political

unity and a shared understanding of external threats in order to ensure effective deterrence toward potential threats such as Russia.

Theoretical Critique

Although the chosen theoretical framework, consisting of Alliance Theory and Deterrence Theory, provides a strong foundation for analysing NATO's strategic behaviour, it is necessary to critically address the assumptions of rationality and unity upon which these theories are based.

A significant contribution to the criticism of our theoretical foundation can be found in the work of Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein. In line with Morgan's observation of rational actors in deterrence theory, the article *Rational Deterrence Theory: I Think, Therefore I Deter*, by Lebow and Stein, challenges the foundational thinking within deterrence theory. They argue that deterrence theory relies on an assumption of universal rationality, which rarely reflects the complexities of real-world politics; as Lebow and Stein points out, the subjective expected utility will vary enormously depending on an actor's risk propensity (Lebow & Stein, 1989, P. 2). In relation to NATO's 2022 strategy, this means that even if the Alliance strengthens its internal cohesion in order to send a clear signal, the effect depends on the opponent's subjective interpretation. This means that if an opponent is risk-prone or driven by political desperation, the rational calculations upon which NATO relies may fail, as the opponent may not have the same idea of costs and benefits (Lebow & Stein, 1989, P. 3). This could challenge the project's assumption that the political unity within NATO could lead to stronger deterrence.

While Lebow and Stein criticise the external effect of deterrence, Snyder also provides an important internal critique of cohesion. Although our project applies Snyder's work to explain the importance of alliance cohesion, it is essential to highlight the inherent tensions in alliance dynamics identified by Snyder. As there exists no global government, states can't be completely certain of other states' behaviour, meaning states often seek security by joining forces in alliances like NATO (Snyder, 1984. Pp. 462-463). As Snyder points out, security within an alliance is never absolute, meaning that if, for example, the U.S. leverages its dominant position to push for a unified, confrontational stance toward Russia, it risks weakening the alliance in the long term. Smaller member states may push back out of fear of entrapment in a situation they cannot control. As Snyder points out, security

within an alliance is never absolute, since no state can ever be fully certain of others in an anarchic system (Snyder, 1984, P. 461).

Another central criticism to make of Alliance Theory is based on Snyder's idea of the lack of certainty, as Snyder states this leads to a fundamental alliance dilemma consisting of two competing fears, abandonment and entrapment (Snyder, 1984, P. 466). Abandonment occurs when a state fears its allies will not provide support in a crisis, which pushes the state to seek more cohesion and demonstrate loyalty. On the contrary, entrapment is the fear of being dragged into a conflict by an ally over interests that one does not share. This creates a permanent tension within NATO's internal management. If the alliance strives for maximum cohesion to avoid abandonment, it simultaneously increases the risk of entrapment for its members. The consequence of this is that alliance cohesion cannot be considered a secure state but a constant bargaining process where members must balance their own security interests against the collective goals of the alliance (Snyder, 1984, Pp. 471-472). This internal instability challenges the assumption that NATO can maintain a unified front, as the members' fear of being trapped in a major escalation may secretly undermine the very credibility and deterrence the alliance seeks to demonstrate.

Existing Research

Most existing research examining deterrence has used a quantitative approach. A large part of the literature examines specific deterrence situations. These case-studies tend to generally criticise, rather than test, deterrence theory (Quackenbush, 2010a, P. 754). Many researchers within this field of study have historically focused on nuclear deterrence. While we acknowledge the value of nuclear deterrence, it is not the main focus of this study. Our focus has been on other mechanisms, such as alliance cohesion and credibility. While there is also a rather large literature on these factors within the field of deterrence studies, we find that a contemporary study that employs these factors can be a valuable contribution to the existing literature. Deterrence theory is often expressed with game-theory models, and the empirical tests therefore need to be able to test if the predictions from these models are correct. The game-theoretic models of deterrence do not make predictions of the success or failure of deterrence. Instead, game-theoretic models of deterrence pursue to predict the outcome of an interaction. We can also observe that most attempts to test deterrence have applied large-N quantitative methods (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 756-757). The advantage of this method is the generalisable nature that stems from the large sample size. While these studies are relevant, we hope that a more qualitative approach can contribute to new knowledge. Instead of large-N studies, we will employ document analysis.

In their article, *NATO Self-Defense: Is Article 5 the Right Framework for Responding to Sub-Kinetic Cyber Aggression?* Kumar, Brown, Ragavan, Cerrato & Nagar seek to uncover how and under which conditions NATO's Article 5 could be invoked (Kumar, Brown, Ragavan, Cerrato & Nagar, 2025). To examine this important question, the researchers adopt a multi-faceted approach in order to evaluate the appropriateness of NATO's Article 5 framework in responding to the sub-kinetic cyber aggression, sub-kinetic meaning activities under the normal threshold for military aggression. They conduct a legal and doctrinal analysis where they specifically focus on Article 5 and examine how international law defines an "armed attack" in a sub-kinetic context. They also conducted a case study on Estonia, which experienced a series of coordinated cyber-attacks from Russia in 2007. This methodological framework differs from the one set out in our study. We do not have the same focus on legal texts and legal procedures when assessing the deterrent effect. Their results suggest that NATO has long refrained from specifying which

types of cyber operations would trigger an armed response. The rationale behind this strategy is that if NATO had a “red line”, hostile actors could operate just below this threshold. The researchers suggest that by issuing clearer statements and boundaries, NATO could more effectively signal its intentions to hostile actors, which could reduce the risk of escalation. A new and more bold strategy on cyber security can enhance NATO’s deterrence and ensure that NATO’s defensive framework remains effective in the face of hybrid threats (Kumar, et. al. 2025, P. 316).

A study that utilizes some of the same theoretical assumptions as our study is Darrell Driver’s article *Deterrence in Eastern Europe in Theory and Practice* (Driver, 2019). The article draws on the theoretical assumptions from deterrence theory, and the findings suggest that hybrid threats in Eastern Europe pose an ever greater challenge, which in turn poses a bigger requirement for deterrence in NATO. Like our study, Driver seeks to examine NATO’s deterrence and how deterrence theory helps explain these efforts (Driver, 2019, P. 14). However, Driver’s article is from 2019, and he is exploring the deterrence in post-2014 Europe, after Russia’s annexation of Crimea. It is interesting that Driver utilises deterrence theory in order to investigate deterrence in Europe after 2014. Our study also draws on the deterrence theory, but is a contemporary study that can contribute to the deterrence literature after Russia’s war in Ukraine in 2022.

The article *NATO defense demand, free riding, and the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022* written by Justin George and Todd Sandler explores the burden-sharing within NATO in regard to military expenditure in the period 1991-2020 (George & Sandler, 2022). The primary purpose was to investigate the military expenditure in NATO in the intervals 1991-2000 and 2000-2020. During the 1990s many of NATO’s 16 allies shifted from investing in military expenditure to investing in social welfare. In Russia, the defence spending fell in the period 1992-1999 by approximately 63% (George & Sandler, 2022, P. 784). It is worth noticing that the study is from before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the military expenditure figures must be understood in this context. The article's theoretical framework draws on economic theory in order to uncover the pattern in burden-sharing regarding military expenditure in NATO. With their approach, they find that despite new initiatives, NATO experienced a certain amount of free riding and member states adopting a policy that relies on the defence spending of other NATO member states (George & Sandler, 2022, P. 785). Their results furthermore suggest that NATO allies, to a certain extent,

relied or free ride on the defence spending of other allies, despite a looming Russian threat (George & Sandler, 2022, P. 803). George and Sandler's article is interesting as it examines the military expenditure within NATO by applying economic theory and it does so using a quantitative empirical analysis (George & Sandler, 2022, P. 794). This is an alternative methodology compared to the approach selected in our study. Assessed in relation to our own study the results from George and Sandler's article are relevant since it could indicate that the deterrent effect has been decreasing.

While most studies on deterrence have utilized a quantitative methodological framework and many of these quantitative studies have almost exclusively focused on the immediate deterrence, our study seeks to uncover the general deterrence in NATO (Quackenbush, 2010b, P. 61). This methodological choice was motivated by the nature of the security situation in Europe. We argue that the relationship between Russia and NATO is not on the verge of armed conflict, and we therefore find that a qualitative document analysis is more suitable to analyse the contemporary deterrence in NATO. Quackenbush points out that formal theories of general deterrence have never really been empirically tested. He explains the lack of empirical testing by pointing to the tendency within the literature to give a lot of attention to the cases of immediate deterrence. Criteria for the selection of general deterrence cases have remained hard to identify (Quackenbush, 2010b, P. 61).

Existing research has mainly focused on the military dimensions of deterrence, while diplomacy, economic statecraft in deterrence and other policy areas has received little attention in the literature (Fisher, Klein, Pupcenoks & Codjo, 2025, P. 1). The article *China, DIME, and innovative deterrence methodology: How authoritarian states react to deterrence activities through information* by Fisher, Klein, Pupcenoks & Codjo addresses this issue by applying a methodology that includes the foreign policy tools; diplomacy, information, military and economic factors (DIME). This methodological approach provides an interesting view on deterrence since it examines factors that could contribute to a more sustainable and lasting deterrence. On the basis of this DIME framework, the authors undertake a case study on China (Fisher et. al. 2025, P. 4). With the overall objective of contributing to a more effective view on deterrence strategy, Fisher, Klein, Pupcenoks & Codjo carry out a quantitative statistical analysis (Fisher et. al. 2025, P. 14). While we do not conduct a quantitative case study, we do however, share the view that non-military factors can impact deterrence. In this regard, we argue that it will be relevant to address

some non-military factors in an analysis of NATO's deterrence. This should contribute to a more comprehensive analysis of the state of NATO deterrence than if the study had only focused on military capabilities and defence spending.

Hypotheses

In this study, we present two hypotheses in order to answer the research question. The hypotheses in this study have been developed by using the deductive approach, which implies that both hypotheses have been developed based on already existing theories. The first hypothesis has been formulated on the basis of a deterrence theory perspective, while the second hypothesis has been developed on the basis of an alliance theoretical perspective. While the basis of the hypothesis is based on each theory, both theories will be used to analyse each hypothesis. The relevant assumptions from deterrence theory and alliance theory will serve as the theoretical framework for the analysis of this study. The two theories in combination should enable us to provide a deeper and more thorough understanding of the topic and answer the hypotheses and research question satisfactorily.

Hypothesis 1:

NATO's increased focus on defence and security since Russia's invasion of Ukraine indicates an enhanced deterrence posture

Based on the deterrence theory assumptions that military capability, credibility, and communication are central to preventing conflict, we expect that factors such as NATO's increased defence spending, troop deployments, and new member accessions following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine have strengthened the Alliance's collective deterrence. According to Thomas Schelling in *Arms and Influence*, military capabilities function as a form of communication. Through actions, states show their determination and the ability to retaliate (Schelling, 1966, Pp. 146-147). In this sense, increased defence expenditure and investments in military capabilities, the member states send signals that extend beyond political declarations. A key element of deterrence is the ability to impose costs on a potential adversary. As argued by Schelling, military strength is not only about winning the war, but about demonstrating the capacity to inflict damage on critical infrastructure and strategic targets (Schelling, 1966, P. 218). The ongoing armament among NATO members may therefore sway the adversary's belief in a swift or low-cost victory and therefore reduce the likelihood of a successful attack. Based on these considerations, we

expect that the strengthening of military capabilities, credibility and communication will contribute to a stronger deterrent effect within NATO.

Hypothesis 2:

Internal friction, divergent priorities and exposure to Russian hybrid threats indicates a weakened deterrence within NATO

Based on the assumptions from alliance theory, we expect that the deterrent effect of NATO will suffer from the dwindling cohesion within the alliance. We find numerous examples that could serve as challenges for the alliance's cohesion. There are several examples of events and communication that could indicate that the differences in threat perceptions and interests among the NATO member states should lead to a weakening of NATO's deterrent effect. Among these examples, we find NATO's internal cohesion in regards to Greenland, among other things, the U.S. criticism of NATO and subsequent threats to withdraw commitment to NATO, and Russia's escalating hybrid activity in NATO countries. According to Patricia Weitsman, an asymmetrical alliance will reduce cohesion. She elaborates that an asymmetrical alliance will be less cohesive since it makes it possible for the weaker member states to free ride on the efforts of the stronger member states, or the strong members will be resentful of bearing the burden of the weaker member states (Resnick, 2013, P. 675). As already explained by this project's theoretical framework, credibility is essential for the overall deterrent effect of a military alliance. The examples above regarding the Internal cohesion of the alliance, the United States lack of commitment to NATO, and Russia's hybrid war against NATO suggest that the overall deterrence might be declining. Therefore, we anticipate identifying indications that suggest a weakening in NATO's collective deterrent effect based on these factors.

