



The Role of NATO in Foreign Policy

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Abstract: — This brief focuses on the critical role that NATO plays within foreign policy, laying out the organization's history, structure, and beliefs and analyzing potential solutions to the current challenges it faces today.

Keywords — NATO, diplomacy, international relations, militarization

I. INTRODUCTION

Since its establishment in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has grown to be one of the most influential military and political alliances globally. In the aftermath of World War II, NATO was created to encourage collective security and reduce political aggression during a period of growing conflict between Western democracies and the Soviet Union. From its initial cohort of twelve members, it has now grown into a multinational organization that plays a central role in foreign security and cooperative defense.

The organization operates on the fundamental ideology that the security of one NATO state is tied to the security of other member states. Originally focused on deterring Soviet expansion during the Cold War, NATO has transformed to address the wide range of modern security challenges and geopolitical competition. Today, it plays a critical role in global foreign policy, with its decisions influencing international relations and security strategies across Europe, North America, and even beyond. Simultaneously, the alliance faces significant challenges, including rising tensions with Russia, disagreements among member nations, and uncertainty about its future role in a complex security environment. Interpreting NATO's history, principles, and contemporary challenges is key to evaluating its contributions and effectiveness in its role of international stability and foreign policy.

II. HISTORY

Established on April 4th, 1949, NATO set a precedent for alliances worldwide. As an intergovernmental military alliance between the US, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and a plethora of other Western European countries, many member states faced the tumultuous impact of a beaten-down economy and weak national security. This pact, though it addressed various other issues caused by the two world wars, had its main purpose in combatting the growth of the Soviet Union and the propagation of its communist ideals. Their goals were notably summarized in the NATO Washington Treaty, which stated that an armed attack against one member is considered an attack against all—a clause provoked in the 9/11 and Balkan territory operations. NATO's past roles within foreign policy have proven significant, and with the world's current state of affairs, NATO's future rests in power.

III. STRUCTURE

The primary political power of NATO is shared between the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the Secretary General. The NAC, NATO's highest authority, consists of representatives from member states and aims to set general policy. The permanent representatives meet weekly, heads of state meet at summits, and the foreign and defense ministers meet at

ministerial sessions. The Secretary General, in turn, is responsible for overseeing the civilian side of the treaty as the chief civilian leader of NATO and is also the NAC chair. They also serve as a spokesperson of the treaty and a mediator between states.

The military power of NATO is given to the Allied Command Operations (ACO) and the Allied Command Transformation (ACT). ACO, headquartered in Belgium, plans and executes military operations. It is led by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), typically occupied by the U.S. General. ACT, headquartered in Norfolk, Virginia, focuses on training, strategic development, and adaptation to new threats.

The decision-making process in NATO is based on unity and consensus as all decisions must be unanimous. While this decelerates certain decision-making processes, it simultaneously grants each country equal influence regardless of size or power.

IV. CORE BELIEFS AND OBJECTIVES

A. Article 3

Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty establishes the principle of resilience, demanding that each member state be resilient enough to withstand major shocks like natural disasters, failure of critical infrastructure, or armed attacks through individual and collective capacity to

respond to said shocks. This pillar of this principle is civil preparedness, or more specifically, “continuity of government, continuity of essential services to the population, and civil support to military operations” (North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 2024).

With the rise of economic liberalization, security elements for civil preparedness have gradually transitioned from state owned entities to commercial actors. Furthermore, at the 2016 Warsaw summit, leaders agreed to increase NATO’s resilience by creating seven new baseline requirements to measure preparedness (NATO, 2024).

B. Article 5

Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty establishes the principle of collective defense, wherein an armed attack on one member state is considered an attack on all member states and triggers their obligatory participation in assisting the said state. Article 5 conditionally applies under the circumstance of an “armed attack.” While such an attack must be international in nature, this term is loosely defined and decided on a case-by-case basis. To invoke Article 5, the NAC convenes to discuss whether the attacks on a member qualify it under Article 5 before the attacked state can request or consent to collective action (NATO, 2025).

Article 5 began during the Cold War as a measure of deterrence, with allies stationing troops around Europe and engaging in military exercises. After Russia’s annexation of Crimea, NATO has increased the size of its combat-ready forces and bolstered its military presence around Russia (NATO, 2025). Article 5 has historically been triggered only after the September 11 attacks on the United States in 2001.

