

THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR IN THE CONTEXT OF NATO'S EXPANSION POLICY (2022 -)

Hüseyin FAZLA*

Abstract

NATO has gained increasing importance, particularly in light of its expansion into Eastern Europe, which prompted a Russian reaction in the form of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent military action in the Russian Ukrainian war. Despite Ukraine's official request to join, NATO has not yet made a decision on membership, and Ukraine remains only a partner nation. The ongoing war has sparked substantial discussions about NATO's role in the conflict, including the position of Eastern European countries against Russian drone flyovers. While some members deem their engagement against Russia too risky, others advocate more direct measures, such as increasing air policing missions and the number of forward defence battalions. The following paper discusses the multi-faceted process of NATO enlargement in the context of Russian Ukrainian war which changed parameters of the security situation in Europe. The hypothesis of this study is that "What is the role of NATO and its expansion policies in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine?" The main theme of this study is to highlight why Russia perceived NATO's expansion as a threat, and then why it invaded a part of Ukraine territory based on this threat assessment, and why some European countries subsequently felt compelled to act collectively under the NATO's umbrella against Russia. In this study, qualitative research method, particularly text/document analysis method is used by conducting scientific research on reports released after the latest NATO summits, war reports related to the topic, articles on Russian Ukrainian war and NATO enlargement process.

Keywords: *NATO, World War Three, War in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, Ukraine.*

NATO'nun Genişleme Politikası Bağlamında Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı (2022 -)

Özet

NATO, özellikle Doğu Avrupa'ya genişlemesi nedeniyle giderek daha fazla önem kazanmıştır. Bu genişleme Rusya'nın tepkisini beraberinde getirmiştir ve önce 2014 yılında Kırım'ı ilhakına, ardından Rusya-Ukrayna savaşının başlamasına neden olmuştur. Bu arada Ukrayna'nın resmi üyelik talebine rağmen, NATO henüz üyelik konusunda bir karar vermemiştir. Ukrayna halihazırda sadece barış için ortaklık bağlamında NATO'yla ilişkisi olan bir ülkedir. Devam eden savaş, NATO'nun çatışmadaki rolü, Rusya'ya uygulanan yaptırımlar, NATO'nun politikaları, Doğu Avrupa ülkelerinin Rus insansız hava araçlarının uçuşlarına karşı tutumu da

* Dr. Hüseyin FAZLA, Head of STRASAM (Strategic Research Centre) huseyinfazla65@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0002-5935-1978

dahil olmak üzere, önemli tartışmalara yol açmıştır. Bazı NATO üyeleri Rusya'ya karşı mükabele göstermeyi çok riskli bulurken, diğerleri hava polisliği görevlerinin ve ileri savunma taburlarının sayısının artırılması gibi daha doğrudan önlemlerin gerekli olduğunda israrçı olmuşlardır. Aşağıdaki makale, Avrupa'daki güvenlik durumunun parametrelerini değiştiren Rus-Ukrayna savaşı bağlamında NATO'nun Doğu Avrupa'daki genişlemesinin çok yönlü sürecini ele almaktadır. Bu çalışmanın hipotezi, "Rusya'nın Ukrayna'yı işgal girişimine başlamasında NATO ve genişleme politikalarının rolü nedir?" şeklindedir. Bu çalışmanın ana teması, Rusya'nın NATO'nun genişlemesini neden bir tehdit olarak algıladığı, bu tehdit iddiasına dayanarak Ukrayna topraklarının bir kısmını neden işgal ettiğini ve bazı Avrupa ülkelerinin daha sonra NATO şemsiyesi altında Rusya'ya karşı toplu olarak harekete geçmeyi neden zorunda hissettiklerini vurgulamaktır. Bu çalışmada, nitel araştırma yöntemi, özellikle metin/belge analizi yöntemi kullanılarak, son NATO zirvelerinden sonra yayınlanan raporlar, konuya ilgili savaş raporları, Rusya-Ukrayna savaşı ve NATO genişleme süreçinde ilgili makaleler üzerinde bilimsel araştırma yapılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *NATO, Üçüncü Dünya Savaşı, Ukrayna Savaşı, Doğu Avrupa, Ukrayna.*

Introduction

Thirty-two countries currently belong to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a multinational organisation that provides a forum for its members to discuss issues of concern and make political and military decisions. NATO's primary purpose is to preserve the sovereignty and safety of its member states through political and military means. Its primary purpose is to provide a "collective defence guarantee" to all its member states. According to Article 5 of the organisation's charter, an attack on one member is considered an attack on all members.

Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO occurred shortly after the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The international community regarded the Russian Federation, excluding Ukraine, as the USSR's successor state. Ukraine, as one of the former republics of the USSR, subsequently joined NATO's partnership structures: the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in 1991 and the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 1994. The main framework for cooperation between NATO and Ukraine is the Commission, which was established in July 1997. This serves as a forum for exchanging political and security issues of mutual interest, as well as implementing programmes aimed at reforming the Ukrainian defence sector, ensuring its economic security and cooperating with NATO in scientific and environmental fields. Since 2002, NATO integration has been an objective of Ukrainian foreign policy under the presidency of Leonid Kuchma (Zima, 24 August 2023).

When Russia occupied and annexed Crimea, and in August 2014 Russia's military invaded eastern Ukraine to support its separatist proxies, in December 2014, Ukraine's parliament voted to seek NATO membership, and in 2018 it voted to enshrine this goal in its constitution. This shows Ukraine's desire to get NATO's footprint on its soil in order to prevent Russia any further aggression. Ironically, Russia showed its objection against NATO's expansion policy by the inva-

sion of eastern part of Ukraine in 2022. Following paragraphs will cover the research questions as such, What makes Ukraine desire to join NATO? NATO's expansion and its role in the Ukraine crisis? What are NATO and Allies doing to help Ukraine defend itself? What is the level of NATO Allies defence industrial capacity in order to urgently deliver the most critical capabilities required by themselves and Ukraine against Russia? Why Russian Drones are a new challenge that most of the NATO's European Members should face?

1. Ukraine's Case at NATO's Expansion Policy

1.1 What makes Ukraine desire to join NATO?

In February 2022, shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO strongly condemned Russia's brutal and unprovoked attack on Ukraine, an independent, peaceful and democratic country and close NATO partner. To this day, NATO and its allies continue to provide Ukraine with unprecedented levels of support, helping it to uphold its fundamental right to self-defence (NATO's response to invasion, 26 June 2025). However, NATO has unequivocally stated that it will not send troops to Ukraine, as it is not a NATO member, nor will it impose a no-fly zone to avoid confrontation with Russia (Kumar, 2022).

At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, Allies agreed that Ukraine would become a member of NATO. They noted that the next step would be for Ukraine to submit an application to the Membership Action Plan (MAP), a NATO programme covering political, economic, defence and security reforms, as well as legal reforms, for countries aspiring to join NATO (What is NATO, 20 September 2025).

Since Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has supported the reform of Ukraine's armed forces and defence institutions, providing equipment and financial assistance. Allies have also provided training for tens of thousands of Ukrainian troops. Ukrainian forces have developed their capabilities by participating in NATO exercises and operations. Since 2016, NATO's support has been organised through a Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP), which includes capacity-building programmes focused on key areas such as cyber defence, logistics, and countering hybrid warfare. Under the CAP, Allies have committed to supporting Ukraine further through a multi-year assistance programme to help it transition from the Soviet era to NATO standards, training and doctrines, rebuild its security and defence sector, and continue to meet its critical needs. At the 2022 Madrid Summit, Allied Leaders agreed to strengthen the CAP, and at the 2023 Vilnius Summit and 2024 Washington Summit, they agreed to provide further support to Ukraine under the CAP (NATO's response, 26 June 2025).