Research Method

Introduction

This methods section aims to explain our methodological approach and also how the data has been collected and analysed. We will furthermore explain our methodological considerations and the limitations and advantages our decisions have had on our analysis. In order to give a meaningful answer to the research question, we will make use of secondary data. What is meant by secondary data is that the data used in our analysis has been collected before our study. The decision to use secondary data has been made because we find that there exists extensive documentation on this area of research, and the material in question can help us answer our research question. The benefits and implications this has for the study will be outlined and explained in greater detail in the “Document Analysis” section below. We have used a qualitative document analysis in order to gain knowledge and insights that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. In the following sections, the different elements of our methods section will be outlined. Our considerations and choices will be explained below. Some elements will be answered briefly, while other phenomena will be explained in more depth. The research question that we seek to answer reads as follows:

To what extent has Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the increasing use of hybrid threats challenged NATO’s deterrence?

Philosophy of Science

This study is guided by the assumptions of critical realism. Critical realism is a newer position in philosophy of science. Roy Bhaskar is one of the central scholars in critical realism, and his approach is an extension of the criticism of positivism (Ingemann, 2020, P. 88). Ontologically, critical realism has the same starting point as positivism and critical rationalism. This implies the key assumption that the world and society exist independently of the researcher. Critical realism is placed among the realist positions within the philosophy of science. A central assumption in critical realism is that reality is complex, and this implies that the world consists of several layers. A society consists of several levels. A society consists of people, which requires biology, which again requires physical structures (Ingemann, 2020, Pp. 88-89). The second central assumption in critical realism

is that reality is contextual. This implies that reality depends on the specific circumstances and historical conditions. When conducting a study, the researcher has to be aware of these contextual circumstances. We find this element of critical realism very relevant for our study as we seek to gain a better understanding of the deterrent effect of NATO.

Critical realists insist that the research process will take place in different stages and with three layers. The first layer, the empirical stratum, is comprised of our immediate observations. The second layer is the factual stratum and is also possible for the researcher to observe, or it is at least possible for the researcher to calculate. The third and last layer is the deep stratum and can best be described as the bottom of the iceberg, which we cannot immediately observe. Here, we need to make use of theories in order to be able to get a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms that are hidden at the bottom of this iceberg. The different strata are briefly described below:

1. *Empirical stratum (consists of data and measurements)*
2. *Factual stratum (consists of incidents and tendencies)*
3. *Deep stratum (consists of causal mechanisms, power structures, and institutional conditions)*

Figure 3.3, Page 93 in Ingemann - Videnskabsteori for Økonomi, Politik og Forvaltning

Critical realism is different from critical rationalism in this area as it seeks to solve the problem of induction by doing a combination of empirical observation and rational deduction. Karl Popper and critical rationalists will refer to the rationalistic element and will first formulate bold hypotheses and subsequently rationalize why the hypothesis was falsified. Critical realism, by contrast, only applies the rationalistic element to post-rationalize. However, the deep strata also demonstrate that critical realism and critical rationalism share the characteristic that they both strive to gain an understanding of the causal mechanisms and therefore also to uncover relationships (Ingemann, 2020, Pp. 92-93). To be able to uncover the causal mechanisms and institutional conditions, we will have to gather all our information and knowledge and reason our way to an appropriate explanation. In order to do this, we will have to rely on our theories. Theory is an abstract conception of the phenomena that we are not able to observe directly (Ingemann, 2020, P. 92). We find this element of critical realism very relevant for the present study as we seek

to gain a better understanding of the deterrent effect of NATO. Since NATO is institutionally complex and the contextual conditions decisive, we acknowledge that a solid theoretical framework can be crucial for gaining insight into the causal mechanisms (Ingemann, 2020, P. 92).

We find that critical realism is well-suited in this context as the study is based within social science and international relations. In order to answer the two deductive hypotheses, we use the theoretical assumptions from our theories in order to gain a better understanding of the causal mechanisms and institutional relations that we are not able to immediately observe. We identify that critical realism can be useful for us in order to answer our hypotheses since they are based upon the two theories, *deterrence theory* and *alliance theory*. These theories are complex and dependent on the context, and observation alone will not be sufficient in order to uncover the deeper causal mechanisms, power structures, and institutional conditions (Ingemann, 2020, Pp. 88-89). By applying the principles of critical realism, we hope to uncover the latent meaning that is hidden in the deep strata (Ingemann, 2020, P. 93). We find it beneficial to use the logic of critical realism in order to develop a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms that help strengthen or may weaken the deterrent effect of NATO.

Deductive Method

This study applies a deductive approach, which will guide the analysis. The benefit of using the deductive method is that we will have a clear theoretical framework that will guide the analysis from the beginning. In order to do this, we have decided on two theories, *deterrence theory* and *alliance theory*.

By using the deductive method, we intend to formulate hypotheses in advance, and these hypotheses will be formulated on the basis of existing theory (Popper, 1959, P. 9). By using deterrence theory, we have a solid theoretical framework to assess the first hypothesis. The use of deterrence theory in this study is advantageous since the theory addresses the factors that must be present for states to deter other hostile actors. Along with alliance theory, which helps us answer the second hypothesis,, these two hypotheses will guide the analysis from the outset. The deductive method assists us in setting the structure of the study.

By letting the deductive method guide the analysis, we base our knowledge on assumptions taken from our selected theories and subsequently logical deductions (Ingemann, 2020, P. 69). One of the differences between us humans and animals is that we have the ability to think abstractly and not let this ability be influenced by immediate sensory impressions, which is a typical characteristic for animals. We are therefore able to think abstractly and then to reason our way to conclusions through deduction. With deduction, you reason from the general assumptions to the specific. This is exactly what we do when we set up our deductive hypotheses. We use the assumptions and already existing knowledge from our three selected theories and our ability to think abstractly to reason our way to conclusions through deduction (Ingemann, 2020, Pp. 68-69).

Qualitative Study

This study will make use of the qualitative method in order to examine the research question. This implies that we have selected documents and articles that will be used in the analysis for the purpose of answering our two hypotheses. To determine the usefulness of deterrence theory, empirical testing is needed (Quackenbush, 2010a, P. 754). The two empirical approaches that have typically been used in the deterrence literature are case studies and quantitative analysis. Most studies concerned with testing deterrence are quantitative studies. These quantitative studies have mostly focused on immediate deterrence (Quackenbush, 2010a, P. 754). This study is qualitative, and it seeks to examine NATO's deterrence since the invasion of Ukraine. Since most existing research on this topic has used the quantitative method, we hope that our qualitative study can help provide new insights to NATO's general deterrence today.

The complex circumstances that are prevalent in international relations require that we choose a method that makes it possible to uncover the relationship between actors and the often hidden intentions these actors have. The qualitative method makes it possible to delve into relevant documents and thereby uncover the meaning the actors have. This qualitative method, supplemented with our theoretical framework, provides us with the necessary tools in order to shed light on the interests and strategic considerations within NATO. The qualitative method makes it possible for us to get into depth rather than assessing the topic more broadly.

Document Analysis

In this study, we use document analysis in order to answer the research question. Document analysis can be applied along with other survey methods, such as interviews or statistical methods. A qualitative content analysis of selected documents helps the researcher to get a better understanding of the subject being examined. Document analysis can be defined broadly as a systematic treatment or evaluation of documents (Lynggaard, 2020, P. 185). The types of documents the researcher needs to collect depend on the research question that the study seeks to answer. In some studies, it will make sense to include several documents and perhaps even documents of different kinds. This could, for instance, be transcripts of interviews, legal texts, statements from governments, and so forth. In other studies, the use of one good document that is relevant can be enough to answer the research question. What is special about the document analysis method is that the researcher does not participate in the production of the document. This also implies that the data from these documents are typically not produced solely to be data in an analysis in social science. The researcher should, however, be aware that the sender of a document can have a presumption that the document may later be an object of examination. What is also important to make clear is that documents will be analysed from the position of the researcher. This position can be formed by some theoretical assumptions, and the temporal context will also play a role (Lynggaard, 2020, P. 189).

Researchers can use three different types of documents: primary, secondary, and tertiary documents. All three types are fixed in time, but they can, however, change over time. Legal texts can be edited over time, and internet-based documents from websites can also be edited. The first type of document, the primary document, can be seen as a document circulated among a limited set of actors, and it will be circulated close to the incident or situation that the document refers to. The second type, which is the secondary document, refers to documents that are also relatively close in time to the events or situations that the documents refer to. The main difference between primary and secondary documents is that secondary documents are, in principle, available to everyone. This does not mean that secondary documents necessarily have the public as the target, but they are, in general, available to the public. The third and last type of document is the tertiary document. What characterizes the tertiary documents is that they are available to everyone. But unlike the

primary and secondary documents, they are produced at some point after the event or situation the document refers to. Examples of tertiary documents can be memoirs, academic books, and articles. They are all an analytical processing of a certain event, phenomenon, or situation, a certain period after these have taken place (Lynggaard, 2020, Pp. 187-188).

Document analysis has been chosen as the qualitative research method in this study as it helps the researchers uncover meaning, develop a better understanding, and discover insights that are relevant for assessing the research problem (Bowen, 2009, P. 29). When deciding on a research method, the researcher has to be aware of the advantages and possible limitations of the research method. In this project, we are aware of the limitations that a document analysis might entail. Examples of limitations when using the document analysis could be “biased selectivity”. This could occur if the researcher includes only a few and one-sided documents. If a researcher only selects documents that support the hypothesis and excludes documents that contradict it, then it could be a sign of biased selectivity. A second possible limitation can be the insufficient detail. Documents may be produced for some other reason than for research. This means that some documents do not provide sufficient detail to be able to answer the research question. A third possible limitation of document analysis can be “low retrievability” which means that access to documents may be deliberately blocked (Bowen, 2009, Pp. 31-32). This can be a particular challenge in the field of this study, as a significant portion of the information is classified. We are aware of the challenges that these limitations may entail. However, there are also some advantages to using document analysis that we find very appealing for this project. First and foremost, when using document analysis, you will not have to create your own data, and this means that the document analysis is less time-consuming and therefore also more efficient than other research methods. This is a considerable advantage in this project, given the limited time available and the need to meet a deadline. The “stability” of documents is another advantage of using document analysis. The researcher's presence does not change what is being studied, and these documents are therefore also suitable for repeated reviews by other researchers. This is also advantageous as the stability of the documents strengthens the reliability, since the documents can possibly be reviewed repeatedly without being influenced by the researcher (Bowen, 2009, P. 31). We argue that the advantages associated with the document analysis outweigh the limitations of this analytical method. Since selected

documents can help us to get a better understanding of the topic in question, we find that document analysis will enable us to answer the research question.

Research Criteria

When conducting academic research, it is worth considering research criteria. The research criteria commonly used within the social sciences are validity, reliability, and generalisability. Given the qualitative nature of the study and since the study applies document analysis, the traditional criteria validity, reliability, and generalizability were considered inadequate. We have been aware that other research criteria are required in order to secure quality. When using qualitative document analysis, it is important that the reader can trace the research process (Lynggaard, 2020, P. 660). The central concept here is transparency. Transparency in qualitative studies implies that the reader can take a critical position to the results of the study. In an experimental research tradition, researchers strive for reliability so that other researchers can repeat the procedure of the study and see if they get the same results. In qualitative document analysis, the context plays a central role. Historical conditions and the contemporary social and political context are crucial for the results the researchers will find. Furthermore, it would be unrealistic to expect that another researcher would be able to repeat a document analysis and have the exact same interpretation and hence result from the analysis. However, the design and the procedure should be as transparent as possible. Otherwise, it will be too difficult for a reader to assess in which context the results should be considered (Lynggaard, 2020, P. 660). In order to ensure that there is the necessary transparency in the study, it is important to describe how documents were selected. We have described the selection of documents and the considerations regarding these choices in the “empirical material” section.

Examples from the documents utilised in the study have been shared in the analysis. The purpose of this has been to share examples from the documents with the reader in order for the reader to be able to judge the context between the data used and the researcher's own interpretation. By giving examples in the analysis, the researcher will also open up to alternative understandings of the material that is utilised.

Delimitations

This section has as its purpose of clarifying the delimitations of the study. The group is aware that some of the methodological choices that have been made pose some challenges and limitations to the study. The study could have had a bigger focus on some of the external threats that NATO is currently facing. Countries ruled by despotic leaders, such as Russia, China, and Iran, could have formed a more prominent role in the project. However, the group has assessed that in order to answer the research question satisfactorily, a focus on the NATO member states and the development of NATO's deterrent effect has been most advantageous. A broader focus, including external actors like Russia, China, Iran, among other countries that do not buy into the values and norms that are central to NATO, would possibly have blurred the focus of the study. We have, from the beginning, been aware that the topic is voluminous and that we need a clear scope in order to make a thorough and satisfactory analysis. In extension of these considerations, we also acknowledge that the literature used for our theoretical framework and for conducting our analysis has primarily American or Western origins. Although we do not consider this a problem in this study, we acknowledge that the results of the study have, in part, been shaped by the texts used for our theory and analysis. These texts will inevitably be shaped by a Western worldview of how the world is arranged, and perhaps even more importantly, how it should ideally be arranged.

