



Rebuilding NATO's Conventional Deterrence: Lessons from the Cold War for the Contemporary Russian Threat

Kamil Sobczyk

National Security Bureau, Republic of Poland, <https://en.bbn.gov.pl/>

Abstract: This article critically evaluates NATO's evolving deterrence posture in response to contemporary Russian aggressive policy, drawing lessons from Cold War-era strategy. While NATO's strategic adaptation since 2014 reflects a renewed recognition of the Russian threat, the current forward-deployed forces on the Eastern Flank, particularly in the Baltic states, remain insufficient for credible deterrence by denial. The article contrasts the robust, multidivisional Cold War defense architecture along the inter-German border with the fragmented and under-resourced forces along today's NATO-Russia frontier. Emphasizing the primacy of conventional deterrence in an era of constrained nuclear options and the inefficiency of non-military deterrence tools, it argues that NATO must accelerate its transformation by significantly increasing ready forces, enhancing logistical support, and sustaining high levels of defense investment. Without substantial in-place capabilities, NATO risks appearing vulnerable to Russian fait accompli strategies and undermining the credibility of its collective defense commitments.

Keywords: NATO, conventional forces, deterrence by denial, deterrence by punishment, Russia, Baltic states, Cold War, defense posture, readiness, defense industry, defense expenditures, strategic adaptation.

The study of deterrence has evolved dramatically since Bernard Brodie's foundational assertion that the primary objective of nuclear strategy should be to prevent war by ensuring retaliation rather than military victory.¹ From its Cold

¹ Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946), 71.

War origins in nuclear strategy to contemporary applications in conventional warfare, deterrence theory has been shaped by changing geopolitical realities, technological innovations, and shifting threat perceptions. The idea of discouraging aggression by others is as old as human history, even if defined and understood differently across the ages. The modern theory of deterrence, in its various dimensions—from conventional and nuclear to cyber and hybrid—presents a wide array of options. This theoretical base carries profound practical implications for contemporary security policy. NATO's current strategic adaptation demonstrates the urgent need to reconcile deterrence theory with operational requirements in an era of renewed great-power competition. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted both the enduring relevance of deterrence concepts and the limitations of existing frameworks when confronting aggressive revisionist powers. In this context, from NATO's current perspective as it confronts an aggressive Russia, robust conventional military capabilities must serve as the Alliance's indispensable foundation, without which its security guarantees lack credibility.

Introduction: Theoretical Fundamentals of Deterrence

Deterrence is a complex subject that has been thoroughly analyzed since the Second World War. Patrick Morgan defined it as “the prevention of action by fear of the consequences (...) a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counter-action.”² This definition shows that deterrence has both physical and psychological elements. The former is objective and includes the economic potential and military capabilities of the parties involved, geography, resources, etc. The latter refers to the fact that deterrence plays out in the heads of decision-makers—if the potential positive consequences of aggression outweigh the negative ones, war may become inevitable. Measuring the adversary's cost calculus is notoriously difficult, as it can differ greatly between parties owing to contrasting values, interests, or time pressures. Consequently, there is no universal model of deterrence; it must always be calculated against a specific enemy within a distinct regional and global political environment, while taking into account the economy and the character of modern warfare.

Since the first use of nuclear weapons, deterrence among global powers has been dominated by the fear of mutual assured destruction. Yet there are evident limits to nuclear deterrence that were identified at the dawn of the nuclear era. These flaws derive directly from the greatest advantage of nuclear weapons – their destructive power. The Western world has come a long way since the 1970s, when experts debated how many megatons were needed to annihilate

² Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1983), 11.

specified percentages of the Soviet population and industry.³ Today, open discussion of nuclear capabilities is generally frowned upon in Western societies. The prospect of mutually assured destruction and the catastrophic damage that could result from a nuclear exchange make nuclear weapons far less useful than they seemed in the early stages of the Cold War.⁴ The weight of the decision to launch a nuclear exchange can paralyze the decision-making process of any party, especially if the attack it faces is purely conventional.⁵

Coalition warfare complicates the picture further: nuclear allies may be even more hesitant to escalate for the sake of weaker partners. Such dilemmas were the subject of Cold War-era analyses and are even more salient today.⁶ The Russian-Ukrainian war illustrates both the difficulty of employing nuclear weapons and the ineffectiveness of nuclear blackmail. Russian leaders have repeatedly issued nuclear threats and drawn “red lines,” but none have proved consequential.⁷ The catastrophic consequences of using atomic bombs—especially strategic warheads—render such employment highly unlikely. Nuclear deterrence works only if one party truly believes the other will use nuclear weapons; if not, it is practically irrelevant. Under these circumstances, conventional military deterrence assumes greater importance as a more internationally acceptable means of demonstrating and, if necessary, employing force.⁸ As John Mearsheimer observes, the overarching relationship between military and political calculations is similar for nuclear and conventional deterrence, but the military calculations themselves differ.⁹ As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO must remain a nuclear alliance; yet, given Europe’s current political-military situation, the conventional element of deterrence appears more effective in preventing war and therefore requires greater attention.