Nato's European expansion since 1949

■ Founder members 1949 ■ Joined 1950-1996
■ Joined 1997-2022 ■ Joined since 2022 ■ Applying to join



Map: NATO Member States (BBC, What is NATO, 20 September 2025)

At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, the Allies removed the requirement for Ukraine to pursue a Membership Action Plan (MAP), changing Ukraine's membership path from a two-step to a one-step process. At the 2024 Washington Summit, the Allies reaffirmed their commitment to supporting Ukraine on its irreversible path to NATO membership and confirmed that they would extend an invitation for Ukraine to join the Alliance once the Allies had reached a consensus and the necessary conditions had been met (NATO's response to Russia's invasion, 26 June 2025).

1.2. NATO's role in the Ukraine crisis

Russian aggression against Ukraine has exacerbated already tense relations and rekindled the Cold War between NATO and Russia. Although Vladimir Putin is blamed for these recent developments, as well as NATO's enlargement policy, NATO's current forward presence on its eastern flank brings the alliance to the doorstep of the former Soviet Union. In other words, under certain circumstances, the alliance could effectively encircle the Russian Federation.

Shortly after the end of the Cold War, the Bill Clinton administration made the fateful decision to lobby for the admission of some former Warsaw Pact nations to NATO, sparking outrage and condemnation in Russia. Moscow was fiercely opposed to the expansion, viewing it as a ploy to exploit their vulnerability and push Europe's dividing line eastwards, leaving them isolated. Understanding the Russian mindset is critical in light of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine.

Moscow was growing impatient with NATO's increasing incursions. At the Munich Security Conference in March 2007, Putin warned the alliance to back off. 'NATO's frontline soldiers have been posted on our borders,' he lamented. Many Russians indeed regard NATO as a Cold War relic and a fundamentally hostile force towards their country. They question why the West has not done the same, despite the fact that their own military alliance, the Warsaw Pact, was disbanded. This was a question that NATO nations collectively ignored for years, and NATO leaders continued to expand, which represented a grave provocation that undermined confidence. The inclusion of the three Baltic countries — which were part of both the Soviet Union and Czarist Russia's empire — brought NATO to the border of the Russian Federation. Later, US arrangements with the Romanian and Bulgarian governments to transport soldiers via facilities in those countries were an unnecessary provocation. Attempting to admit Georgia and Ukraine to NATO blatantly disregarded what the Russians perceived to be their critical national interests. (Kumar, 2022).

This prompted a decisive response from Russia, which backed the separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and took aggressive action against Georgia. The intention was to hinder NATO's expansion to both countries by destabilising Georgia and demonstrating to Ukraine that it could face similar consequences (Łukasz, 2024). Hybrid operations and strategic deterrence led to the destabilisation of Ukraine, creating a frozen conflict that limited the possibility of state democratisation and integration with the West for years (Banasik, 2022, p. 199).

Tensions escalated due to the Obama administration's intervention in Ukraine's domestic political affairs in 2013 and 2014, when it supported protesters in their efforts to overthrow Ukraine's pro-Russia president. In retaliation, Moscow seized and annexed Crimea, igniting a new Cold War. The Joe Biden administration has responded with reluctance and evasion to Russian demands for substantial Western concessions and security guarantees. US President Donald Trump has asserted on several occasions that the war happened mostly because of the Biden administration's incompetence. Several commentators have stepped forward to opine that the United States is ultimately responsible for Russia's invasion of Ukraine because Washington allegedly broke the promise made to Moscow in the final months of the Cold War that, if the Soviets agreed to German reunification, NATO would not expand east of the German border (Michta, 2025).

Moscow believes that NATO's attempt to use Ukraine as a political and military pawn could have severe consequences for the Ukrainian people. Putin then escalated the situation by illegally annexing Crimea, which is part of Ukraine. Some experts claim that it was not the West's aggressive pursuit of an anti-Russian agenda that encouraged Moscow's revisionism, but rather

the weakness and lack of strategic clarity it communicated at every turn post-Cold War. It was not the West's alleged geostrategic assertiveness that set the stage for the unfolding tragedy in Eastern Europe, but its timidity each time Putin used military power to occupy territory – first in Georgia in 2008, then in Ukraine in 2014, in Syria in 2015, and finally in Ukraine for the second time in 2022 (Michta, 2025).