The use of Artificial Intelligence in the Study

Due to restrictions from the university and the wide range of possibilities with artificial intelligence today, we will here address the question of the use of artificial intelligence tools in the study. From the beginning of the conceptual phase, the use of artificial intelligence tools has been helpful with idea development. The group has engaged with these tools in an effort to test our own thoughts and ideas. The group considers these tools as very valuable in the brainstorming phase. The use of these artificial intelligence tools has sometimes made us reconsider our initial assumptions, although it has at no point been directly crucial for our decision-making. Throughout the study process, decisions have been made after discussions in the group. It is important to emphasize that the use of artificial intelligence tools has only served as a valuable supplement and has therefore not directly been decisive for the choices made in our study. Instead, a mix of

literature on the subject and good group discussions has been central to the decisions made during the research process. Last but not least, these tools have not been used for the purpose of text production. The group is aware that the use of these tools has both strengths and weaknesses, and that one weakness can be that it weakens our own creativity. In order to avoid this, the group members have engaged in active discussions from the outset of the study process and throughout the writing process of the different sections of the study.

Empirical Material

This study draws on qualitative empirical data and it consists of both primary- and secondary sources. The primary sources will consist of the official documents and data sources from NATO. These sources are crucial for the analysis, since they are contemporary sources, which help us examine the current security environment concerning NATO. The official documents from NATO used in the analysis are free to the public and they enhance the replicability of the study. Another primary source is the speech that was held by the former U.S. Secretary of State, Robert Gates in 2011 (Gates, 2011). This primary source contributes with some historical context on how the NATO relations were 15 years ago. Furthermore, it reveals how a government led by the Democratic Party viewed NATO in peacetime - even before Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. This speech helps us examine the credibility, cohesiveness, and alliance politics within NATO. The transparent nature of these publicly accessible documents enhances the replicability and transparency of the study. The group is however, aware that the qualitative approach that is selected and the group's interpretation of the documents influence the results generated by the group.

The study also draws on some secondary sources. This involves research articles and academic analyses that investigate relevant parameters for NATO, such as defence spending and cases of hybrid aggression from Russia. These sources help us with other perspectives on the subject, and they also serve as pertinent data for our analysis. A general characteristic of most of our sources in our analysis section is that they are of a more recent date. Since this study seeks to examine NATO's deterrent effect after 2022, we find that the analysis will benefit from contemporary documents and data. The primary source "Defence expenditures and NATO's 5% commitment" serves as a good example of

the contemporary material that has been utilized in the study (see Appendix A). It is an official NATO document that serves the purpose of shedding light on the defence spending among the NATO member states. This helps us examine the overall deterrent effect of NATO and thereby enables us to answer the research question.

In Christelle Calmels article, *NATO's 360-degree approach to security: alliance cohesion and adaptation after the Crimean crisis*, it is described how the NATO member states can have different perceptions of external threats. (Calmels, 2020, P. 421). The article also dwells on the fact that in the Warsaw summit communiqué, the text mentioned words like “democratic”, “common”, and “shared” 18 times, which indicates that NATO is more than just a defence alliance. This suggests that it is in fact, a community of shared values (Calmels, 2020, P. 423). Calmels’ article will specifically be useful in order to answer the second hypothesis, which draws on the alliance theory.

Since the study is examining defence policy and great power politics, there are some documents we don't have access to. It is the nature of this field of study that a large amount of documents regarding defence planning and defence strategies are classified material that is not available to the public. It is within this limit that we have selected our sources. One advantage of utilizing sources that are publicly accessible is that it strengthens the transparency of the study. Despite this limitation of documents that are inaccessible to us, there is still a significant literature of both primary and secondary sources that can be relevant for the purpose of investigating this field. Since there is a wide range of empirical material, it is important to reflect on the relevance and implications of this material. Furthermore, the quality of the sources has been of great importance. We have, from the outset had a wish to incorporate primary sources into the analysis. For this reason, we have prioritized spending the necessary time to find relevant and trustworthy sources that could contribute to answering the two hypotheses. We find that the mix of both primary and secondary sources has been ideal in order for us to be capable of answering the research question.

Analysis Strategy

Deterrence as a field of study and discussion has surged in recent years. This can to a large part be explained by a changing world order. Insecurity in Europe and Trump's second presidential term form the backdrop for the analysis. The two theories, deterrence

theory and alliance theory, will form a complementary theoretical framework in the analysis. While Deterrence Theory is used to analyse NATO's external ability to deter hostile actors, Alliance Theory is applied to analyse the internal political and strategic dynamics that influence the alliance's overall cohesion and credibility. Combined, the two theoretical approaches make it possible to assess both the military-strategic and political dimensions of NATO's deterrence. Since deterrence is difficult to measure directly, due to the fact that successful deterrence is defined by the absence of hostile action, this project operationalises deterrence through a number of indirect indicators derived from the theoretical literature.

Drawing primarily on NATO's own definition of deterrence, as well as the work of Morgan, Zagare, and Quackenbush, the analysis focuses on three central dimensions of deterrence: capability, credibility, and communication. Capability is operationalised through indicators such as defence expenditure, military deployment, and collective defence structures following 2022. Credibility is analysed through political unity within NATO, burden-sharing, Article 5 commitments, U.S. commitment to Europe, and NATO's willingness to respond to Russian aggression and hybrid threats. Communication is operationalised through official NATO and important actor statements, strategic and security concepts, summit declarations and signalling towards Russia regarding NATO's intentions, thresholds, and potential consequences.

In addition to deterrence theory, the project applies alliance theory in order to analyse NATO's internal cohesion. Building on Snyder, Weitsman, Resnick, and Palaios & Papageorgiou, alliance cohesion is understood as the alliance's ability to maintain political and strategic unity in the face of both external threats and internal threats. These two types of threats can change the cohesion within an alliance. Disagreements within NATO member states concerning the contributions to the NATO budget will also be included. The United States criticism of other NATO members' defence spending will be included as empirical evidence to analyse this phenomenon. Two important concepts from alliance theory are fear of abandonment and fear of entrapment. These two concepts respectively mean the fear for actors of suddenly being left alone in a conflict by their allies and to involuntarily be drawn into a conflict that does not serve the strategic interests of the actor. In order to analyse these concepts, we intend to uncover examples from both documents and speeches in order to identify examples of the NATO allies seeking either more or less

military cooperation. Fear of abandonment will be analysed through Article 5 commitments, troop deployments in Europe, and an assessment of closer military cooperation in general. Fear of entrapment will be analysed by looking at material that could indicate that some NATO member states attempt to avoid escalation and to limit the alliance obligations. This could include examples of member states' lack of military and economic contributions to Ukraine in order to avoid conflict with Russia. The analysis therefore, focuses on both external and internal variables affecting NATO cohesion.

In regard to analysing external cohesion, the term is operationalised through the alliance's shared threat perception of Russia, increased military cooperation, support for Ukraine, and the extent to which Russia's invasion has generated strategic unity among member states. Internal cohesion factors are analysed through indicators such as burden-sharing disputes, diverging strategic priorities among member states, disagreements regarding military support to Ukraine, debates concerning escalation risks, and tensions surrounding the United States' strategic focus on Asia.

Lastly, building on Snyder's concept of alliance bargaining, this project operationalises bargaining as the continuous negotiation process through which NATO member states seek to maximise strategic benefits, minimise political and military costs, and influence alliance decision-making processes. Bargaining is analysed by looking for indicators of burden-sharing disputes, negotiations regarding defence expenditure, disagreements over military support to Ukraine, debates concerning escalation management, and conflicts regarding NATO enlargement and strategic priorities.

This project's analysis is structured around the previously introduced hypothesis. The first hypothesis is formulated on the basis of the theoretical assumptions from the project's section on deterrence theory. The theoretical assumptions selected for the deterrence theory in this study primarily stem from the researchers Stephen L. Quackenbush and Patrick M. Morgan.

The second hypothesis has been shaped by adopting the assumptions found in the project's theoretical section on alliance theory. These researchers shape the theoretical assumptions of our two hypotheses. By formulating two hypotheses that draw on deterrence theory and alliance theory, respectively, we have two theories that can contribute to insights and two different perspectives on deterrence.

To test the first hypothesis, we will make use of secondary data that clarifies NATO's material capacities. According to Schelling, military capacities function as a form of communication, and therefore it is important that our empirical data for the first hypothesis will document the actions that shed light on NATO's ability to retaliate against any attack. The specific empirical data used to adequately analyse the first hypothesis includes defence spending, and other factors. Here, we will include data from official NATO reports and documents concerning NATO's expenditure commitment and defence expenditures. By using this form of empirical data, it is possible to compare defence spending between the NATO member states, to investigate whether there has been a factual increase or decrease in resource allocation. Furthermore, we will examine data concerning deployed troops within NATO states in Europe. This data will be collected from among others the Enhanced Forward Presence. This serves as empirical data regarding NATO's physical presence and military capabilities. Moreover, the project will analyse overviews of NATO's military exercises to evaluate whether there has been a rise in the scope after the invasion of Ukraine. Lastly, the project will analyse Russia's use of below threshold warfare and hybrid activity, in order to assess whether traditional deterrence is capable of addressing this type of hostile activity.

This empirical data will be analysed through document analysis of official NATO documents and summit declarations, for example the Madrid Summit Declaration from 2022, as well as the Vilnius Summit Communiqué. By using sources that are publicly available, we will be able to ensure the project's transparency, which is a central research criteria in our methods. The purpose is to determine whether increased rearmament signals a sufficient capacity to inflict damage, thereby strengthening the overall deterrent effect.

To test the second hypothesis, we will make use of qualitative empirical data that enlightens the internal political dynamics and tensions within NATO. Whereas the first hypothesis has more focus on the external factors, the analysis for the second hypothesis focuses more on the internal factors and the political cohesion that, in this project, is considered crucial for the alliance's overall deterrence. For the second hypothesis, this project will conduct a document analysis of speeches from central actors, including examples of Donald Trump's rhetoric concerning NATO, as well as from Secretary General Mark Rutte. Furthermore, the project will analyse official documents and

speeches regarding the accession of Sweden and Finland into NATO, serving as empirical data on how the alliance addresses external threats and manages the tensions that arise during expansion. To test the second hypothesis, the project further examines documents regarding NATO's GDP defence expenditure commitments to analyse the burden-sharing issues, with the purpose of identifying signs of asymmetry. In addition, we will analyse empirical data regarding U.S. troop numbers in Europe to examine the country's ongoing commitment, comparing the data from before and after the invasion. Lastly, we will also look for specific tensions in official NATO documents, where member states may have expressed fears of abandonment or entrapment.

Critique of Methodological Choice

A critical point of methods in the literature and research of deterrence theory comes from Paul Huth and Bruce Russett. According to Huth and Russett, the research on deterrence theory lacks consensus. This is evident in their article *Testing Deterrence Theory: Rigor Makes a Difference* (Huth & Russett, 1990). Huth and Russett argue that scientific disputes occur due to methodological errors and unclear definitions of key terms (Huth & Russett, 1990, P. 466). They further argue that rigorous empirical testing in the social sciences requires scholars to follow five steps, which include: The first step, specify the behaviour and/or outcome in precise terms. Step two, develop a theoretical model, or rather a causal framework with clearly defined concepts and conditions. Step three, operationalise and select, by translating the theory into measurable variables and identifying a representative set of cases. Step four, empirical testing, by analysing the cases, to understand if changes in independent variables lead to the predicted outcomes. Step five, use the empirical results to assess how well the theoretical model explains the observed behaviour (Huth & Russett, 1990, P. 467). According to Huth and Russett, the foundation of solid empirical testing ultimately depends on how thoroughly steps one and two are defined, as the validity of steps three, four, and five relies upon them (Huth & Russett, 1990, P. 467). Building on this, Huth and Russett emphasise that the lack of agreement in deterrence research often is a result of methodological errors that can produce conceptual muddles and unsuitable definitions of key concepts (Huth & Russett, 1990 P. 467). A significant challenge in regard to clarifying deterrence lies, according to Huth and Russett, in the fact that empirical testing is only possible if scholars agree on

how to move from general theoretical concepts to operationalising them across cases (Huth & Russett, 1990, P. 497).

Huth and Russett's focus on methodological rigor functions as a critical perspective of our project's methodological framework. As we apply qualitative document analysis and make use of secondary data to examine NATO's general deterrence, it can be argued, based on Huth and Russett's logic, that we lack the necessary rigor in order to make valid conclusions. In accordance with Huth and Russett's main argument for scientific progress within deterrence theory, does it require a strict process, where theory is translated into measurable variables (Huth & Russett, 1990, P. 467). By considering Huth and Russett's viewpoint on deterrence theory, and the methodological frameworks they present, do we acknowledge that our method of choice, to examine NATO's deterrence, can be criticised for being methodologically imprecise. This critique is furthermore included to demonstrate that we are aware that our results are based on the interpretation of documents rather than the measurable testing that Huth and Russett call for as ideal.