³ Roger Speed, *Strategic Deterrence in the 1980s* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1979), 25.

⁴ Colin McInnes, *NATO's Changing Strategic Agenda: The Conventional Defence of Central Europe* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 3-7.

⁵ Tyler Bowen, “Threading the Needle: The Logic of Conventional Coercion in Nuclear Crises,” *Texas National Security Review* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2026): 28-51, 34-35, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tns.00022>.

⁶ Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 461-495, 461-463, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010183>.

⁷ Peter Dickinson, “Putin Is Becoming Entangled in His Own Discredited Red Lines,” *UkraineAlert*, Atlantic Council, September 17, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-is-becoming-entangled-in-his-own-discredited-red-lines/>.

⁸ Samuel Seitz and Lauren Sukin, “Deemphasizing Nuclear Weapons in Nuclear Deterrence: The Case for Conventional Counterforce,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 8, no. 1 (2025): 15-35, 17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2025.2513102>.

⁹ “Conventional Deterrence: An Interview with John J. Mearsheimer,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 3-8, 5, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-12_Issue-4/SSQWinter2018.pdf.

Security Context: Challenges in the Euro-Atlantic Region

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has steadily reduced its war-fighting capabilities, focusing on the mobility and flexibility of its land forces.¹⁰ After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new prospects for cooperation with its successor states, large conscription-based land forces seemed obsolete. Apart from the lack of a threat from the East, the need to conduct out-of-area peacekeeping operations became a major driver of change in the military domain.¹¹ Emphasis shifted to professional, highly trained, mobile, and relatively light forces. Advanced, heavy capabilities such as air defense and armored or mechanized formations were sidelined.¹² As forces were transformed into more specialized formations, their overall size also declined. Defense spending contracted sharply.¹³

This process also affected public thinking: a whole generation grew up in a reality in which citizens felt no obligation to defend their country beyond paying taxes. This is significant because all NATO member states are democracies, and public sentiment influences politics. The “peace dividend” not only reduced Western military capabilities but—perhaps more importantly—eroded the will to fight and to bear the costs of conflict.¹⁴ These trends might have remained a sociological footnote were it not for Russia, whose leadership has decided that war remains a viable means of pursuing national interests.

The 2008 invasion of Georgia was a wake-up call that was collectively ignored.¹⁵ Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine in 2014–2015 came as a shock and initiated changes in NATO defense policy, yet the response remained half-hearted.¹⁶ The 2022 invasion of Ukraine finally convinced the Allies that the

¹⁰ Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, “1989-1992: End of Cold War Transforms the Alliance,” NATO SHAPE, accessed January 8, 2026, <https://shape.nato.int/page14652746>.

¹¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council (‘The London Declaration’),” NATO Official Texts, July 5, 1990, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/officialtext_23693.htm.

¹² Celeste A. Wallander, “Institutional Assets and Adaptability: NATO After the Cold War,” *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (2000): 705-735, 726, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081800551343>.

¹³ Wallander, “Institutional Assets and Adaptability,” 718.

¹⁴ Christopher Coker, “Cultural Dialogue: The Western Encounter with ‘the Rest’,” *International Security Programme Paper ISP PP 2011/07*, Chatham House, 4-6, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/International%20Security/1211pp_coker.pdf.

¹⁵ Peter Dickinson, ed., “The 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Putin’s Green Light,” *Ukraine-Alert*, Atlantic Council, August 7, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukraine-alert/the-2008-russo-georgian-war-putins-green-light/>.

¹⁶ Yuliia Kurnyshova, “Deterrence, Coercion, Desecuritization: Three Lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian War,” *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, December 8, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2025.2599339>.

threat of great-power war had returned to Europe.¹⁷ The first months of the Russian-Ukrainian war revealed how unprepared NATO was to conduct high-intensity conflict with a peer competitor. Wartime requirements for munitions and materiel exceeded all expectations. For example, U.S. donations of one million 155 mm artillery shells per year, though large relative to then-existing production rates, paled in comparison with monthly output during large conflicts of the last century.¹⁸ During the Second World War, artillery shells were produced (and used) in the millions per month.¹⁹ After three years of war, NATO countries are still struggling to produce enough technologically simple artillery shells—let alone high-end precision rounds and various types of missiles—for the relatively small Ukrainian army, even while drawing on the resources of the entire Alliance.²⁰

All this raises a question: how long would NATO Allies be able to sustain a high-intensity war on their own? More broadly, how effective is NATO's deterrence-and-defense system, and how credible are its security guarantees? Deterrence is inherently subjective; one size does not fit all. Everything depends on the threat – its nature, aims, scale, and immediacy.