Following the Euromaidan regime change, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law in June 2017 that made NATO membership a strategic foreign and security policy objective. From an operational point of view, Ukrainian soldiers have participated in several NATO operations, including peacekeeping missions in the Balkans (KFOR), counter-terrorism operations (Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean), and counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia (Zima, August 24, 2023).

In any case, the ongoing debate about NATO's role in the conflict in Ukraine centres on Russia's long-standing objection to the alliance's expansion, which Moscow views as a threat. Understanding this historical stance is crucial to grasping the dynamics of the ongoing conflict, as both sides acknowledge that Ukraine's potential NATO membership influenced the invasion and shaped the geopolitical landscape (Graeme, 2024).

2. War in Ukraine, and its implications on NATO Policies

2.1. What are NATO and Allies doing to help Ukraine defend itself?

Above all, since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent destabilisation of eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO has adopted a firm stance in full support of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. The Allies have strongly condemned and do not recognise Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, nor its temporary occupation of the region.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was attributed to the stated goals of demilitarising and denazifying Ukraine. This was driven by Putin's ambition to achieve a larger Russia and regain territorial dominance akin to that of the USSR (Omiunu, et al, 2024).

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO also condemned Russia's illegal attempt to annex four Ukrainian regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia – on 23 September 2022. This was the largest attempted annexation of European territory by force since the Second World War. As we know, the sham referenda in these regions were engineered in Moscow and imposed on Ukraine. They have no legitimacy, and NATO does not recognise them. NATO nations consider these lands to be part of Ukraine and they will always be so. NATO nations are putting pressure on Moscow at every opportunity. For example, the overwhelming vote in the United Nations General Assembly condemning Russia's attempted annexations sent a clear message that Russia is isolated and the world stands with Ukraine in defence of the rules-based international order (NATO's military presence, 2025).

2.2. Sanctions on Russia, and NATO Forces in Eastern Europe

NATO's strategy for resolving the conflict has been complex, involving economic sanctions against Russia, deterrence measures, support for Ukraine and diplomatic initiatives (Omiunu et al., 2024). As demonstrated in the case of Ukraine, the preoccupation with balance is a common feature of IR realism theory, but it is perhaps best exemplified by Stephen Walt's 'balance of threat' proposition. Walt's argument that alliances such as NATO mobilise in response to threats appears particularly relevant in the context of the Ukraine crisis. If Russia's seizure of Crimea marked the return of 'geopolitical rivalries to centre stage', then the repercussions for NATO are obvious: the heightened threat required the Alliance to turn towards renewed balancing as a means of protecting its eastern allies (Webber and Sperling, 2017).

In any case, NATO allies and partners have imposed unprecedented costs on Russia, including severe sanctions designed to weaken its economy, deprive it of critical technologies and markets, and reduce its ability to rebuild its military quickly. Allies continue to refine these sanctions to increase pressure on Moscow. The sanctions will make it more difficult for Russia to repair its armoured vehicles and aircraft, manufacture missiles and finance its war. (Statement by NATO, 24 March 2022). However, NATO countries are exercising caution in response to Russia's assault on Ukraine, since Ukraine is not a member of the alliance. NATO has offered Ukraine military assistance in the form of logistics and support components, but has declined to dispatch fighter jets and tanks despite Ukraine's request (Omiunu, et al, 2024).

NATO member countries are sending a variety of weapons and military equipment to Ukraine, including anti-tank and air defence systems, artillery, munitions, drones, tanks and fighter jets. The security guarantee set out in NATO's Article 5 and its ironclad promise of collective defence give Allies the confidence to send weapons to Ukraine without compromising their own security. Furthermore, Allied forces are training Ukrainian troops to use this equipment. This is having an impact on the battlefield every day, helping Ukraine uphold its right to self-defence, as enshrined in the United Nations Charter. To coordinate these donations and the training of Ukrainian forces, NATO has established the Security Assistance and Training Mission for Ukraine (NSATU). Based in Wiesbaden, Germany, with three logistics hubs in eastern NATO countries, NSATU is staffed by nearly 700 personnel from NATO member states and partner countries (NATO response, 26 June 2025).

The NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC) in Bydgoszcz, Poland, is helping NATO allies and Ukraine to identify and apply lessons learned from Russia's war against Ukraine. This contributes to NATO's deterrence and defence capabilities, as well as increasing the ability of Allied and Ukrainian forces to work together effectively. The JATEC is staffed by NATO and Ukrainian personnel. Since its opening in February 2025, the centre has carried out projects focusing on air defence, the protection of critical infrastructure, and resilience.

Throughout the conflict, the political and economic sanctions imposed on Russia, as well as the support provided to Ukraine by NATO countries, have been effective. While NATO's support

has been crucial in preventing Russia from achieving its military objectives in Ukraine, Ukraine believes that it is inadequate given the level of resistance it has shown in self-defence. President Zelensky of Ukraine has successfully lobbied for Western support throughout the conflict (Ominu, et al, 2024).

A key element of NATO's deterrence and defence strategy is its military presence in the eastern part of its territory. Following Russia's deployment of troops to Ukraine in 2022, NATO allies immediately activated defence plans and deployed thousands of additional troops from both sides of the Atlantic. They then enhanced NATO's forward presence by establishing multinational battlegroups, and sent more ships, planes and troops across NATO's eastern flank. These actions were intended to demonstrate the Allies' resolve and readiness to defend Alliance territory and populations against Putin's ambitions.

The war in Ukraine has created a paradoxical situation for NATO. Russia's aggressive strategy has placed NATO at the heart of the conflict, effectively making it one of the main causes. However, since the war began in February 2022, NATO's role has been limited to protecting the territorial integrity of its member states. Nevertheless, NATO's legitimacy and relevance as the primary actor in European security has been reinforced, particularly through membership applications (Zima, August 24, 2023).

At the 2022 Madrid Summit, members agreed to strengthen forward defences, prepare the battlegroups in the eastern part of the Alliance, transform the NATO Response Force (NRF), and increase the number of high-readiness forces. The number of aircraft assigned to air policing has increased, with an additional 130 aircraft and 140 ships deployed to the Baltic Sea and Mediterranean (Zima, 24 August 2023). In addition to the existing battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, NATO rapidly established four new multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. In July 2024, Latvia became the first country to scale up its NATO forward presence by forming the NATO Multinational Brigade Latvia. In May 2025, Germany officially inaugurated the multinational brigade it leads in Lithuania. These eight battlegroups are positioned along NATO's entire eastern border, stretching from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south. Today, NATO has 500,000 troops on high alert working across all domains: land, sea, air, cyber and space (NATO's military presence, 2025).

At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, the Allies approved new regional defence plans to counter the primary threat to the Alliance. Russia. NATO leaders also endorsed a Defence Production Action Plan to accelerate joint procurement and generate investment and production capacity. Under this plan, Allies have agreed to framework contracts worth more than USD 10 billion, covering critical items such as 155 mm artillery, anti-tank guided missiles, and main battle tank ammunition.

Incidentally, at the NATO summit in Vilnius in July 2023, the Allies did not invite Ukraine to join NATO, since doing so while the country is in conflict would mean triggering NATO's collective defence clause and drawing all the Allies into war with Russia. In order to avoid extending the

conflict to the whole of Europe, the Allies adopted a minimalist approach, indicating that they would be able to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when the Allies agree and the conditions are met (Zima, August 24, 2023).

At the 2024 Washington Summit, the Allies pledged to increase their defence industrial capacity in order to urgently deliver the most critical capabilities required by themselves and Ukraine. As part of the Pledge of Long-Term Security Assistance for Ukraine, Allies agreed to provide a minimum baseline funding of €40 billion in 2024 and to sustainably support Ukraine in its efforts to prevail. The Allies have far exceeded this commitment, providing over €50 billion in 2024 – almost 60% of which came from European Allies and Canada (NATO's response, 26 June 2025).