Analysis

Hypothesis 1:

NATO's increased focus on defence and security since Russia's invasion of Ukraine indicates an enhanced deterrence posture

Defence Spending

One of the main indicators of strong deterrence lies in the military capabilities of a given actor. In order to determine NATO's military capability, one of the most logical and transparent data sources is the defence spending within the alliance, and luckily, NATO provides a yearly settlement of allies' defence spending. This data is provided by the defence ministry of each member state. In addition to these sources, NATO also gathers information from the Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs of the European Commission (DG ECFIN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (NATO, 2026). In regard to the definition of defence expenditure, NATO defines it as: *"payments made by a national government specifically to meet the needs of its armed forces, those of Allies or of the Alliance"* (NATO, 2026). A substantial part of this includes payment of armed forces by the different ministries. The term Armed Forces encompasses a wide range of branches and support units, including land, air, and maritime forces, special operations, space and cyber commands, medical and logistics units, and general administration. In addition to this, the defence budget of the member states may also include "Other Forces". This category encompasses domestic and maritime security forces, such as interior troops, national police units, gendarmeries, carabinieri, and coast guards. Expenditure within this category is only included to the extent that the forces in question are trained in military tactics, equipped and organised as military units, capable of operating under direct military command in deployed operations, and realistically able to be deployed beyond national territory in support of military activities. Furthermore, expenditure related to "Other Forces" financed through the budgets of ministries other than the Ministry of Defence is likewise categorised as defence expenditure (NATO, 2026).

The calculation of defence expenditure furthermore includes pensions for retired military and civilian personnel, peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, research and development (R&D), military components of dual-use civilian–military activities, as well as infrastructure-related spending. Conversely, expenditures related to war damage compensation and civil defence are not included in the calculation of defence spending (NATO, 2026). The scale of the budgets provided by the member states gives us the opportunity to use NATO’s defence expenditure data to get a comprehensive idea of how the military capability of the alliance has evolved in the years since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and therefore would provide us with a clear picture of one of the key indicators of NATO’s deterrence.

We utilise the latest numbers from 2025 to examine the overall defence spending of the alliance. According to the data shown in Appendix A, we see a substantial increase in the overall defence spending in total within the alliance from 2022. We see a clear increase in defence spending from 2022 to 2023, where the overall budget more than doubled in this time frame. It went from a 3.8% growth in 2022 to 9.3% growth in 2023. From 2023 to 2024, the defence expenditure doubled once again to an unprecedented 18.6% growth. The defence expenditure growth, however, would decrease slightly from 2024 to 2025, where it went from 18.6% to 15.9%. Even though we see a slight decrease, 15.9% growth is still significantly higher than the previous years (NATO, 2026).

These numbers also represent the immediately observable data points when analysing the military capacity and therefore serve as the empirical stratum or the surface layer of the iceberg in this regard. The data clearly indicates a substantial shift in the general approach and consensus regarding defence expenditure, experienced by the NATO member states in the years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The trend here is undeniable and serves as the factual stratum in this analysis of capability within NATO’s defence posture (Ingemann, 2020, Pp. 92-93).

To gain an understanding of the deeper stratum in this data, we need to apply both alliance theory and deterrence theory to the numbers and the data (Empirical strata) and the spending increase observation (Factual strata) (Ingemann, 2020, Pp. 92-93). If we do so, it becomes clear that the mechanisms that drive this surge in spending could be multifaceted. The increase in NATO defence spending after 2022 can therefore be understood as the result of multiple interacting mechanisms.

Viewed through the lens of deterrence theory, the increase in overall defence expenditure within NATO is a clear indicator that the alliance is seeking to increase deterrence through mainly capability, but indirectly also both credibility and communication. According to NATO's own definition of deterrence, capability is one of the central pillars of deterrence (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2026). As demonstrated in the theory section, this is also the view of the scholars who make up the deterrence theory in this project. By locking in unprecedented growth rates since the invasion of Ukraine, NATO is suggesting a strong commitment to its defence. In game theory terms, this is a physical manifestation of a hardline strategy designed to force the challenger (Russia) to see that the cost of changing the status quo (attacking a NATO ally) heavily outweighs any benefits (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 745-747). Moreover, the sustained manner of spending since 2022 indicates that NATO is attempting to fortify its general deterrence so it doesn't fail and turn into a crisis of immediate deterrence. Therefore, the increased defence expenditure can be interpreted as an indication that NATO seeks to strengthen deterrence through enhanced military capability.

However, the increased defence expenditure also indicates an increase in the two other pillars of deterrence theory, credibility and communication. In deterrence theory, credibility depends on whether an adversary believes that threats and commitments will actually be carried out. Military capability alone is insufficient if the adversary doubts the political willingness to use those capabilities (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 742-743). The increased NATO defence spending since 2022 strengthens deterrence credibility because it demonstrates political willingness to prioritize military preparedness and collective defence despite significant economic costs. In addition to this, the sustained investments in defence indicate that NATO's strategic response to Russia is not temporary, thereby strengthening the perceived reliability of the alliance's deterrent posture. Communication in deterrence theory concerns signalling intentions, thresholds, and consequences clearly to adversaries (Quackenbush, 2010, Pp. 747-748). By publicly announcing increased defence budgets and long-term military investments, NATO engages in strategic signalling toward both adversaries and allies. These visible and measurable increases in defence expenditure communicate that NATO perceives Russia as a serious security threat and is willing to allocate substantial political and economic resources toward countering it. In deterrence theory, this signals that future aggression against NATO members would likely

be met with stronger military resistance and greater alliance unity. Consequently, such signals are likely to influence Russia's cost-benefit calculations regarding hostile actions toward the alliance.

From an alliance theory perspective, the theorists Snyder, Weitsman, and Resnick who form the fundamental understanding of alliance theory in this project, state that external threats are central drivers of alliance cohesion (Snyder, 1997, P. 44; Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 24-25; Resnick, 2013, Pp 672-673). This would indicate that Russia's invasion of Ukraine increased NATO members' perception of insecurity and vulnerability, leading to increased defence spending within the alliance. Weitsman supports this view through her argument that a high external threat generally leads to higher alliance cohesion. Therefore, making Russia a unifying factor within NATO in this instance (Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 24-25). The increased defence spending can therefore be seen as demonstrating alliance unity, in order to avoid being vulnerable to adversaries of the alliance, in this case Russia.

In addition to this, it also demonstrates an example of Snyder's concept of bargaining. Snyder argues that alliances require constant management and bargaining (Snyder, 1997, Pp. 165-166). The spending increases were not only reactions to Russia, but also outcomes of internal alliance negotiations regarding burden-sharing and responsibility (Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 24-25). NATO members increased spending partly to maintain influence and credibility within the alliance. Therefore, Defence spending becomes a form of signalling loyalty and commitment to the alliance. However, the spending surge was not driven solely by fear of Russia. As demonstrated earlier in this project, the U.S. has applied heavy pressure on the alliance in order to increase defence spending, with arguments of burden-sharing. This plays into the internal cohesion of the alliance. European allies feared a weakening of U.S. commitment if they failed to contribute sufficiently. Therefore, increasing defence expenditure can be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the risk of abandonment by the United States. To summarize, NATO members increased defence spending not only to deter Russia externally, but also to preserve internal alliance cohesion and maintain U.S. commitment to European security. Therefore, we can conclude that Russia's invasion of Ukraine intensified threat perceptions and strengthened alliance cohesion, creating incentives for military reinforcement. However, although increased defence spending theoretically strengthens deterrence, deterrence

remains inherently difficult to measure directly, since successful deterrence is ultimately reflected in the absence of hostile action.

NATO 2022 Strategic Concept

As a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO updated its strategic concept at the 2022 Summit in Madrid. In the 2022 strategic concept, the member states of the alliance acknowledged a shift in the security and stability of the world after the invasion and formally designated the Russian Federation as the most significant and direct threat to allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. This marked a profound departure from the 2010 Strategic Concept, which had pursued a "strategic partnership" with Moscow. In response to this altered security landscape, the 2022 document fundamentally reoriented NATO's posture by elevating collective defence to its primary focus, heavily emphasizing deterrence and forward resilience (NATO, 2022b).

The empirical stratum here revolves around the 2022 Madrid Summit, where NATO formally designated Russia as the "most significant and direct threat" and subsequently overhauled its posture toward forward resilience and enhanced collective defence. This rhetorical pivot marks a profound rupture from the 2010 Strategic Concept, which framed Russia as a "strategic partner". According to Weitsman, states ally to overcome external threats, and an alliance facing a high external threat will naturally exhibit a high degree of cohesion (Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 24-25). Through the 2022 strategic concept, NATO actively utilises this altered security landscape to construct a unified focus. By presenting Russia as the biggest threat to NATO, the strategic concept identifies a single adversary of the alliance, creating unified focus between the member states, which leads to increased internal cohesion. Furthermore, Resnick backs up this observation through his notion of shared consensus regarding the primary adversary being a fundamental prerequisite for high alliance cohesion (Resnick, 2013, Pp 672-673). Therefore, the Madrid text serves as an empirical indication of the alliance overcoming internal frictions by uniting around a defined external threat.

In analysing NATO's strategic pivot, the 2022 Madrid Summit document operates not merely as an internal policy guideline, but as an active communicative instrument of deterrence. Empirically, the strategic concept explicitly states a fundamental reorientation in response to Russia's invasion. Within the theoretical framework of deterrence, a successful posture relies on three core elements: capability, credibility, and

communication. The publication of the 2022 strategic concept serves as a direct execution of the communication pillar, which is defined as the *messaging of intentions, thresholds and consequences* (Morgan, 2003, P. 84). By formally and publicly departing from the 2010 "strategic partnership" model to designate Russia as a direct threat, NATO is actively attempting to alter Russia's cost-benefit calculus. The document clearly signals that further aggression will be met with a posture of collective defence.

Beyond managing internal threat dynamics or sending outward signals, the 2022 Strategic Concept empirically illustrates the intrinsic link between internal alliance cohesion and external deterrence credibility. Weitsman defines alliance cohesion as the ability of states to agree on goals and strategies for attaining those goals (Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 24-25). The Madrid document provides clear empirical evidence of this cohesion, as member states collectively acknowledged a shift and formally designated Russia as their primary threat while simultaneously elevating collective defence as a primary focus. In the framework of deterrence theory, NATO defines credibility as consistent and visible behaviour that demonstrates resolve. This credibility is essential because a challenger must believe that an act of aggression will be punished when conducting their cost-benefit analysis (Morgan, 2003, P. 84).

By analysing these two concepts together, the 2022 strategic concept reveals a central connection between credibility and cohesion. The high degree of internal cohesion achieved by uniformly identifying a single adversary provides the foundation for NATO's external credibility. Because all member states signed onto the strategic departure, the alliance demonstrates the reliable actions needed to make its deterrence credible. Therefore, the 2022 strategic concept shows that internal political unity is essential to deter aggression and change an adversary's decision-making.

In the first part of the analysis, the goal has been to answer the first hypothesis: *NATO's increased focus on defence and security since Russia's invasion of Ukraine indicates an enhanced deterrence posture*. In order to do so, focus has been on recognizing signs of concepts from primarily deterrence theory but in addition also alliance theory. Through the analysis of relevant documents, the first part of the analysis has identified indications of an increased deterrent effect within NATO. It should be considered that deterrence can be difficult to measure. However, the analysis finds that various factors indicate that there has been a strengthening of NATO's deterrent effect since 2022. In general, most NATO

member states have identified Russia as a common threat to security and prosperity on the European continent. This, according to the theoretical framework, should lead to a strengthening of cohesion and credibility within the alliance. The fact that many NATO member states acknowledge the threat from Russia has led to the rise in defence spending across various NATO member states. Furthermore, in the wake of the war in Ukraine two more countries, Finland and Sweden, have joined NATO. This accession of two countries in close proximity to Russia can also be interpreted as a sign of a strengthened NATO deterrence in the aftermath of the war.

Deployed Troops

NATO member states have a long history of deploying troops to allied states in order to display strength both internally but also to potential adversaries. In the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea and especially after the war broke out in Ukraine in 2022, NATO has given higher priority to forward presence in the frontline states in Eastern Europe. As stated in NATO's own strategic document *Strengthening NATO's eastern flank* "NATO's forward presence along the Eastern flank demonstrates the Alliance's solidarity, determination, and ability to act immediately in response to any regression" (NATO, 2025a). Currently, soldiers from NATO countries are permanently or semi-permanently present in Eastern European NATO member states (NATO, 2025a). For the time being, NATO has troops stationed in eight European member states: Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland. All battlegroups in the eight states are fully combat-capable, which indicates the deterrent nature of the missions in question (NATO, 2025a).

The allies have also agreed on strengthening NATO's ability to reinforce its forces in the East by adopting the following measures:

1. More pre-positioned equipment and weapon stockpiles
2. More forward-deployed capabilities, including integrated air and missile defence systems;
3. Strengthened command and control and;
4. Upgraded regional defence plans, with specific forces preassigned to the defence of specific allies

Source: (NATO, 2025a) Strengthening NATO's eastern flank (Updated 23rd October 2025)

In 2022 at the NATO Summit in Madrid, the allies agreed to a new NATO force model, which should secure a broader expansion of high-readiness forces. These new contingents of combat-capable soldiers should be available to NATO where and when needed (NATO, 2025a). The change came in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine in February 2022. This demonstrates NATO's enhanced focus on strengthening deterrence on its Eastern flank, further illustrating the need for presence and military force in order to deter adversaries. The nature of military presence in Eastern European states is multifaceted. NATO's Standing Naval Forces (SNF) contribute with maritime capabilities that can quickly be deployed when tension or a crisis appears. In times of increased hybrid activity in frontline states, the need for enhanced and multifaceted deterrence is inevitable.