C. Article 6

Article 6 clarifies the principle set in Article 5, specifying attacks on member states qualifying for collective defense. In addition to the physical territories of member states, this Article also specifies attacks “on the forces, vessels, or aircraft of any of the Parties” in the territory or airspace of a member state (NATO, 1949). Although the Treaty regularly undergoes informal amendments with the induction of new members, official changes to the text are rare. As the only of its kind to have been amended since 1949, Article 6 arguably sheds the most light on the development and history of the North Atlantic Treaty. The Article was modified for the accession of Turkey and Greece in 1951, where “on the territory of Turkey” was added into the official text (Boeva and Novotny, 2019). Twelve years later, the original wording, “Algerian Departments of France,” was altered to reflect

Algeria's independence from France (Boeva and Novotny, 2019).

Furthermore, the Article is characterized by both intentional vagueness and specificity in demarcating geographical boundaries. For instance, the phrase "North American area north of the Tropic of Cancer" provides a very definitive southern border for NATO by referencing a specific landmark, while "area" is vague. United States legislative bodies have since taken actions to clarify the wording of Article 6, especially as it pertains to its territories and jurisdictions (Boeva and Novotny, 2019).

The significance and complexity of Article 6 was reinvoked in 2017 when North Korea outlined plans to launch missiles toward the American territory of Guam. Though not in the "North American area," Guam was a territory of the United States under Article 6 and thus qualified for collective defense under Article 5 (Boeva and Novotny, 2019).

D. 2022 Strategic Concept

In 2022, NATO members reaffirmed the above principles with their Strategic Concept. This document emphasized Russia's war on Ukraine and the importance of having an independent Ukraine. The Russian Federation has also been called "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security" (Dolan, 2022). The 2022

Concept was also the first direct address of the People's Republic of China (PRC), with concerns being placed on the country's partnership with Russia and its growing presence in strategic sectors such as critical minerals despite NATO's continuous commitment to "constructive engagement" with the PRC (NATO, 2022).

V. ROLE IN FOREIGN POLICY

The scope of NATO's projects is heavily influenced by its relationships with international actors. The United States has consistently been the most influential member of NATO due to its military strength, economic power, and global political influence. As NATO's largest military contributor, it provides substantial resources, advanced military technology, and strategic leadership that support the alliance's operations and deterrence capabilities (Reuters, 2024). The U.S. military presence in Europe has been a key factor in maintaining security and stability across the continent since NATO's creation.

American influence can be seen in many of NATO's major strategic decisions. For example, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, NATO invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty for the first time in its history, recognizing the attacks against the United States as an attack against all alliance members. This decision led to NATO involvement in operations in Afghanistan and

demonstrated the significant impact of U.S. security priorities on NATO strategy.

Moreover, NATO maintains strong relationships with other international organizations, particularly the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN). These partnerships allow NATO to address security challenges through both military and non-military means, strengthening international cooperation. The relationship between NATO and the EU is especially important as both organizations share many of the same member states and security objectives. In fact, NATO identifies the EU as a “unique and essential partner” and cooperates on a variety of issues, including crisis management, cyber security, military mobility, maritime security, resilience, and support for Ukraine (NATO, n.d.).

Furthermore, NATO operates within the framework of the UN Charter, particularly Article 51 which recognizes the right to collective self-defense. Since the 1990s, the two organizations have worked together in regions affected by conflict, including the Balkans, Afghanistan, and parts of Africa. Their cooperation extends to disaster relief, civilian protection, and capacity-building initiatives designed to strengthen local institutions and improve long-term stability (NATO, n.d.).

Beyond the EU and UN, another important element of NATO's foreign policy is its engagement with non-member countries. NATO recognizes that modern security challenges often extend beyond the borders of its member states, making international partnerships essential for maintaining global stability. As a result, the alliance has developed extensive partnership networks with countries around the world (NATO, n.d.). Countries such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea have developed strong relationships with NATO despite being geographically distant from the North Atlantic region. These partnerships have become increasingly important as security concerns become more global in nature. NATO has also maintained close cooperation with Ukraine for many years, providing practical support, training, and assistance aimed at strengthening the country's defense capabilities and resilience (NATO, n.d.).