At the 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, the Allies committed an additional €35 billion in security assistance for Ukraine, and this support is expected to continue. Furthermore, Allies are focusing on defence industrial cooperation and boosting production capacity, including by working in close partnership with the European Union and Ukraine.

As of August 2025, Ukraine had received at least €309 billion (\$360 billion) in aid from 41 countries since the start of the war. According to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, a German think tank, at least 41 countries have contributed to Ukraine's war efforts monetarily, either through military, humanitarian or financial assistance. Military assistance includes weapons and equipment for the Ukrainian military, as well as financial aid. Humanitarian relief covers medical supplies, food and other items for civilians, while financial assistance comes in the form of grants, loans and guarantees. According to the Kiel Institute, most contributions to Ukraine have come from NATO, with 29 of its 32 members providing monetary aid. Additionally, 12 non-NATO countries and territories have sent monetary aid to Ukraine. These include Australia, Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, Japan, Malta, New Zealand, South Korea, Switzerland, China, Taiwan and India (Duggal, 2025).

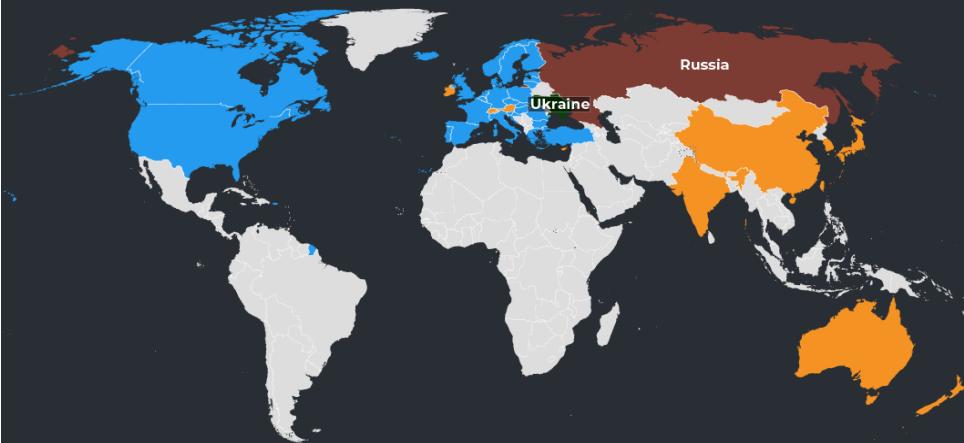
Notably, from a purely military perspective, the invasion of Ukraine revealed Europe's heavy reliance on US weapons through NATO's security system, as well as the discontinuity of its connections with Russia, China, India and other countries (Chae, 2024).

In general, allies continue to support each other in the event of cyber-attacks, presumably including Ukraine. Following the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines and other incidents involving damage to undersea cables and pipelines, NATO allies have increased their naval presence in the Baltic and North Seas. Member nations are increasing intelligence-sharing and surveillance activities across all domains to protect critical undersea and energy infrastructure.

RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Which countries are aiding Ukraine?

At least 41 countries have contributed to Ukraine's war efforts monetarily either through military, humanitarian or financial assistance.



NATO countries sending aid

Belgium
Bulgaria
Canada
Croatia
Czech Republic
Denmark
Estonia
Finland
France
Germany
Greece
Hungary
Iceland
Italy
Latvia
Lithuania
Luxembourg
Netherlands
Norway
Poland
Portugal
Romania
Slovakia
Slovenia
Spain
Sweden
Turkiye
United Kingdom
United States

Non-NATO countries sending aid

Australia
Austria
China
Cyprus
India
Republic of Ireland
Japan
Malta
New Zealand
South Korea
Switzerland
Taiwan



Source: Kiel Institute for the World Economy

| August 20, 2025

@AJLabs

Table: Countries are aiding to Ukraine (Duggal, 2025)

2.3. NATO's European Members Face New Challenge: Russian Drones

The level of threat to NATO did not only shift because of the Ukraine crisis. However, perceptions of aggressive intent are a different matter. NATO allies in close proximity to Russia, such as the Baltic States and Poland, did experience a heightened sense of threat, which is rooted in their past encounters with aggression and occupation during the Soviet era. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that these states were the loudest in calling for measures to counter Russia following its invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 (Webber and Sperling, 2017).