Knowing the Threat: Russia's Strategic Aims

NATO currently regards Russia as the most serious direct threat to the Alliance.²¹ The Russian Federation, successor to the Soviet Union, inherited not only a large share of its military potential, including its nuclear arsenal, but, more importantly, an imperial strategic mindset deeply rooted in its bureaucracy, education system, and broader society. Theory translates into practice: since 2007, Russia has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to use force, reject Western offers of cooperation, and act aggressively against its neighbors and NATO Allies alike. All of this is intended to fulfill its national interests – but what are they?

¹⁷ "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept," Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, June 29, 2022, 3-4, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>.

¹⁸ Stephen Grey, John Shiffman, and Allison Martell, "Years of Miscalculations by U.S., NATO Led to Dire Shell Shortage in Ukraine," *Reuters Investigates*, July 19, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-artillery/>.

¹⁹ Adrian Bonenberger, "How Much Ammo Did the U.S. Produce during WWII?" *Military Media*, November 8, 2023, <https://www.militarymedia.org/p/update-155-artillery-ammo-production>; and Mark Harrison, "A Volume Index of the Total Munitions Output of the United Kingdom, 1939–1944," *Economic History Review* 43, no. 4 (1990): 657-666.

²⁰ Grey, Shiffman, and Martell, "Years of Miscalculations by U.S., NATO Led to Dire Shell Shortage in Ukraine."

²¹ "Madrid Summit Declaration, Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Madrid, 29 June 2022," NATO Official Texts, June 29, 2022, Article 5, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm.

As Henry Kissinger warned in 1957, “democracies would have been spared much misery but for their penchant to assume that dictators do not mean what they say.”²² Beginning with his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, Vladimir Putin clearly articulated Russia’s goals: revising the post-Cold War order, halting NATO enlargement, and gaining recognition of a Russian sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe.²³ In December 2021, he went further, demanding the withdrawal of Allied troops from NATO’s Eastern Flank.²⁴ In essence, Moscow seeks to restore pre-1989 Soviet-style dominance in Central and Eastern Europe.

To that end, Russia has launched three invasions—Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014 and 2022)—conducted countless information and cyber operations (beginning with Estonia in 2007), and executed hybrid attacks on Allied territory. One constant emerges from these actions: Vladimir Putin respects strength and despises weakness. Strength limits his ambitions; weakness encourages aggression.²⁵

Military Deterrence Against Russia: Requirements and Challenges

Effective deterrence of Russia must rest on credible military power. While many instruments of state power—diplomatic, informational, economic, financial, intelligence, and legal—can be employed in deterring an aggressor, if all else fails, military force remains the final arbiter. When dealing with Russia, the military dimension is crucial from the outset. In 2021–2022, the United States, together with its allies and partners, employed every tool except the direct use of military force to dissuade Moscow from invading Ukraine; all failed because Russia was determined to bear any cost to achieve its aims.²⁶ Moscow assumed that Kyiv was militarily weak and would not take up the fight, and that the West would not intervene.²⁷ During the first months of the war, the most effectively de-

²² Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 6-7.

²³ Vladimir Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” *Kremlin.ru*, February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

²⁴ “Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of The Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” Draft, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 17, 2021, <https://mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1790803/?lang=en>.

²⁵ Thomas Graham, “The Limits of Putin’s Ambitions,” *Ukraine Policy Brief*, Council on Foreign Relations, June 20, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/limits-putins-ambitions>.

²⁶ Ariana Gic, Marko Mikhelson, and Roman Sohn, “Tragedy of the West: Sacrificing Ukraine and the Rules-Based Order,” *RUSI Commentary*, Royal United Services Institute, December 3, 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/tragedy-west-sacrificing-ukraine-and-rules-based-order>.

²⁷ Seth G. Jones and Riley McCabe, “Russia’s Battlefield Woes in Ukraine,” Brief, Center for Strategic & International Studies, June 3, 2025, www.csis.org/analysis/russias-battlefield-woes-ukraine.

fended front was in the Donbas, where Ukraine established well-manned, well-fortified positions. Wherever Russian forces encountered strong resistance, they were defeated.