As it is explained in official NATO declarations, Russia has tested NATO's responsiveness along the Eastern flank of the alliance for many years (NATO, 2025a). The threat appears in various aspects. Besides, the war in Ukraine, hybrid threats in and around frontline states, and an escalation in airspace violations have also been observed over the last years which emphasises the need for a multi-faceted approach to deterrence in NATO (NATO, 2025a). In September 2025, an unprecedented number of Russian drones were observed violating the airspace of various NATO member states. In order to counter this threat from Russia, NATO initiated the Eastern Sentry. This policy was intended to be a flexible activity that should enhance NATO's caution along the Eastern flank of the alliance. In the Eastern Sentry, NATO member states are contributing with different kinds of military capabilities and assets with the intention of further enhancing NATO's deterrent effect towards Russia. Among other military equipment, it includes air defence systems, fighter jets, and frigates (NATO, 2025a).

The measures NATO has taken to counter Russia's increased aggression over the last years indicate that the alliance takes the external threat seriously and that they recognize the need for a stronger common defence and deterrent effect. Military presence and the stationing of troops play a significant role in strengthening defence and deterring an adversary. Capability is one of the main concepts within deterrence theory. By implementing a strategy where more NATO troops are stationed along the Eastern flank of the alliance, NATO will be able to enhance its core military capabilities. Following the logic of deterrence theory, the reinforcement of NATO's collective defence and in effect the

strengthening of its deterrence, the credibility of the alliance will also be improved. Communication is after capability and credibility the third main pillar in deterrence theory. The statements of new defence initiatives and the stationing of troops are declared in statements and documents that are accessible for both the public but also adversaries. This can, according to deterrence theory, indicate that NATO is seeking to clearly signal its intentions to adversaries and the possible consequences hostile actions can entail (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 747-748).

The growing Russian aggression since the war in Ukraine in 2022 seems to have increased NATO's scrutiny on its Eastern flank. Since then, we have seen NATO launch several initiatives that should help mitigate the security risks that come with Russia's increased aggression. Among these, the decision to establish battlegroups in four new countries, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania serves as one of the most striking examples. The establishment of these four new battlegroups in these four countries and the strengthening of NATO capabilities in the other four battlegroups demonstrate the change in threat perceptions in NATO (NATO, 2025a). According to deterrence theory, the establishment of new battlegroups and the reinforcement of troops and equipment within other, already established battlegroups, suggests that NATO has acknowledged the need for stronger military capabilities in order to be able to deter Russia. Accordingly, these new measures should enhance the security of all NATO member states.

In April 2024, Germany began sending additional troops to the multinational group that is stationed in Lithuania. The mission is administered under German command, and this deployment of additional German troops underlined the need for further enhancing military presence along the Eastern flank. This German-led Brigade will continue to grow and will in the end be fully operational with 5000 soldiers by 2027 (NATO, 2025a). This example demonstrates that the alliance takes the challenge seriously and that deterrence, among other important measures, requires troop deployments in strategically important states. The importance of the stationing of troops from European member states will not be less crucial after the United States has cast doubt on their military presence in some of the states along the Eastern flank.

Accession of Finland and Sweden

For NATO's deterrence to be effective, it is important that the alliance possesses essential capabilities to make the threat credible, and with Sweden and Finland becoming members of NATO, it has led to increased capacities and, with this, the alliance's power to hurt.

Finland's membership in NATO creates a new geographical reality for Russia, as they, after 2024, were faced with a direct 1300-kilometre-long border to NATO territory. From a deterrence perspective, expanding the alliance forces Russia to spread its military resources, which would dramatically increase the costs if Russia were to launch an attack. NATO has, among other things, established a Multi Corps Land Component Command (MCLCC) under the Joint Force Command Norfolk. The Joint Force Command Norfolk is a NATO headquarters located in North America (NATO Joint Force Command Norfolk, n.d.). The MCLCC ensures that NATO is able to have regional expertise and can plan the defence of Finnish territory as well as the surrounding regions (Finnish Ministry of Defence, n.d.). This has meant an increase in the alliance's armament in a strategically important area. This increase in material strength is crucial because, as Schelling argues, deterrence requires that the opponent clearly perceives the nature of the threat (Schelling, 1966, P. 30). By integrating Sweden and Finland, NATO is expanding its strategic depth, which makes it possible to communicate a more comprehensive threat of retribution should Russia attempt further aggression.

Sweden and Finland's entry to NATO also supports the alliance's ability to communicate and show physical presence. Here, the stationing of NATO troops and the implementation of large-scale military exercises, such as Steadfast Defender, play a central role. Both Sweden and Finland participated in the military exercise, Steadfast Defender 24, in January 2024 (Garamone, 2024). Sweden participated in this strategic defence exercise, despite Sweden not being a fully employed member of NATO when the exercise had its beginning. Steadfast Defender 24 was a military exercise that featured about 90.000 service members from NATO's member states, as well as from Sweden and was meant to test NATO's ability to deploy forces quickly and test defence plans. The military exercise was the largest since the end of the Cold War (Garamone, 2024). Sweden and Finland have furthermore contributed to this physical presence with large military capabilities. Sweden has, for example, contributed with a battalion of approximately 600 soldiers in 2025 to NATO's Forward Land Forces in Latvia (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024).

This contribution is a strong indicator that NATO is attempting to increase its deterrence, as it physically demonstrates Sweden's integration into the alliance's collective defence and increases the unified power to hurt in the Eastern regions. Furthermore, Finland contributed with fighter jets during several NATO missions, including in Bulgaria, Romania, and the Black Sea, as well as took part in NATO's Iceland Air Policing mission, and contributed to NATO's Maritime Group One in the Baltic Sea (Finnish Ministry of Defence, n.d.). Finland also holds a defence reserve of approximately 900.000 Finnish citizens (Finnish Defence Forces, n.d.), which furthermore reveals Sweden and Finland as strong military member states for the alliance.

The integration of Swedish and Finnish troops in these exercises and missions can be argued to function as a direct demonstration of NATO's collective capabilities. Through the lens of deterrence theory, these military exercises should be viewed not merely as technical training, but as a deliberate practice of communication designed to demonstrate that the alliance possesses both the ability and the will to deploy significant military power if necessary. By operating and training together in border areas, the member states allow NATO to signal that its military capacity is fully integrated and combat ready.

As established in the theoretical framework, Schelling's logic of deterrence is fundamentally rooted in capabilities, specifically the power to hurt (Schelling, 1966, Pp. 3-4). For NATO's deterrence to be effective, the alliance must not only possess military force but also demonstrate a capacity that forces the opponent to evaluate the cost-benefit of the situation. Since 2022, NATO's military has seen a substantial increase, most notably, NATO has seen a general rise in defence expenditures since Finland and Sweden joined NATO in 2023 and 2024.

One key indicator of NATO's increased capabilities is the alliance's shift in defence spending. According to data collected from NATO on defence expenditure of NATO countries from 2014 to 2025, there is a clear rise in member states meeting the 2% GDP goal, since 2023 the number of member states that met the goal has increased by 21 (NATO, 2026). Sweden spent 1,68% of its GDP on defence in 2023, but increased this allocation to 2,31% in 2024. This meant the country met the NATO defence spending target the very year after its admission to the alliance, before further boosting expenditures to 2,51% in 2025. Finland, on the other hand, was already exceeding this goal when the state became a member of NATO in 2023, as Finland was spending 2,12% of its GDP on

defence, which increased to 2,40 in 2024 and to 2,77% in 2025 (NATO, 2026). This indicates that Sweden and Finland have become significant assets to NATO's collective defence, as both nations met the alliance's spending target either prior to or shortly after their accession.

This development helps resolve internal challenges regarding burden-sharing within the alliance. By integrating two economically strong nations that prioritise defence spending, NATO is directly addressing the free rider problem. According to Schelling, this is essential because economic commitment functions as a form of communication. It signals to Russia that the alliance is not merely expanding on paper, but that its new member states bring genuine material capacity. Consequently, the contributions from Sweden and Finland reduce the pressure on other member states while strengthening NATO's collective power to hurt, as the alliance as a whole possesses more resources to withstand external threats.

Hypothesis 2:

Internal friction, divergent priorities and exposure to Russian hybrid threats indicates a weakened deterrence within NATO

The United States' Withdrawal from Europe

One of the most striking new developments in NATO is the United States ambitions to withdraw troops from military bases in Europe. Following the logic of alliance theory, there is an element of bargaining that has failed in the case of the United States decision to withdraw troops from military bases in allied European states. According to Snyder, the objective of bargaining is to decrease the costs and to increase the benefits of all the actors involved in an alliance (Snyder, 1997, Pp. 165-166). The United States' plan to withdraw thousands of soldiers from Europe can suggest that they no longer consider it advantageous to be as present militarily as they have been up to now. Some analysts also argue that this can be interpreted as a weakening of the U.S. deterrence in Europe (Fix, 2026). This development in U.S. - NATO-relations come at a vulnerable point in time where the European NATO members have only just started the process of rearming. However, the recent announcements from the U.S. should not be seen in isolation to deter Russian aggression. In fact, some scholars argue that Trump's administration is in fact

punishing Europe for its lack of support in the current Iran war (Fix, 2026). Regardless of the reason the U.S. has for withdrawing troops from Europe, it suggests that the relationship between the U.S. and its NATO allies in Europe has been weakened. Furthermore, the American decision not to deploy a long-range fire battalion is a serious problem for Europe as the continent has a deterrence gap. Europe lacks Deep Precision Strikes (DPS), which have played an important role for the United States and NATO in defending Europe from initially Soviet and then Russian aggression. The shortage of European deep precision strike capabilities to counter Russian long-range cruise and ballistic missiles in Kaliningrad highlights how the new United States policy threatens Europe's ability to deter Russia (Schütte, 2026).

As explained by the historian Liana Fix, the number of withdrawn U.S. troops is not the main issue. Instead, it is the damaging signal this sends to external actors (Fix, 2026). From an alliance theory perspective, the U.S. intentions to withdraw troops from Europe can also be interpreted as communication that might be harmful to the cohesiveness in NATO. When the internal cohesion and consensus are challenged, it may harm the alliance's ability to project its credibility to external actors, which in this case is Russia. This American decision can also be interpreted as harmful to the cohesion within NATO.

NATO's Internal Cohesion

Due to the changing world order and the increasingly unpredictable American administration in recent times, the question of NATO's internal cohesion seems highly relevant. Donald Trump has challenged NATO's internal cohesion in a number of ways. After the beginning of the war in Iran, Trump considered withdrawing the United States from NATO (Schütte, 2026). His repetitive claims for the U.S. to get control over Greenland is also a recent example which emphasizes the doubt Trump has cast on U.S. - NATO-relations. Under Trump, the U.S. has also reduced its assistance to Ukraine, criticised Zelensky publicly in the White House, and has furthermore eased tensions with Russia. At this point, the American administration acts as if it no longer perceives European security as an important American national interest (Schütte, 2026). This could suggest that the United States at the moment has different strategic interests than its European NATO allies. Following the principles of alliance theory, one could argue that the uncertainty that currently exists in U.S. - NATO-relations can pose threats to the internal cohesion in NATO. Besides the 5000 troops the Trump administration has declared to

withdraw from Germany, the United States is also planning to cancel the deployment of 4000 troops that should function in a rotational system in Poland. These decisions pose a threat to the credibility of NATO as it endangers the American commitment to their European allies (Schütte, 2026). These developments can be interpreted as potential threats to NATO's internal cohesion. Weakened internal cohesion will, according to alliance theory, also weaken the alliance's credibility. A weakening of the credibility of the alliance will, in effect, result in a reduction of the overall deterrent effect. As Patricia Weitsman argues, the longevity of the alliance is dependent on internal cohesion as well as geopolitical developments (Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 24-25). This underlines the importance of having a high degree of internal cohesion. Under President Trump, the United States has attempted burden-shifting in the alliance. The United States has declared that the conventional military defence of Europe should be the responsibility of the European NATO states. This change in policy would also mean the end of American trip-wire forces, who today serve in relatively small contingents across Europe. Among other places, the trip-wire forces are deployed in states along the Eastern flank in Europe and can help deter adversaries as a conflict would involve these trip-wire troops stationed by NATO. Should this new American policy be adopted, it could be interpreted as something that would undermine the credibility of the U.S. security guarantees to Europe (Schütte, 2026). It is no secret that the United States wants the European allies to contribute more to the military defence of Europe.