VI. CURRENT CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS

While NATO remains as a crucial intergovernmental military and political alliance tasked with safeguarding the freedom and security of its member states, it currently confronts various internal and external pressures that fundamentally challenge its cohesion and long-term strategic effectiveness. As looming threats by Russia and fragmentation amongst

member states intensify, NATO increasingly loses its credibility while operating under uncertain circumstances.

A. Rising Tensions with Russia

Russia's intensifying threat to Euro-Atlantic security has pushed NATO members into a state of heightened instability, requiring strategic cooperation with an ever increasing need for collective defense. German defense leaders, corroborated by Baltic and Nordic intelligence agencies, have conducted assessments, determining that Russia could pose a direct military threat to NATO territory within five to eight years and warning that Moscow is preparing for large-scale confrontation rather than episodic escalation (European Centre for International Political Economy [ECIPE], 2025).

One of the main concerns for NATO and a major indicator of power imbalance between NATO and Russia is the alliance's munitions production capacity. NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte has noted that Russia produces the same amount of ammunition in three months as what all of NATO produces in a year, which raises alarming questions on the alliance's ability to sustain a prolonged conventional conflict (ECIPE, 2025). In addition to the imbalance of munitions production capacity, Russia has deliberately held in reserve its most advanced

capabilities, including airpower, naval strike missiles, and hypersonic systems during the war in Ukraine, which suggests its potential usage in future direct confrontation with NATO (Brands, 2026).

Coupled with the United States' shift in geostrategic priorities, this predicament further complicates. While Washington points its attention to the Indo-Pacific, European allies are left to contend with the prospect of reduced American forward deployment, which could weaken NATO's escalation ladder and invite opportunistic aggression from Moscow (Atlantic Council, 2025a).

B. Burden-Sharing Disputes

A longstanding divisive issue within NATO is the uneven distribution of defense expenditure among its member states. Major allies of NATO, including Italy, Spain, Canada, and Belgium have continued to fall short of the agreed 2% of GDP threshold, even after a broad wave of spending increases due to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Atlantic Council, 2025b). Notably, this has resulted in the Trump administration questioning whether the U.S. should honor its Article 5 treaty obligations toward member states who have failed to meet spending targets (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2026).

In response to this, NATO members agreed to raise the core defense spending target to 3.5% of GDP by 2035, with an additional 1.5% to be directed toward defense-related expenditures, at the 2025 Hague Summit (CFR, 2026). However, analysts have noted that headline pledges do not necessarily mean deployable military capabilities will actually materialize. The Atlantic Council (2025a) has argued that NATO must move away from perennial debate on the spending issue and instead move towards talks about moving military capabilities from the U.S. to European members so that Europe can independently defend itself without depending on volatile American assistance.

Alongside this, if member states perceive unequal commitment alongside burden-sharing asymmetries in financing, fragmentation within the alliance will likely intensify, which erodes the political will necessary for collective deterrence (New York City Foreign Policy Association [NYCFPA], 2025).

C. Internal Political Disagreements

NATO's internal political disagreements have further contributed to its unstable nature with varying priorities of its member states. Notably, Hungary and Slovakia have repeatedly diluted language on Ukraine and challenged shared decision-making processes which has

introduced structural fault lines into the alliance's political core (ECIPE, 2025).

Turkey's membership has also raised multiple challenges towards the alliance. Ankara's acquisition of the Russian-made S-400 air defense system, its reported ties with Hamas, and its continued engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood have allowed for emerging doubt on trust within the alliance (Washington Examiner, 2026; NYCFPA, 2025). While Turkey is undisputedly a geographically indispensable ally, it has caused several constraints in NATO's collective decision-making process due to its Eastern Mediterranean disputes and divergent stances on NATO enlargement.

Intra-alliance tensions have also risen due to rising defense budgets and asymmetric military buildups. This is due to regional powers developing competing strategic visions, as Poland emerges as continental Europe's largest military power and Germany orients itself towards its ambitious rearmament plans, which could paralyze NATO's consensus-based decision-making process. It has become increasingly plausible that ad hoc coalitions of like-minded member states would form, acting outside NATO's institutional framework, and undermine the alliance's relevance as a unified security architecture.