In the broader picture, Russia is now a pariah state, suffering heavy sanctions and diplomatic isolation, and largely cut off from the international financial system.²⁸ It has also unilaterally withdrawn from all post-Cold War arms control and confidence-building treaties.²⁹ The Euro-Atlantic community's remaining levers to influence Russian decision-making are limited, though sanctions that could cripple the Russian economy remain possible. Nevertheless, Russia today has almost nothing to lose.³⁰ Moscow, having lost many traditional instruments of influence (energy, diplomacy, culture, corruption), increasingly relies on military might, with its nuclear arsenal as the ultimate argument. Hence, NATO must focus on military deterrence if it wishes to influence Kremlin calculations.

Military deterrence has two pillars: nuclear and conventional. Although the limitations of nuclear deterrence in the modern world have already been outlined, credible nuclear forces remain indispensable. Yet they are insufficient on their own and must be complemented by robust conventional deterrence.

What, then, is conventional deterrence? In general terms, it is the ability to deter a potential adversary from aggression through a credible threat of military force that can both inflict significant damage (deterrence by punishment) and deny the success of an invasion (deterrence by denial).³¹ The former includes the destruction of enemy forces and attacks against sensitive targets deep inside the aggressor's territory. The latter aims to call into question the aggressor's ability to achieve its war objectives. Three major factors determine its effectiveness³²:

- *Military potential* – the size of the armed forces, reserve pool, equipment and ammunition stocks, military infrastructure, deployment of forces, training, mobility, readiness, operational defense plans, command structure, and morale. All these translate into the ability to conduct military operations.

²⁸ CFR Editors, "Three Years of War in Ukraine: Are Sanctions Against Russia Making a Difference?" Council on Foreign Relations, updated October 23, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/three-years-war-ukraine-are-sanctions-against-russia-making-difference>.

²⁹ Alexander Graef, "From Crisis to Strategy: The OSCE and Arms Control in a Divided Europe," *Policy Brief*, European Leadership Network, March 14, 2025, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/policy-brief/from-crisis-to-strategy-the-osce-and-arms-control-in-a-divided-europe/>.

³⁰ In contrast to the Soviet Union up to the late 1980s, this makes modern Russia less predictable than the USSR.

³¹ Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1974), 10-11.

³² Matthew Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the U.S. and China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 11.

- *Economic base* – the country's industrial capacity to sustain the war effort and the cohesion of society. These elements determine whether a nation can sustain a prolonged war.
- *Political resolve* – the stability of government and its willingness to fight. This reflects whether political elites are prepared to engage in defensive combat when faced with a military threat.

Combined, these factors shape the overall effectiveness of deterrence.

From the Fulda Gap to the Suwałki Corridor: Deterrence Transformed

In military terms, as discussed previously, NATO is now much weaker than it was in 1989. Large-scale reductions in funding and force structure, coupled with a strategic pivot toward lighter, more mobile stabilization forces, have resulted in a substantial loss of combat capability – a change justified by the waning Soviet/Russian threat and the rise of global terrorism. Against the backdrop of rising Russian aggressive imperialism, NATO's position is starting to fall short of the scale of the threat. How should the effectiveness of current Allied deterrence be assessed?

Considering Moscow's strategic aims, its confrontational and aggressive policy of recent decades, its fully mobilized wartime economy, and the fact that it has less and less to lose, the risk of at least testing NATO's resolve is high.³³ Considering the nature of the Russian regime—its opportunistic and, in its own view, rational character—it will attack when and where it considers itself stronger than the opponent. From an Allied perspective, it is crucial to have a credible deterrent force when and where needed. Deterrence during the Cold War was maintained in exactly that way, with positive results – Russia did not attack any NATO nation. That is why it is necessary to understand the difference in deterrence and defense posture during and after the Cold War.

This article analyzes NATO's defense potential in two hot spots: the inter-German border in the 1980s and the Baltic states' borders with Russia and Belarus today.

Inter-German Border: NATO's Cold War Fortress

At the height of the Cold War in the early 1980s, NATO deployed formidable forces in the Federal Republic of Germany along a 1,681-kilometer border with Soviet-controlled East Germany and Czechoslovakia. This frontline was defended by Belgian, British, Danish, Dutch, German, and U.S. forces. Altogether, these forces amounted to nine corps comprising 28 divisions, facing 57 Soviet divisions.³⁴ Along likely avenues of attack—Fulda, Hof, Göttingen, and the North

³³ Frank Gardner and Paulin Kola, "Russia Could Attack NATO within Five Years, Says Alliance Chief in Stark New Warning," *BBC News*, December 11, 2025, www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn81x8py3j5o.

³⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 167-169.

German Plain—a brigade was responsible for defending only 7–15 kilometers of frontage.³⁵ Thanks to this concentration, Soviet forces lacked what was then considered a decisive advantage (i.e., a superiority ratio greater than 3:1), having at most a two-to-one advantage.³⁶

Moreover, these forward-deployed units constituted only the first line of defense – without yet accounting for reinforcements from across the Atlantic and other European Allies, including, among others, France. These troops were fully manned, equipped, and trained to fight – not merely meant to serve as a political tripwire. There was one notable exception: the forces of nuclear-capable Allies in West Berlin, where NATO maintained a symbolic presence to signal to the Soviet Union that an attack on one member state would be treated as an attack on all. This posture played a significant deterrent role by affirming the credibility of Article 5 commitments.

Moreover, NATO forces in Germany operated within the framework of Standing Defense Plans, which were tested annually during the massive REFORGER (*Return of Forces to Germany*) exercises.³⁷ In these remarkable operations, the Allies trained for the large-scale transatlantic deployment of reinforcements and for repelling a Soviet invasion. These exercises also served as an instrument of strategic communication designed to convince Moscow of the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture.³⁸

During the 1980s, NATO land forces were supported by strong air power and robust air defense systems. Combat aircraft from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom were permanently stationed at ten major air bases in Germany, supplemented by the Dutch, Belgian, and West German air forces. In total, NATO fielded around 600 jet aircraft,³⁹ of which 60–80 were kept on constant combat readiness under the Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) framework.⁴⁰ Air operations were supported by a jointly funded air defense radar system stretching

³⁵ Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 181-183.

³⁶ Which would be even smaller when counting overall manpower in theater (due to the presence of more combat units that were not organic to divisions) and the qualitative superiority of Western weaponry. Colin McInnes, *NATO's Changing Strategic Agenda: The Conventional Defence of Central Europe* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 74-76.

³⁷ Col. (Ret.) Gregory Fontenot, "Demonstrating Rapid Reinforcement of NATO: Return of Forces to Germany (REFORGER)," a preview chapter from *Lariat Advance: Insights from the Cold War for the Twenty-First Century*, U.S. Army University Press, 2024, www.armyupress.army.mil/books/browse-books/ibooks-and-epubs/rapid-reinforcement-of-nato/.

³⁸ James Stavridis, "Comment: To Deter Putin, Bring Back NATO-wide Exercise," *HeraldNet*, May 29, 2025, <https://www.heraldnet.com/opinion/comment-to-deter-putin-bring-back-nato-wide-exercise/>.

³⁹ U.S. Air Forces in Europe, "Fact Sheet: United States Air Forces in Europe," U.S. Government Publishing Office, April 2006, www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D301-PURL-LPS99370/pdf/GOVPUB-D301-PURL-LPS99370.pdf.

⁴⁰ Lieutenant General (Ret.) Friedrich W. Ploeger, "Germany as a Special Case in the History of NATO Air Policing," HQ Allied Air Command, November 16, 2021,

from Norway to eastern Turkey, with particular emphasis on West Germany. Additionally, two layers of ground-based air defense were provided with Hawk, Nike Ajax, and Nike Hercules missile systems.⁴¹

The New Frontier: Deterrence in the Baltic Region

Currently, NATO's most threatened border is the one shared by Russia and Belarus with Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.⁴² The Baltic states are among the most proactive and committed Allies. However, due to their objectively limited demographic, economic, and military potential, they remain heavily dependent on broader NATO support. On their own, they lack the capacity to conduct large-scale, high-intensity conflict against a major power like Russia and, therefore, are unable to deter Moscow effectively.

This vulnerability was acknowledged shortly after Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014–2015. As part of the strategic adaptation process, NATO began reinforcing its deterrence and defense posture along the Eastern Flank. Nevertheless, this effort encountered significant political, operational, and logistical challenges stemming from a quarter-century of disarmament. Allied armed forces lacked sufficient forces at high readiness, struggled to rotate personnel effectively, and faced supply shortages. Above all, there was a critical lack of political will to substantially increase defense spending to bridge these gaps.⁴³

Although the contemporary border between Russia (and Belarus) and the Baltic states is approximately the same length as the Cold War frontline—1,742 kilometers—NATO's forward presence there is markedly more limited. As a result of a decade-long series of initiatives, NATO has managed to deploy one brigade combat team per Baltic state.⁴⁴ Combined with national forces, this results in a NATO forward presence of approximately one corps consisting of ten brigades distributed across three divisions. However, these units are not homogeneous in terms of capability, and the majority of Baltic brigades lack heavy equipment.⁴⁵ As a result, they are incapable of establishing a static defensive line and are limited to mobile or point defense in selected areas.