In her article, *NATO's 360-degree approach to security: alliance cohesion and adaptation after the Crimean crisis*, Christelle Calmels describes that she identifies an "Eastern part" and a "Southern part" of the alliance (Calmels, 2020, Pp. 425-427). In the article, it is explained how the NATO member states in Europe have different priorities and strategic interests. In the member states in Eastern Europe, it is Russia that is considered the main threat to national security. In Southern Europe, the focus has for geographical reasons been different. In the South, they identify terrorism, migration, and radicalisation as some of the main threats to their national security (Calmels, 2020, P. 426). This example underlines the challenges NATO is faced with. If the allies do not share the same threat perceptions and strategic interests it can challenge the cooperation. As it is stated in Calmels article "a common attitude toward external threats is mandatory to achieve cohesion" (Calmels, 2020, P. 421). Furthermore, in recent times we have seen examples of issues within NATO that could possibly threaten the internal cohesion.

Over the last months, the relationship between Spain's prime minister Pedro Sánchez, and Donald Trump has deteriorated. This has been outlined in Ishaan Tharoor's recent article *Why Spain Is Standing Up To Donald Trump* (Tharoor, 2026). Sánchez has openly criticised the United States' acts of war in Iran. On the other hand, Trump has heavily criticized Spain's insufficient contributions to the NATO budget (Tharoor, 2026). These internal disagreements between two NATO member states could indicate that there are some issues with the internal cohesion. Spain has denied the U.S. use of their military bases for operations related to their war against Iran. Spain's foreign minister, José Manuel Albares, has additionally made some critical comments about U.S. decision-making in relation to the conflict in Iran. Albares has stated that "no ally was even consulted or informed" suggesting a substantial disagreement in NATO (Tharoor, 2026). The example of the conflict in Iran demonstrates that an external shock can challenge the alliance's cohesion.

The problem for NATO cohesion is that Spain is not the only European state that questions the U.S. foreign policy. Other European governments have also criticised the United States' hostilities in Iran, and this can be seen as a threat to NATO cohesion (Tharoor, 2026). Additionally, the internal cohesion is furthermore challenged by President Trump's claims that Spain's economic contributions to NATO are insufficient. Seen through the lens of alliance theory, this could be a sign of problems with the burden-sharing between the allies in NATO. Ideally, all member states should take on their responsibility of the common defence in order for the alliance to be properly functioning.

In NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept, Russia was not framed as a direct threat but rather as a potential strategic partner, with whom closer cooperation was envisioned (NATO, 2010, P. 29). At the same time, NATO's focus shifted towards crisis management and expeditionary operations beyond its own territory, including stabilisation efforts as well as counterterrorism (NATO, 2010, Pp. 9-10). However, the political viability of this approach was challenged internally within NATO. In his farewell speech at the Security and Defence Agenda in Brussels in 2011, U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates delivered a warning that NATO risked becoming a two-tier alliance (Gates, 2011). Gates stated that while the U.S. carried the primary financial and military burden, many European allies benefited from security without contributing sufficiently. Gates warned that future U.S. leaders might lose interest in investing in NATO if European member states did not increase their

commitments (Gates, 2011). This frustration marked the end of an era characterised by strategic optimisation and led to a period in which the Alliance's internal cohesion and credibility of deterrence faced examination.

In the years following 2011, the U.S. foreign policy went through a fundamental change, which held consequences for NATO. As the then U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, addressed it in the article *America's Pacific Century from 2011*, the U.S. was at a pivot point. After a decade of heavy resource allocation to Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. diverted more towards Asia and the Pacific, increasing its diplomatic, economic, and strategic investments (Clinton, 2011, P. 3). Clinton stated that future geopolitics would be determined in Asia, not in Afghanistan or Iran (Clinton, 2011, P. 2), which marked a clear difference in prioritisation in China and the Pacific Region rather than in traditional European and Middle Eastern security. This strategic change increased the internal tensions within the NATO alliance in regards to burden-sharing. Gates, as mentioned above, expressed this frustration in 2011 by describing NATO as a two-tiered alliance, due to the economic and military burden the U.S. had carried, while European allies had deprioritised its own defence (Gates, 2011, P. 4). Gates warned that the European defence budgets needed to increase, as future U.S. leaders might no longer consider the investment in NATO as worth the effort (Gates, 2011, P. 4). Differing strategic interests, the withdrawal of U.S. soldiers from the European continent and dispute over the support for Ukraine could indicate a weakening of NATO's internal cohesion. Following the logic from our theoretical framework, a deterioration in internal cohesion will lead to a decrease in the credibility of the alliance. This harmful combination could in turn result in a weakening of the deterrent effect of NATO.

Russian Hybrid Activity

As demonstrated above, NATO's ongoing increase in defence spending, deployment of troops, and the accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO should theoretically increase NATO's deterrence substantially. However, as we accounted for in the beginning of this study, Russia does not distinguish active measures or hybrid warfare/below threshold activities from conventional warfare. It's all part of an overall hostile front towards adversaries of Moscow (Shala et al., 2022, Pp. 3–4). Therefore, we can use hybrid activity as an indicator for how effective NATO's theoretical increased deterrence towards Russia has been since 2022. Empirical analysis of hybrid warfare is inherently constrained by data

scarcity, driven by both the covert and multifaceted nature of these operations. Consequently, establishing definitive attribution to Russian state actors presents a persistent methodological challenge for both scholars and intelligence authorities (Shala et al., 2022, Pp. 5–6). To mitigate these constraints, this study utilizes multiple data sources on Russian hybrid activity. This approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of the scope and evolution of these operations since 2022, while remaining sensitive to the underlying data limitations.

Russian hybrid warfare operations form a critical component of its overall hostile activities against Europe. Between 2014 and 2024, researchers documented 219 hybrid incidents highly suspected to be carried out by state-sponsored actors from Russia, with about 46% of these occurrences taking place in 2024 alone. This upward trajectory intensified into 2025, with German authorities reporting 321 cases of sabotage within that single year (Klimburg, 2026). To understand Russian hybrid activity, this study utilises Alexander Klimburg's concept of *Three Pillars of Russian Hybrid Warfare in Europe* presented in his 2026 report *Enter Europe's Cyber Deterrence*. The defining characteristic of this hybrid framework is its multidimensional integration; the three pillars do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another across cyber, physical, and cognitive domains (Klimburg, 2026).

The first pillar described by Klimburg is physical sabotage and below threshold terrorism. In order to analyse this aspect of Russian hybrid activity, we will dive into data provided by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in a report from 2025 regarding Russian subversion and sabotage in European countries. Critically, the CSIS database isolates Russian subversive actions and plots executed between January 2022 and March 2025 that aimed to produce, or succeeded in producing, physical effects. This includes kinetic tactics ranging from the use of explosives and incendiary devices to maritime sabotage, such as using anchors to sever undersea fiber-optic cables. Recognizing that attribution is a persistent vulnerability in the study of active measures, CSIS employed a strict verification framework to ensure data reliability. To be included in the database, each incident required confirmation from at least three independent, credible sources linking the event directly or indirectly to the Russian government. This quantitative mapping was further cross-verified through interviews with government and non-government experts, peer review, and a formalized confidence-level assessment for every recorded incident.

Consequently, this dataset provides a methodologically rigorous foundation for mapping the physical scope of Russia's post-2022 hybrid campaign. Moreover, the attacks recorded in the data of this study were all carried out on NATO member states soil or territorial waters (Jones, 2025, P. 7). Among the most significant findings in this study is the sharp escalation of operations following the invasion of Ukraine. CSIS data reveals that recorded Russian attacks rose from 3 in 2022 to 12 in 2023, before surging to 34 incidents in 2024 (Jones, 2025, P. 7).

This development would indicate that NATO has failed to deter Russia, in regards to below threshold warfare on NATO soil and territorial waters. The rise of these hybrid incidents also exposes a particular gap in the credibility pillar of NATO's defence. According to Quackenbush, a threat is only credible if it is rational to carry out (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 749-750). Russia's hybrid attacks intentionally stay below the threshold of conventional warfare. If NATO were to invoke an Article 5 military retaliation against a non-lethal sabotage event, it would risk open conflict with a great power, which is the worst-case scenario for both parties. Because Moscow knows that a massive conventional warfare response to a hybrid incident is irrational, therefore NATO faces the "Defender's Paradox". By conceding to Russia on hybrid occurrences to avoid open war, NATO effectively guarantees Russia's success in these sub-threshold operations, invalidating NATO's deterrent effect in regards to below threshold activity.

Another interesting assumption of deterrence theory is that both actors in a potential conflict are rational when conducting cost-benefit analyses. However, as argued by Morgan, ideological hostility significantly weakens the expectation of rational behaviour (Morgan, 2003, Pp. 59-60). The surge of Russian hybrid attacks against NATO members suggests that despite concurrent allied efforts to strengthen deterrence, Moscow remains willing to drastically escalate operations on NATO soil. This dynamic highlights a critical failure of the rationalist assumption in deterrence theory. Russia's subjective calculation of costs and benefits increasingly renders NATO's conventional deterrence frameworks ineffective. This is potentially driven by what Lebow and Stein conceptualise as political desperation or a high propensity for risk (Lebow & Stein, 1989, P. 3).

As demonstrated in this project's theoretical framework, general deterrence is considered a passive concept meant to uphold the status quo (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 752-754). The sharp escalation to 34 physical sabotage incidents in 2024 actively demonstrates that

the status quo is being violently altered. Therefore, the success of general deterrence is measured by the absence of hostile action. As a result, the sustained, multi-year penetration of NATO borders by Russian state actors for active sabotage strongly indicates that general deterrence has degraded, forcing NATO closer to the high-tension reality of immediate deterrence.

From an alliance theoretical perspective, we can gain some insight into why NATO has issues when it comes to deterrence of hybrid attacks. Because hybrid attacks often target individual member states, rather than NATO as a whole, they could trigger Snyder's alliance security dilemma, regarding fear of abandonment and fear of entrapment (Snyder, 1997, Pp. 180-186). States directly targeted by sabotage may push for a harsh, unified NATO response out of fear of abandonment. Conversely, allies further from the threat may hesitate, fearing entrapment in an escalating conflict with Russia over interests they do not strictly share. This internal bargaining and hesitation over how to classify and respond to hybrid threats leads to ambiguous or inconsistent signalling from NATO. According to this project's theoretical framework, ambiguous signals inherently weaken external deterrence credibility.

A follow-up report by Rick Chersicla from the Irregular Warfare initiative states that the number of incidents categorised as Russian sabotage in the first six months of 2025 had decreased to four (Chersicla, 2025). Within the theoretical frameworks of Quackenbush and Morgan, this sudden deceleration can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, it could indicate that NATO's heightened post-2024 public attribution and political alignment finally altered Moscow's rational cost-benefit calculation, meaning immediate deterrence successfully took effect. On the other hand, applying Chersicla's own perspective that "*sabotage is the new normal*" (Chersicla, 2025), this drop may not represent a victory for NATO's deterrent framework, but rather a tactical adaptation by Russia. Having tested NATO's thresholds from 2022 to 2024, Russian actors may simply be shifting their strategy away from physical sabotage toward lower-profile hybrid operations in order to bypass NATO's detection capabilities without triggering a unified alliance response.

The report from CSIS clearly states that it isolates the data to incidents involving physical effect. Therefore, leaving out Russian cyber attacks and campaigns of Russian propaganda and disinformation. This study found these areas important in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the issue. As a result, the study employs other sources

for these areas of interest. The second pillar revolves around cyberattacks against critical infrastructure in Europe. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, hostile cyber operations against NATO member states have intensified significantly. This is evident in multiple sources that state a general increase in cyber warfare against Europe and NATO. In 2026, Swedish Civil Defence Minister Carl-Oskar Bohlin noted that Russia's below threshold hostile activities against Europe had shifted over the past year, pointing to a marked increase in cyberattacks (Wälde, 2026). According to a Microsoft analysis, Russian cyberattacks against NATO countries increased by 25% from 2024 to 2025 (Microsoft, 2025). Empirically, the data shows a substantial increase in Russian cyberattacks against NATO member states between 2024 and 2025, alongside a simultaneous decrease in physical hybrid activity. At the factual stratum, this indicates a clear strategic shift in Russia's below threshold operations. By applying our theoretical framework to the deep stratum, we can identify the indicators driving this shift. This development suggests that while NATO's conventional deterrence remains formidable, forcing Russia to abandon riskier physical hybrid activities, the Alliance's deterrence architecture is actively being circumvented in the digital domain. Analysed through Quackenbush's classical deterrence model, Russia occupies the role of the *Challenger* seeking to alter the status quo, while NATO acts as the *Defender* seeking to preserve it. Deterrence fundamentally relies on altering a hostile actor's cost-benefit calculus to prevent undesired actions. The reduction in physical hybrid threats implies that NATO has successfully communicated that the costs of physical aggression outweigh the benefits (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 744-747). However, the surge in cyber operations reveals a critical vulnerability in NATO's general deterrence. While NATO possesses immense military capabilities to deter conventional war, Russia's willingness to escalate cyber operations indicates that it does not perceive NATO's threats of retaliation in the cyber domain as credible. Because cyberattacks often sit below the threshold of an "armed attack" that would trigger Article 5, Russia calculates that the Defender is more likely to concede than to defy, allowing Russia to exert pressure without risking conventional military conflict.