D. Questions Over Effectiveness and Future Role

Adversaries of NATO are diverging from conventional military parity to exploit vulnerabilities across cyber, economic, cognitive, and informational domains, which deliberately undermine the alliance's cohesion while simultaneously avoiding the clear thresholds that would invoke a collective Article 5 response (ECIPE, 2025). It is evident that the political fragmentation of NATO member states have caused increasing threats on its operational effectiveness and slows its ability to respond decisively to hybrid threats.

The alliance has taken several steps to address this modernization gap, particularly in the 2025 Hague Summit, where leaders pledged an increase in NATO's defense investment and expansion of its resilience agenda to encompass cyber infrastructure and societal domains (ECIPE, 2025). EU initiatives such as the White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030 and the ReArm Europe Plan also highlight the need for strategic autonomy to be actively constructed rather than assumed (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik [DGAP], 2025). Therefore, European allies may be able to fill the gap of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine in the near term, but critical capabilities such as strategic air defense and advanced intelligence collection cannot yet be provided independently (DGAP, 2025).

Most crucially, NATO's strategic credibility is currently most at stake. Russian officials have continued to portray the alliance as a community of divergent interests held together by historical ties, with risks of strategic lags due to increasing internal disagreements (NYCFPA, 2025). As a result, NATO's actions in the foreseeable future will remain the defining factor in Euro-Atlantic security in the coming decade.

VII. FUTURE POLICY OPTIONS

NATO's past and current challenges suggest the importance of concrete structural reforms. Perhaps the most urgent area is modernizing for hybrid and technological threats. In 2022, NATO launched the Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) to connect technology startups with alliance defense needs in artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and cyber capabilities (NATO, 2023). While DIANA is a meaningful step, it still remains significantly underfunded relative to the scale of the problem—binding commitments to direct a defined share of the defense budget specifically toward emerging technologies, separate from headline GDP spending targets, will give it real teeth. While NATO formally recognized cyberspace as an operational domain in 2016 and reaffirmed collective resilience in its 2022 Strategic Concept, the question of whether a cyberattack triggers an

Article 5 response remains ambiguous (NATO, 2022). Clearer thresholds for what constitutes a cyber act of war would reduce miscalculation on all sides and close the deterrence gap that adversaries are already exploiting (ECIPE, 2025).

Operationally, two other reforms are long overdue. The Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), designed to deploy within 48 to 72 hours, still operates under political authorization requirements that introduce dangerous delays in fast-moving crises (NATO, 2024). Expanding pre-delegated deployment authority in defined circumstances would reduce that window without bypassing collective decision-making. On the question of U.S. dependence, the Trump administration's repeated questioning of Article 5 obligations toward allies that miss spending targets has made European strategic autonomy a necessity rather than an aspiration (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026). The EU's ReArm Europe Initiative, formally the Security Action for Europe (SAFE), and its White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030 are serious policy responses, but the gap between spending pledges and deployable capability remains wide (European Commission, 2025; Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik, 2025). Capability pooling among mid-sized NATO members, through coordinated joint procurement in areas like strategic airlift, air

defense, and logistics, offers a practical path toward reducing a single-state reliance on American military assets without requiring treaty changes.

But perhaps most important is NATO's ability to adapt its foundational doctrine to keep pace with modern conflict. Article 5 was built for clearly identifiable conventional attacks; today's adversaries use disinformation, energy coercion, and infrastructure sabotage in ways specifically designed to avoid triggering a collective response (ECIPE, 2025). NATO's expanded resilience agenda at the 2025 Hague Summit was a genuine step forward, but a clear operational framework for responding to grey-zone aggression, including agreed non-military response options, is still nonexistent. Closing that gap ties together every other challenge alliance faces: without it, internal fractures will deepen and NATO's global credibility will erode. What the alliance needs is not just more resources, but the political will to wield them more effectively.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Throughout history, NATO has been a critical tool within foreign policy, from its initial roots in preventing communist ideals from spreading across Europe to its present day role in making critical strategic decisions amongst its key members. Nonetheless, NATO still faces many challenges when it comes to internal disputes,

sharing defense expenditures, and addressing the many rising tensions we see today across the globe regarding countries such as Russia or China. The question of the continued effectiveness and credibility of NATO is especially critical to consider for youth today when looking forward to what values and alliances will dictate foreign policy in the future. Ultimately, approaching NATO's future with emphasis on creating clear doctrines to follow, modernizing military technology, and pioneering more efficient operations would strengthen NATO's critical role in foreign policy.

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