<https://ac.nato.int/archive/2021/germany-as-a-special-case-in-the-history-of-nato-air-policing->

⁴¹ Adam Radomyski, "Evolution of NATO's Air Defense System Between 1950 and 2015," *Kwartalnik Bellona* 697, no. 2 (2019): 110-126, <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.001.3.3631>.

⁴² Jennifer Kavanagh and Jeremy Shapiro, "The Bear in the Baltics: Reassessing the Russian Threat in Estonia," *Policy Brief*, European Council on Foreign Relations, December 18, 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-bear-in-the-baltics-reassessing-the-russian-threat-in-estonia/>.

⁴³ Kurnyshova, "Deterrence, Coercion, Desecuritization."

⁴⁴ "Strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank," NATO, accessed July 18, 2025, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm.

⁴⁵ Kavanagh and Shapiro, "The Bear in the Baltics."

Regarding force ratios, open-source estimates suggest that Russian forces engaged in Ukraine exceed 100 brigade equivalents (approximately 700,000 soldiers).⁴⁶ In a hypothetical confrontation, then, Russia would possess a significant numerical advantage in the early stages of a conflict. Although forward NATO forces are combat-ready and trained to operate against numerically superior adversaries, their deterrent effect remains insufficient.

A notable improvement, however, has been the resumption in 2020 of large-scale exercises under the name DEFENDER-Europe, which simulate the transatlantic transfer of reinforcements in collective defense scenarios.⁴⁷

Regarding air power, the Baltic states do not possess indigenous combat aircraft. Instead, they rely on NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission, consisting of 8 to 12 aircraft operating from two air bases.⁴⁸ However, this mission is primarily designed to police peacetime airspace, not to provide effective air defense during conflict. Similarly, Baltic ground-based air defense is limited almost exclusively to short- and very short-range systems, although procurement of medium-range platforms is underway.⁴⁹ Following the Vilnius Summit, NATO established rotational deployments of Allied medium-range systems, but these are limited to a single battery at any given time.⁵⁰

Lessons Learned from Comparing Two Frontlines

The differences between Cold War-era conventional deterrence and the present situation are striking. First, in the 1980s, major NATO Allies maintained a forward presence—including in Berlin—that provided a powerful symbol of collective defense and convincingly demonstrated that “an attack on one is an attack on all.” Second, the Allied forces in Germany were deployed, trained, and equipped not only to deter Soviet aggression but also to defeat it. They were capable of deterrence by *punishment and denial simultaneously*, with sufficient capacity to counter and block a potential *fait accompli* strategy. Third, these forces enjoyed ex-

⁴⁶ Institute for the Study of War, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 16, 2025,” July 16, 2025, www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-16-2025; “A Numbers Game: What We Know about the Balance of Power between the Russian and Ukrainian Armies – and How Mobilization Could Change It,” *Meduza*, April 26, 2024, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/04/26/a-numbers-game>.

⁴⁷ “DEFENDER,” U.S. Army Europe and Africa, accessed July 18, 2025, www.europeafri.ca.army.mil/Defender/.

⁴⁸ “NATO Air Policing,” NATO, updated October 24, 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132685.htm.

⁴⁹ Bartosz Chmielewski and Jacek Tarociński, “On the Warpath: The Development and Modernisation of the Baltic States’ Armed Forces,” *OSW Commentary* No. 632, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (OSW)/ Centre for Eastern Studies, May 10, 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-05-10/warpath-development-and-modernisation-baltic-states-armed>.

⁵⁰ “NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence,” NATO, updated February 13, 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8206.htm.

tensive logistical support, including pre-prepared Sea and Air Ports of Debarkation (SPODs/APODs), clearly defined transport routes to the frontlines, and a fuel supply based on the integrated Central European Pipeline System (CEPS).⁵¹ Fourth, NATO's robust command and control (C2) architecture and Standing Defense Plans ensured institutional preparedness. Finally, the scale of forces deployed was proportionate to the threat – a key factor in deterrence credibility. Taken together, these elements formed an effective and multidimensional deterrence architecture.