Europe is facing a new challenge as Russian drones breach its airspace. Despite repeated overflights, few European countries have dared to label Russia's hybrid attacks as acts of war,

fearing public alarm or escalation. The increase in drone incursions across several European countries, as well as Russian fighter jets entering Estonian airspace, has fuelled debate about the nature and severity of the threat that Moscow poses to Europe. With each incident being attributed to Moscow, Europe has realised that the conflict has spread beyond Ukrainian territory, over three years since Russia launched its full-scale invasion. Since then, they have tried to adjust their vocabulary and doctrine, exercising great caution to avoid alarming the public and to prevent any risk of escalation (Le Monde, October 8, 2025).

On the night of 9-10 September, Polish and other NATO aircraft shot down several Russian drones that had violated the country's airspace during strikes on neighbouring western Ukraine. Although Ukraine is not a NATO member, Poland is, and the Polish government has asked the alliance to investigate whether the territorial integrity, political independence or security of a member country has been threatened. Then, on 19 September, Estonia requested a consultation with other NATO members after three Russian MiG-31 fighter jets violated its airspace. Russia later denied any violation by the jets, stating that they had flown over 'neutral' Baltic waters (What is NATO, 2025). In Denmark, drones were spotted over an air force base housing F-16 and F-35 fighter jets, sparking concerns across European capitals (Sofuoğlu, 7 October 2025). In an interview with the Kyiv Independent on 6 October, Dutch Prime Minister Dick Schoof said that NATO's European member states believe Russia is behind a spate of mysterious drone sightings across the continent, but they cannot prove it. The Russians may be testing whether NATO would support its individual member nations if they were to request Article 5 protection under the alliance's founding treaty.

NATO's involvement in the conflict in Ukraine has been significant, but some argue that more assertive action was necessary. For example, some have suggested that Ukraine should have been permitted to join NATO, which would have provided the country with greater military support and protection. NATO could also have adopted a more assertive approach by directly attacking Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine (Karasinska, 30 August 2023). Following recent drone attacks on European countries, some NATO member states are now arguing that Alliance members should take joint action against Russia. However, given the circumstances, NATO's direct involvement would have led to a more significant conflict, which some might even consider to be the start of World War III.

Conclusion

This is part of a broader strategy to extract Ukraine from the Russian sphere of influence and integrate it with the West. This is accompanied by support for pro-democracy national uprisings in Ukraine. It is widely accepted that NATO's failure to integrate Russia within the European system and Western society during its expansion into Eastern Europe was a careless mistake (Chae, 2024). Regardless of how the decision to expand NATO after the Cold War is assessed, it

can be argued that Russian aggression against Ukraine is groundless (Łukasz, 2024). While the geopolitical argument may not explain all aspects of the Russian invasion, this issue could be a central component of the explanation. Russia still demands Ukrainian neutrality in the event of a peace agreement. For example, during the negotiations in March–April 2022, the Ukrainians, Turks (who hosted the talks), NATO, Europeans and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett (who brokered the talks) all seemed to believe that Putin genuinely wanted to end the war and that prohibiting NATO expansion was central to achieving peace (Graeme, 2024).

Russia-backed insurgents have taken control of a significant portion of eastern Ukraine. Russia has officially recognised the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as separate entities. The Russian army is enormous, whereas the Ukrainian army is much smaller. Ukraine is undoubtedly up against an army that it cannot defeat alone. A “deal on Ukraine” would effectively confirm Russia’s territorial gains. If the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war were to end, there is a possibility that Ukraine would be divided roughly in two, with the east being more closely associated with Russia and the west with the European Union.

In the longer term, however, the Alliance is committed to assisting Ukraine and supporting its post-war reconstruction and reform efforts. These initiatives could be seen as further steps towards bringing Ukraine closer to NATO and its irreversible path to membership. Consequently, at least, Western Ukraine could become part of a security organisation such as NATO.