This strategic shift by Russia also has profound implications for NATO's internal dynamics, which can be understood through Alliance Cohesion Theory. Weitsman argues that alliances typically exhibit high cohesion in the face of strong external threats (Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 24-25). However, unlike a conventional military invasion that threatens the

Alliance collectively, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure are inherently asymmetric, since they target individual member states. This asymmetric threat environment actively triggers what Snyder terms the "alliance security dilemma" (Snyder, 1997, Pp. 180-186). Within this dilemma, member states must constantly balance the competing fears of abandonment and entrapment. A member state suffering a severe cyberattack against its critical infrastructure may fear *abandonment* if its allies decline to mount a unified, collective response to a non-kinetic event. Conversely, allies unaffected by the cyber breach may fear *entrapment*, reluctant to escalate tensions with a nuclear-armed Russia over a digital intrusion

Ultimately, this dynamic illustrates the theoretical connection between internal alliance cohesion and external deterrence credibility. If fear of entrapment prevents NATO from establishing clear, unified red lines regarding cyber warfare, internal alliance insecurity will inherently weaken its external deterrence. Therefore, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 bolstered NATO's conventional cohesion, the subsequent shift toward cyber warfare demonstrates that NATO's deterrent effect is actively being contested.

The third pillar focuses on psychological and political subversion, leveraging disinformation to erode societal trust, exacerbate domestic polarization, and alter electoral outcomes. A prominent example includes the "Storm-1516" network, which systematically spread narratives aimed at discrediting Western leadership and undermining European solidarity with Ukraine (Klimburg, 2026). This type of hybrid activity operates in more subtle ways and does not seek to create instant outcomes, but gradually seeks to gain influence, shift narratives and sow division over time (Olejnik, 2025). NATO also acknowledges that campaigns of Russian propaganda and misinformation have been on the rise (NATO, 2025b). When analysing this observable data, the specific disinformation campaigns and the measurable rise in Russian propaganda acknowledged by NATO act as the empirical stratum for this section. The factual stratum is present in the broader tendencies observed in the ongoing psychological and political subversion, as well as the shifting of narratives. To uncover the deep stratum in this area, we apply the theoretical framework of this study, to both the empirical and factual stratum.

We start by applying the three core elements of deterrence theory to the Russian campaigns of misinformation and propaganda aimed at Europe and NATO. While Russia does not directly challenge NATO's physical military *Capability* to deny gains, its

subversion can be interpreted as a direct assault on *Credibility* and *Communication* (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 743-747). By discrediting Western leadership, Russian actors attack NATO's ability to show consistent and visible behaviour that demonstrates resolve. If leadership is discredited, the adversary may calculate that NATO lacks the political resolve to follow through on its thresholds, threatening the collapse of the deterrent effect. Another deterrence theoretical observation is linked to Quackenbush's challenger/defender model and the paradox of mutual deterrence (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 745-747). In this sequential interaction, Russia acts as the challenger trying to alter the status quo. By deploying below threshold tactics that avoid a conventional military response, Russia forces NATO into a complex variation of the paradox of mutual deterrence. If NATO tolerates these subtle misinformation campaigns without a firm response, it effectively chooses to concede because this option offers a lower immediate cost than a full escalation to conflict. However, as Quackenbush warns, if the challenger perceives this willingness to yield as a certainty, its motivation to push boundaries increases, rendering traditional deterrence unstable.

When applying alliance theory to this area, we can also gain some insight into the inner workings of NATO in this regard. Weitsman highlights that alliance cohesion fluctuates based on the interplay of *external threats* and *internal threats*. Conventionally, Russia presents a severe external military threat, which historically bolsters NATO's cohesion (Weitsman, 2004, Pp. 24-25). However, the text shows that Russia is using hybrid subversion to deliberately manufacture a high *internal threat* within European states (by undermining solidarity and exacerbating domestic division). According to Weitsman, when an alliance faces a high external threat coupled with a high internal threat, cohesion becomes difficult to maintain. This could indicate that Russian actors seek to split NATO's cohesion by replacing shared democratic values and trust with internal friction. This is also evident in the arguments of Palaios and Papageorgiou, who argue that modern NATO cohesion cannot be explained solely by traditional military-security variables, since it is heavily shaped by broader political, institutional, and domestic dynamics (Palaios & Papageorgiou, 2026). These campaigns stoke the fear of abandonment and degrade alliance cohesion. Because internal cohesion is a vital prerequisite for communicating a credible collective defence, this psychological subversion demonstrates a gradual erosion of NATO's general deterrent effect without ever firing a shot.

All in all, evaluating Russia's below threshold activities since the invasion of Ukraine, across Alexander Klimburg's three pillars provides a nuanced answer to whether NATO is losing its deterrent effect. When viewed through a critical realist lens, the empirical data indicate that NATO's conventional military enhancements have successfully upheld its immediate deterrence baseline while its general deterrence framework is actively degrading. Ultimately, because deterrence credibility is structurally dependent on internal alliance cohesion, Russia's persistent ability to penetrate NATO borders and cognitive spaces without facing a unified countermeasure indicates that NATO's general deterrent effect is being gradually circumvented. Therefore, while NATO remains capable of deterring a total military conflict, it is progressively losing its capacity to enforce the stable status quo required for effective general deterrence.

In the second part of the analysis, the focus has been on answering the second hypothesis: *Internal friction, divergent priorities and exposure to Russian hybrid threats indicates a weakened deterrence within NATO*. In order to do so concepts from mainly alliance theory, but additionally also deterrence theory, have been applied. For this hypothesis, we find indicators that suggest a weakening in NATO's deterrence. In the analysis, we find that the United States' withdrawal of troops from Europe can be seen as a sign of the strains NATO's internal cohesion has suffered in recent times. The United States' reduction in assistance to Ukraine and President Trump's persistent claims for Greenland further underline this point of a decline in the United States' relationship with its NATO allies. Russia's hybrid activity in neighbouring European countries can also be interpreted as a sign that NATO deterrence is not having the intended effect. If Russia considered NATO's deterrent posture as strong, these below threshold operations should be considered undesirable. These findings in the second part of the analysis suggest that rather than an increase in deterrence, there has been a decrease in NATO's deterrence.

Discussion

Strengthened Deterrence and Increased Hybrid Activity

The empirical and theoretical findings within this study present a striking geopolitical paradox: NATO's conventional military posture has arguably never been stronger in the post-Cold War era, yet it fails to deter Russia from committing below threshold hostile activities.

This study's analysis found indications that NATO should have increased its deterrence substantially, through unprecedented growth in defence expenditures, the integration of Finland and Sweden into the alliance, and additional troops present on the Eastern flank. These factors bolstered the conventional capacity and communicated a shift in strategic signalling to adversaries of the alliance. Nevertheless, while indications show that NATO has increased its deterrence through a plethora of means, simultaneously, the alliance has experienced elevated levels of hybrid threats from Russia. The analysis also found that Russian hybrid activity had been on the rise in the same time period that NATO bolstered its deterrence. However, this conventional strength has not stopped Russian hostility. Rather, it has displaced it into the hybrid activities described in this project. Because Moscow does not distinguish between below threshold operations and conventional warfare, it treats the entire spectrum as a single, cohesive hostile front. This structural friction exposes three key dimensions of the *Defender's Paradox* that justify deeper discussion.

In deterrence theory, a threat is only effective if it is credible, meaning the adversary believes the defender has the rational willingness to carry it out (Quackenbush, 2010a, Pp. 745-747; Morgan, 2003, Pp. 44-45). Due to Russian hybrid threat operations deliberately staying below the threshold of conventional war, NATO triggering Article 5 procedures over non-lethal events remains fundamentally irrational. Doing so would risk open war with a great power in possession of nuclear weapons, which is the worst-case scenario for all parties involved. Therefore, Moscow exploits this asymmetric cost-benefit calculation in their favour. By knowing that NATO is likely to concede on individual hybrid occurrences to avoid all-out armed escalation, Russia effectively guarantees its own success through these below threshold operations, invalidating NATO's conventional deterrence methods.

The adaptive nature of Russia in this field of hostile activity also plays a role when it comes to deterring below threshold activities. The data from 2024 to 2025 illustrates how Russia bypasses NATO's conventional deterrence defence mechanisms through tactical adaptation. When NATO began increasing its attribution and political alignment towards physical sabotage, the alliance observed a decrease of these incidents in the first six months of 2025. However, this cannot be observed as a definitive victory for deterrence. As noted by Swedish Civil Defence Minister Carl-Oskar Bohlin, hybrid hostile activities simply shifted in nature, resulting in a simultaneously 25% increase in cyberattacks against NATO countries between 2024 and 2025. The digital domain provides Russia with a highly effective tool to apply psychological and operational pressure on critical infrastructure within the allied member states, without triggering a unified conventional response based on Article 5.

Essentially, this development challenges the core assumption of Quackenbush's classical deterrence models, which view general deterrence as a passive tool to maintain a stable status quo. The sharp escalation of recorded Russian attacks on NATO soil, empirically demonstrates that the status quo is actively and violently being altered. Because successful general deterrence is measured entirely by the absence of hostile action, the sustained manner of infiltration and sabotage of NATO's physical and digital border proves that traditional frameworks are failing to preserve stability in the status quo. NATO is left in a position where its 20th-century deterrence tools and architecture excel at preventing a conventional military conflict, but provide little to no deterring effects to counter 21st-century hybrid warfare methods.

Can Russia be Considered a Rational Actor?

The theoretical assumptions from deterrence theory imply that the actors observed are rational. One could question whether or not this is the case when assessing the relationship between NATO and Russia. Historically, the two actors have been adversaries both militarily and ideologically. An argument could be that in autocracies, economic prosperity is not as important as it has been in Western countries where a healthy economy and prosperity among the citizens have laid the foundation for our social model.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the general perception in the Western world was that the liberal democratic system of government had won. Since then, Western countries have tried to maintain healthy relations with several autocratic states. The rationale has been that when we engage in trade with these states, military aggression will be avoided and these countries should ideally also democratise. The NATO member states have for the last decades, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, maintained diplomatic relations and traded with Russia. When assessing the current relationship between Russia and NATO, one could raise the question if NATO's approach to deterring Russia is suitable. As we know from the theory section, NATO defines deterrence as "The ability to alter an actor's cost-benefit calculus so they decide against taking an undesired action". In order for this deterrence logic to be true, the involved actors have to act rationally. However, it would be naive to blindly accept Russia's leadership as a fully rational actor. Could Russia's rational compass differ from what is considered rational in the Western hemisphere?

When assessing Russia's war in Ukraine in particular, but also its aggressive behaviour towards other neighbouring countries and attitude toward Western countries over the last years, it could be argued that Russia is not a particularly rational actor in economic terms. It is expensive to wage war and for Russia it has meant that previously major customers in the West have stopped purchasing oil and gas from Russia. India has also scaled down their purchases of oil from Russia by 30% after pressure from the Trump administration (Berman, 2026). Although other major powers, such as China and Iran still do a significant amount of trade with Russia, Russia's economy has suffered from the war in Ukraine. This raises the question of why Russia in the first place waged war against Ukraine. Seen in the light of rational economic terms, Russia's war in Ukraine seems irrational. The war has not helped enrich Russia economically. Furthermore, the war has obviously also entailed substantial losses on both sides. Russia has, in particular, suffered heavy troop losses in the war. The war has strained Russia's relationship with many rich and powerful countries in the Western hemisphere that were previously valuable trade partners for Russia. One could therefore argue that Russia's war efforts have had consequences in both economic and diplomatic terms but also for the millions of Russians who have felt the consequences of the war. The assumptions found in deterrence theory that actors are rational might therefore not be the most adequate to apply to the case of Russia. One could argue that many elements of Russia's war efforts in Ukraine are irrational and harmful for Russia both

in economic, diplomatic and social terms and deterrence theory might therefore not be the most applicable theory in order to assess Russia's rationale behind their war against Ukraine.

NATO-U.S. Internal Frictions

One of the most continuous sources to internal friction within the NATO alliance is the question of burden-sharing. The discussion centres around the question of whether the European member states contribute sufficiently to the collective defence or if they act as free-riders depending on U.S. military superiority. In our analysis, we examine economic data that presents NATO member states BNP shares used on defence, in order to examine whether the perceived free-rider problem undermines the alliance's internal cohesion and the credibility of its collective security commitments. But this friction is not only economic, it is also deeply political. When the U.S., as presented in our analysis, regarding Trump's statements, criticises European member states for not fulfilling the 2% GDP commitment, does this create a direct threat towards the alliance's cohesion.

Among other criticisms, Donald Trump has questioned Spain's commitment to the alliance due to a lack of economic contribution, and has even suggested that NATO should consider expelling Spain from the alliance. Furthermore, Trump has stated that Spain is a very low payer (Folch, 2025). The critique is a result of Spain's refusal to commit to the newly adopted 5% GDP commitment, which was agreed upon by all other NATO member states. Spain's defence spending has long been insufficient in accordance with the 2% GDP commitment (Folch, 2025). This refusal to commit to the NATO benchmark leads to a deeper discussion concerning the alliance's internal cohesion. As described in our analysis, the relationship between Spain and the U.S. has considerably worsened, which is demonstrated by the fact that Trump has threatened to end all trade with Spain as retaliation for the failed contribution (Tharoor, 2026).