Today, although allies maintain a forward presence in NATO's most vulnerable region, these forces still serve primarily as a tripwire for triggering an Allied response – not as a credible military shield. In this way, they represent deterrence by punishment, with limited ability to deny a Russian *fait accompli*. While these units are combat-ready and partially integrated with host-nation forces, they remain incapable of stopping a massive invasion by combined Russian-Belarusian forces. Command and control structures and logistical support are also underdeveloped: there are few high-level headquarters, and fuel distribution still relies primarily on vulnerable, ineffective rail and wheeled transport.⁵² Air assets largely serve policing roles and remain very limited. Whether today's force posture is in fact proportionate to the threat remains highly questionable. As a result, there is ample room to doubt whether current NATO forces exert a meaningful deterrent effect on Russian decision-making.

One may argue that NATO's new family of plans, including operational reinforcement frameworks and defined crisis-response timelines, increases its deterrence capabilities. Proponents of this view emphasize that forces in place will be strengthened prior to any full-scale military incursion, during the crisis phase.⁵³ Comparable logic prevailed throughout the Cold War; however, standing forces were significantly larger and more capable. In fact, every meaningful conventional deterrence instrument currently in use was already developed and exercised on a much larger scale during the Cold War.

The intellectual and operational roots of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) concept can be traced back to the Allied garrison in West Berlin. The present Air Policing missions are the descendants of the Cold War's Quick Reaction

⁵¹ Fontenot, "Demonstrating Rapid Reinforcement of NATO."

⁵² Gintaras Bagdonas, "Military Command and Control," *Vilnius Summit Series* No. 5, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), July 1, 2023, https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/07/ICDS_Brief_Vilnius_Summit_No5_Gintaras_Bagdonas_July_2023.pdf; and Piotr Szymański, Agata Łoskot-Strachota, and Jacek Tarociński, "Fuelling Defence: Expanding NATO's Pipeline System to the Eastern Flank," *OSW Commentary* No. 724, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, July 30, 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2025-07-30/fuelling-defence-expanding-natos-pipeline-system-to-eastern>.

⁵³ William Alberque, "The History of NATO's New Defence Plans (2014–Present): SACEUR and the Strategy Gap," The Geopolitics and Security Studies Center, October 29, 2025, <https://www.gssc.lt/en/publication/the-history-of-natos-new-defence-plans-2014-present-saceur-and-the-strategy-gap/>.

Alert. Today's DEFENDER-Europe exercises find their precedent in REFORGER. In essence, NATO is not reluctant to adopt Cold War-era solutions; the real problem lies in scale.

In summary, during the Cold War, NATO maintained a robust, layered forward defense system built to withstand and repel a Soviet invasion. The deployed forces were multinational, mechanized, and supported by a layered air defense system and strong air power. Soviet leaders understood clearly: an attack on NATO would trigger a general war.

Today, NATO is visibly striving to regenerate comparable capabilities while drawing heavily on Cold War-era models. However, so far, the forces rotationally deployed to the Eastern Flank serve primarily as political assurance and as a tripwire, emphasizing deterrence by punishment. Their presence signals preparedness for escalation rather than deterrence by denial.

This posture aligns with other adaptation efforts, such as the new NATO Force Model, which envisions a force of up to 800,000 troops at various readiness levels.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, Russian decision-makers clearly understand the dynamics of political consensus within NATO and may still believe that limited military gains are attainable.⁵⁵ The historical pattern of Russian action—2008 (Georgia), 2014 (Crimea), and 2022 (Ukraine)—demonstrates a preference for fait accompli strategies, particularly when doubts exist about Western resolve.

From Vladimir Putin's perspective, NATO may still be seen as unprepared for a long-duration, high-intensity war. Russia, by contrast, has succeeded in mobilizing a war economy, expanding its armed forces, rotating battle-hardened personnel, and acquiring firsthand experience in drone-trench warfare.

In answering the central question, NATO presently has limited capacity to conduct or sustain high-intensity warfare over the medium- to long-term.⁵⁶ Apart from more obvious factors, such as defense capabilities and the political will to use them, other equally important but often overlooked factors include insufficient ammunition reserves and inadequate industrial capacity. Consequently, NATO's current deterrence and defense posture is not fully credible and may therefore invite testing by Russia aimed at undermining Alliance cohesion.

⁵⁴ John R. Deni, "The New NATO Force Model: Ready for Launch?" *NDC Outlook* 04-2024, NATO Defense College, May 27, 2024, 2-3, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/fr/the-new-nato-force-model-ready-for-launch-2/>.

⁵⁵ The Allied decision-making process would be actively constrained by Russian hybrid, cyber, and information operations, as well as by the "escalate-to-de-escalate" doctrine, which envisions limited nuclear strikes, gambling that Western leaders will prove unwilling to pursue nuclear escalation.