References

Banasik, M. (2022). Odstraszanie strategiczne mechanizmem prowadzenia przez Federację Rosyjską rywalizacji międzynarodowej. In: *Przegląd Wschodnioeuropejski*. 13 (1), 193-204.

Chae, Heeyoung. (2024). *Impact of NATO Enlargement on Eastern Europe Security: Case Study of Ukraine War*. Denison University International Studies. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4787&context=isp_collection (dated October 8, 2025).

Duggal, Hanna. (August 21, 2025). Tracking US and NATO support for Ukraine: A full breakdown. Al Jazeera News. Russia-Ukraine war. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/21/tracking-us-and-nato-support-for-ukraine-a-full-breakdown> (dated October 7, 2025).

Graeme, Gill. (September 06, 2024). The Russo-Ukraine War and NATO. Analysis. Australian Institute of International Affairs. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-russo-ukraine-war-and-nato> (dated October 8, 2025).

Jureńczyk, Łukasz. (2024). NATO Enlargement to the East and the War in Ukraine from the American Perspective. DOI: 10.31648/pw.10184. https://uwm.edu.pl/cbew/2024-15-1/14_JURENCZYK-L.pdf (dated October 8, 2025).

Karasinska, Hanna. (August 30, 2023). *Exploring NATO's impact on the war in Ukraine: An investigation into the alliance's role and potential strategies for intervention*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4914936>

Kumar, R. (2022). *Role of NATO in Russia-Ukraine Conflict*. International Journal of Management and Social Science Research Review, Vol-9, Issue-8.

Le Monde, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/10/08/europe-faces-new-challenge-as-russian-drones-breach-its-airspace_6746206_4.html (dated October 8, 2025).

Michta, Andrew. (March 6, 2025). The real reason Russia invaded Ukraine (hint: it's not NATO expansion). New Atlanticist. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-real-reason-russia-invaded-ukraine-hint-its-not-nato-expansion> (dated October 8, 2025).

NATO's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. (26 June 2025). NATO HQ, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_192648.htm (dated October 6, 2025).

NATO Secretary General Press Conference. (23 March 2022).

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte's Speech at Chatham House. (9 June 2025), London, UK.

NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance. (September 19, 2025). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm? (dated October 8, 2025)

Omiunu, Funmilayo I. , Okafor, Celestine Ogechukwu. Ngoka, Ruth Obioma. (2024). *North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Strategy and Its Involvement in the Russian Ukraine Crisis: A Reflective Analysis.* African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies (AJPAS) 17(2) (Dec., 2024):379-399 <https://www.ajpasebsu.org.ng/>

Sofuoğlu, M. (October 7, 2025). TRT World. *Decoding the mystery of drones over Europe: False flag ops or Russian hybrid tactics?* <https://www.trtworld.com/article/41584a745700> (dated October 8, 2025).

Webber, M & Sperling, J. (2017). *NATO and the Ukraine Crisis: Collective Securitisation*, European Journal of International Security, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 19-46. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2016.17> (dated October 8, 2025).

What is NATO and what do Article 4 and 5 cover? (September 20, 2025). BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clymn8zyrp9o> (dated October 8, 2025).

Zima, Amélie. (August 24, 2023). *NATO and the war in Ukraine limited role but reinforced legitimacy?* IRSEM. https://www.irsem.fr/storage/file_manager_files/2025/03/nr-139-zima-nato-ukraine.pdf (dated October 7, 2025).

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış Bağımsız

Yazar Katkısı: Hüseyin Fazla %100

Destek ve Teşekkür Beyanı: Çalışma için destek alınmamıştır.

Etik Onay: Bu çalışma etik onay gerektiren herhangi bir insan veya hayvan araştırması içermektedir.

Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı: Çalışma ile ilgili herhangi bir kurum veya kişi ile çıkar çatışması bulunmamak-tadır.

Peer Review: Independent double-blind

Author Contributions: Hüseyin Fazla 100%

Funding and Acknowledgement: No support was received for the study.

Ethics Approval: This study does not contain any human or animal research that requires ethical approval.

Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person related to the study.