This friction is further highlighted by the fact that Spain has denied the U.S. access to Spanish military bases in regard to military operations in Iran, as Spain has stated that the U.S. war against Iran is contrary to its own values and interests (Tharoor, 2026). Although other European governments have tried to avoid direct involvement in the dispute between the United States and Spain, they have offered limited support for American actions in Iran and have avoided direct criticism of Trump. (Tharoor, 2026). This points to a divided

alliance, where Spain prioritises their national autonomy and values, over the demands made by the U.S. This leads to the question of NATO's credibility, and whether it gets weakened when the U.S., as the biggest contributor to defence in NATO, publicly doubts another member state's willingness to invest in the alliance's defence.

This refusal from Spain to accept NATO's benchmark on 5% of GDP illustrates how the economic demands become an instrument in a bigger political power struggle. Trump's demand for a 5% commitment was met with direct opposition from Spain, which declined. This friction between the U.S. and Spain is deeper than just GDP percentages and leads to a classical alliance dilemma between abandonment and entrapment.

When Spain refuses the U.S. access to their military bases for operations linked to Iran, this suggests a fear of entrapment. This is a sign of Spain prioritising their own autonomy and values over the alliance's common ground to avoid becoming targets of retribution in a conflict they do not support, as Spain stated, they would not be complicit in actions contrary to their values and interests. This creates a contradictory situation, where the U.S. threatens abandonment and trade cuts, while European member states like Spain try to protect themselves from entrapment. Interestingly, while other European governments denied interfering in the Spain-U.S. conflict but offered some support for U.S. actions in Iran, and avoided criticising Trump, Spain has maintained that they do not wish to support this. This dynamic can be argued to weaken NATO's credibility, as it sends a signal to the world that the alliance is torn in regard to both economic priorities and strategic goals. Ultimately, such friction could undermine the alliance's internal cohesion, as the lack of agreement and prioritisation of national autonomy over collective commitments makes it difficult for NATO to present a unified front.

The U.S. ambitions to withdraw troops from military bases in Europe, as well as Trump's consideration of withdrawing the U.S. from the NATO alliance, and the decreased assistance to Ukraine under the Trump administration. These statements present a stark dilemma for other member states, effectively heightening their fear of abandonment. This fear is rooted in the fundamentals of Snyder's security dilemma, where states seek strong commitment to ensure security but face the risk of allies not supporting them during a time of need (Snyder, 1984, Pp. 466-467). In the context of the European member states, can this fear of abandonment be suggested to have been intentionally provoked by the U.S. in

order to gain leverage in the burden-sharing discussion. As noted, the United States has threatened with withdrawal, as well as reduced its commitments to Europe both economically and strategically. This bargaining strategy however, carries risks for the alliance's internal cohesion. As seen in the case of Spain, this pressure backfired, leading to internal friction and a stronger prioritising of national interests over collective security. Instead of fostering unity, the fear of abandonment can be suggested to encourage states to focus on their own national interests. This fear of abandonment emphasises the internal tensions that have occurred due to U.S pressure for increased burden-sharing. As the case of Spain demonstrates, the U.S attempt to obtain political influence through threats of withdrawal had the unintentional consequence of creating internal friction. Instead of strengthening collective security, are there indications of the pressure leading to a prioritising of national autonomy. This points to a central challenge in the alliance, as an increased fear of abandonment from the U.S. could possibly lead to a weakening of the internal cohesion, as member states would most likely start to focus on their own strategic priorities instead of the alliance's priorities.

Ultimately, when the U.S. signals decreased commitment to Europe, it can be argued to possibly undermine the credibility of the Article 5 obligation, as the automatic trigger of American intervention is no longer guaranteed. The potential withdrawal of troops from Eastern Europe creates major uncertainty regarding U.S. commitment. As Schelling describes it, is physical presence a strong way of communicating a credible threat (Schelling, 1966, P. 47). When the U.S. signals a potential withdrawal of troops, does the U.S. remove the physical military presence that otherwise can be considered to serve as a credible commitment to European security. According to Schelling's logic, these troops act as a physical security guarantee for European member states that would force the U.S. to react in case of an attack. By withdrawing them, the U.S. reduces the direct consequences of remaining passive in a situation where European territory was to be attacked. This, in return can be an indication of a weakened NATO deterrence, as the promise of American intervention becomes less certain. If European member states lose faith in the willingness of the United States to provide support during an attack on European territory, it will inevitably create friction between the two actors. This situation creates friction between the European member states that feel threatened by Russia and the United States, which increasingly prioritises its own national interests and economy.

This friction highlights a broader internal divide where the Eastern flank prioritises U.S. commitment due to a major threat from Russia, while the Southern flank, exemplified by Spain, fears entrapment in situations that conflict with their values and interests. This difference in national interests can be argued to make it increasingly difficult for NATO to maintain a unified front, which can be considered as necessary to present effective deterrence. These examples illustrate that NATO's internal landscape is a complex bargaining environment where political unity is challenged by individual member states' pursuit of greater national autonomy. As seen in the case of Spain's refusal to grant the U.S. access to their military bases, the internal threats that arise from these differing interests create a friction that not only focuses on defence spending, but also a deeper conflict regarding national autonomy and strategic priorities. When member states prioritise these individual interests over collective commitments, it undermines the internal cohesion that is essential for the alliance's external credibility. Ultimately, this suggests that NATO's deterrence is vulnerable to political fragmentation, due to the fact that if the alliance cannot guarantee a unified response due to internal friction, the nature of Article 5 can be considered weakened, and this can be argued to reduce the overall credibility of NATO's security guarantees and in turn the overall deterrence posture of NATO.

Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to analyse the deterrent effect of NATO since 2022. The analysis has been guided by the use of two hypotheses in order to answer our research question. In hypothesis one, we apply Appendix A and this material shows that there has been a significant rise in defence spending within the NATO member states since 2022. There has been a substantial increase in defence spending from 3,8% in 2022 to 9,3% growth in 2023. From 2023 to 2024 it doubled to 18,6%. Although the defence expenditure went from 18,6% to 15,9%, the numbers underline the perception that the NATO members are taking their defence and deterrence seriously. This data, which is from official NATO documents, shows the shift in policy and threat perception in NATO. The fact that these sources are publicly accessible illustrates that the alliance engages in strategic signalling towards both its allies and adversaries. In accordance with the increase in defence spending, NATO member states have also engaged in the stationing of troops, especially along the Eastern flank. This increased focus on having combat-capable soldiers in Eastern European states further illustrates NATO's commitment to enhanced deterrence following Russia's war in Ukraine.

In the NATO 2022 strategic concept, we find that NATO designated Russia as the most direct threat to the alliance. In the 2010 strategic concept, Russia was portrayed as a strategic partner, and this shift in policy underlines our assumption that NATO has recognised the threat Russia poses and the need for a stronger deterrence within NATO in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We find that the publication of the 2022 strategic concept is a clear example of the communication pillar within deterrence theory (Morgan, 2003, P. 84). By releasing the document to the public, NATO clearly signals to adversaries and allies that further aggression will be met with a collective defence. This determination also indicates a certain amount of cohesion within NATO. The 2022 strategic concept document provides empirical evidence of the cohesion within the alliance as the member states collectively acknowledged Russia as the main threat of the European continent. Credibility is central in deterrence theory as adversaries must believe that acts of aggression will be countered by military force (Morgan, 2003, P. 84). Another sign of increased NATO deterrence was found in the analysis of the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. These two countries both possess military assets that can be valuable for the alliance. In addition, both Finland and Sweden have, in the years since

accession, increased their defence spending which further underlines the point that they are valuable allies for the other NATO member states. These factors mentioned above suggest that there has been a strengthening of NATO deterrence since 2022.

In hypothesis two, we find that recent decisions from the U.S. administration to withdraw troops from Europe suggest a weakening of the internal cohesion in NATO. We find that the American decision to withdraw troops from Europe could be interpreted as a sign of weakening U.S. deterrence in Europe. However, the main issue we find is that it sends a damaging signal to external actors. When internal cohesion in an alliance is weakened, it is difficult for the alliance to project credibility to adversaries. Seen from an alliance theory perspective, we find that the American decision to withdraw troops from Europe can be interpreted as a sign of communication that is harmful for NATO's cohesion. In accordance with this, we further find examples that indicate a weakening of NATO's internal cohesion. President Trump's claims for U.S. control over Greenland, his criticism of Ukraine's President Zelensky, and the U.S.'s decision to reduce assistance to Ukraine further underline the point that the internal cohesion in NATO has suffered in recent times. We find that tensions in the relationship between President Trump and Spain's Prime Minister Sánchez further illustrate that the relationship between the U.S. administration and some of its European allies has suffered. Spain has led the way in criticizing U.S. policy regarding the war in Iran, among other foreign policy issues. President Trump's criticism of Spain's insufficient NATO contributions underlines the disagreement that exists between the allies. Russian hybrid activity is analysed and the findings suggest that the below threshold operations have been an important strategic tool for Russia. The findings also indicate that although NATO has increased its focus on defence spending and enhancing deterrence, Russia has continued to utilize these active measures. This could suggest that the deterrence has not had the intended effect on the hybrid activity carried out by Russia.

There are both elements within this analysis that suggest a strengthening and a weakening of NATO's deterrence. In the first hypothesis, the rise in defence spending, the stationing of troops on military bases in Eastern Europe, the elements of NATO's 2022 strategic concept document, and Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO all could be interpreted as there has been a strengthening of NATO's deterrence posture. However, in the second hypothesis, we find other relevant indications that could suggest a weakening of NATO's deterrence. The U.S. administration's intention to withdraw troops from Europe,

signs of decline in NATO's internal cohesion, and Russia's persistent hybrid activity in European states could indicate that there has been a weakening in NATO's deterrence.

In conclusion, the study set out to answer the research question: *To what extent has Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the increasing use of hybrid threats challenged NATO's deterrence?* In the analysis, we identified indications of both a strengthening and a weakening of NATO's deterrence. An increased focus on conventional deterrence suggests that NATO has strengthened its deterrent effect. Nonetheless, the internal frictions between the allies may prove detrimental to the deterrence of the alliance going forward. Furthermore, the analysis revealed indications that, in spite of an enhanced conventional deterrence posture, NATO's current means of deterrence likely are not fully capable of deterring below threshold hybrid activity from adversaries, such as Russia. This poses a threat to the common defence among the NATO member states and suggests that a unified response to this matter is needed in order to uphold the deterrence posture on all fronts.

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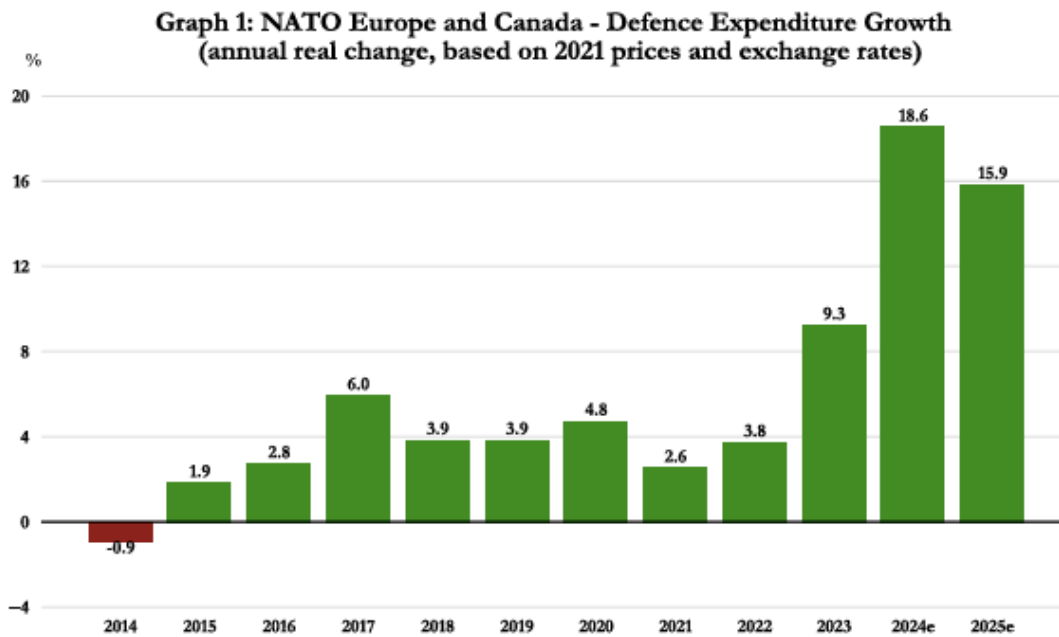
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Appendix:



Notes: Data as at 3 June 2025, based on 2021 prices and exchange rates. Figures for 2024 and 2025 are estimates. The NATO Europe and Canada aggregates from 2017 onwards include Montenegro, which became an Ally on 5 June 2017, from 2020 onwards include North Macedonia, which became an Ally on 27 March 2020, from 2023 onwards include Finland, which became an Ally on 4 April 2023, and from 2024 onwards include Sweden, which became an Ally on 7 March 2024.