⁵⁶ NATO would be strongest in the first weeks, then suffer a slowdown due to a lack of supplies; over the longer term, it would regain superiority after shifting economies to wartime needs. That might sound positive in the end, but the process of reaching that point would be catastrophic for regions and states bordering Russia, which would risk occupation and atrocities by the Russian army.

Conclusion: Requirements for Effective NATO Deterrence

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the fundamental principles of deterrence theory remain valid. Military capabilities are indispensable elements of effective deterrence. At the same time, it is hard to overstate the importance of perceptions and psychological factors in adversary decision-making. The effectiveness of deterrence depends not merely on objective military capabilities but on how potential adversaries perceive Allied resolve, unity, and willingness to use force. What is crucial is an understanding of the enemy – its strategic interests and its determination to fulfil them. Putin's Russia is a revisionist power that considers NATO a constraint on the growth of its influence. A fundamental aim of contemporary Russia is to destroy NATO by demonstrating that Article 5 commitments are void. To achieve this goal, Moscow is ready to risk a lot. In fact, for the Kremlin, war is a continuous state. As long as Ukraine binds Russian forces, Vladimir Putin will not be able to act effectively against NATO. However, after the conclusion of the Russian-Ukrainian war—especially if it is favorable for Russia—Russia will likely pose a significant kinetic threat to NATO.

In light of the above, what should NATO do to strengthen its deterrence? In general, NATO's ongoing strategic adaptation is progressing in the right direction. However, the slow pace of implementation may lead Vladimir Putin to conclude that his window of opportunity remains open.

The decisions reached at The Hague Summit—particularly the new Defense Investment Pledge, which aims to raise defense expenditures to 5 % of GDP by 2035—clearly signal that NATO is beginning to take the Russian threat seriously.⁵⁷ This decision follows the lead of Eastern Flank nations and has been catalyzed by U.S. leadership. The significance of The Hague pledge cannot be overstated. It provides the financial basis for real military development. More importantly, it signals a transformative political shift: Allies are now treating the threat of war as a plausible scenario. This, in turn, enhances deterrence by communicating to Moscow that Europe has come to terms with the possibility of major war – and is willing to prepare for it. Issuing declarations and implementing limited reforms in the armed forces is relatively easy. Committing to sharp increases in defense spending—especially at the expense of welfare policies—is a fundamentally more serious signal.

Operational plans drafted by SHAPE, along with revised NATO Capability Targets, are sound – but they must now be matched with allocated forces, headquarters, and capabilities. Unfortunately, most Allied armed forces are still at the earliest stages of structural and doctrinal transformation. The largest European NATO members field no more than eight land brigades each, which helps explain

⁵⁷ “The Hague Summit Declaration Issued by the NATO Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in The Hague 25 June 2025,” NATO, June 25, 2025, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm.

the still limited size of NATO forces forward-deployed on the Eastern Flank.⁵⁸ If NATO wants to be credible, it needs much larger forces on the Eastern Flank, and particularly to the Baltic States. Alongside strengthening the national armed forces, the number of brigades deployed to the East must also increase. This growth should be pursued not only in numbers but especially in quality by including heavy armored and advanced air-defense capabilities. Moreover, Baltic Air Policing should transition to Baltic Air Defense already in peacetime. Forces on the Eastern Flank should have robust logistical support, including forward military infrastructure, prepositioned munitions stocks, and an extended fuel pipeline system.

The historical experience of the Cold War demonstrates that a comprehensive and effective deterrence system is not only possible but sustainable. NATO once fielded hundreds of thousands of troops along the Iron Curtain while simultaneously experiencing economic growth – suggesting that properly managed defense spending need not harm the economy. In fact, it may stimulate it. The lessons from the Cold War also highlight the importance of maintaining deterrence over extended periods. Successful deterrence requires sustained investment, continuous adaptation, and long-term political commitment. The Alliance's ability to maintain credible deterrence against Russia will depend on its capacity to sustain high levels of defense spending and military readiness, potentially for decades rather than merely years.

Wishful thinking has no place in contemporary strategy. It is not possible to “do more with less.” Effective deterrence requires robust, in-place forces capable of countering present threats. NATO has enjoyed a peace dividend for decades only because it proved itself undefeatable. The task now is to implement The Hague Summit decisions without delay and to use them as a springboard for fully operationalizing the new deterrence and defense posture developed since the Wales Summit. Only then will NATO's conventional deterrence regain the credibility required to prevent Moscow from testing Allied resolve.

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About the Author

Kamil Sobczyk is the Head of the Western Division at the National Security Bureau of the Republic of Poland.

⁵⁸ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2025* (London: Routledge, February 2025), 89, 94, 104, 134-135, 147.

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