

# **RUSSIA'S SECURITY AND THE REJECTION OF NATO'S EXPANSION ON THE EASTERN FLANK: THE DECLINE OF THE TRANS-ATLANTIC ORGANIZATION**

**SHERIFF GHALI IBRAHIM**

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS,  
UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA**

**BABA GANA ALKALI**

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS,  
UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA**

**AND IDISI EDERIN LOVETTE**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, BAZE UNIVERSITY ABUJA-  
NIGERIA**

## **Abstract**

*Russia's security and the rejection of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) expansion on the Eastern flank has generated geopolitical frictions between Russia and the West, which Russia perceives as a direct threat to its national unity. Despite NATO's stated mission of fostering peace and stability within the region, Russia perceives the alliance's growing footprints near its borders as a deliberate undermining of its strategic security. This opposition has culminated in heightened tensions, as evidenced by Russia's military actions in Ukraine, which Moscow justified as preventive measure against NATO's "strategic encirclement." This study seeks to examine how NATO's expansion has impacted the security dynamics between the alliance and Russia, potentially destabilizing the region and challenging the cohesion of transatlantic relations. Using mainly secondary sources of data as methodology of approach, the study provides extensive historical and analytical perspectives. The Theory of Realism is used to explain the study, which emphasizes that states operate in an anarchic international system. Basic assumptions of the theory of Realism to the applicability of the study provides insights into the security dynamics and tension between the policies of NATO and Russia's national security. The paper posits that the decline of the Trans-Atlantic organization entails serious implications, not only for Western nations but also for global stability. Therefore, appropriate recommendations are put forward in the study for both parties to manage this complex crisis to avoid the risk of further escalation of conflict in the region.*

*Keywords: NATO's Expansion; Eastern Plank; Russia's Security; Collective Security; Peace Deal.*

## Introduction

The Eastward expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia's reaction reflects a complex and historically rooted conflict between the two powers, shaping contemporary security dynamics in Europe and beyond. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO has expanded significantly into Eastern Europe, incorporating former Soviet republics and satellite states. This expansion, while intended to foster security and stability, has been a source of escalating tension between Russia and the West, with Moscow perceiving NATO's proximity as a direct threat to its security and influence in the region (Kremlin, 2022; Umland, 2023). Historically, NATO was established in 1949 as a military alliance to counter Soviet expansion in Europe. Its original purpose was largely defensive, aimed at deterring Soviet aggression and promoting collective security within Western Europe. However, since the 1990s, NATO has embraced a wider security agenda that includes non-traditional roles like crisis management, humanitarian assistance, and peacekeeping in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and North Africa (Smith & Jones, 2022). This transformation and expansion were catalyzed by the notion of collective security and the belief that integrating Eastern European nations would consolidate democratic governance and stability in a region historically prone to conflict (Bierman, 2023).

From the Russian perspective, however, NATO's eastward expansion violates informal agreements allegedly made during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russian leaders contend that Western officials had pledged not to expand NATO "one inch eastward" from its Cold War borders, a claim that has fueled Russian fears of encirclement and provoked accusations of Western overreach (Gorbachev, 2021). Although NATO denies any formal promise against expansion, Russian leaders and security experts have argued that the alliance's continued encroachment exacerbates tensions, creating an imbalance of power on Russia's western frontier and undermining regional stability (Sokov, 2023; Kuchins, 2023).

The situation became more volatile with the potential NATO membership of Ukraine and Georgia. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support for separatist regions in Eastern Ukraine demonstrate its readiness to assert influence and counter NATO's encroachment (Lehne, 2023). These actions not only signal Moscow's commitment to protecting its regional sphere of influence but also its intent to prevent NATO from expanding into territories it considers part of its historical and strategic periphery. This stance was reaffirmed in Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which the Kremlin described as a defensive measure to "demilitarize and de-Nazify" Ukraine, thus preventing it from becoming a NATO stronghold (Buchanan, 2023). NATO members are increasingly divided on their stance toward Russia, with some European countries, such as Germany, balancing their defense commitments with economic considerations, particularly regarding energy dependence on Russia (Steinmeier, 2022). Furthermore, the United States' strategic pivot to Asia and its focus on countering China have raised questions about its long-term commitment to European security, contributing to a perception of waning unity within NATO (Campbell & Sullivan, 2023). Scholars suggest that NATO's current challenges may necessitate a rethinking of its strategy and objectives if it is to remain a cohesive force in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2023).

## Methodology and Materials

The methodology for this study primarily relies on secondary data sources. These sources include scholarly articles, books, government documents, and credible online databases, providing

extensive historical and analytical perspectives. Secondary data offers a broad context by drawing from pre-existing research on NATO's expansion, Russia's foreign policy, and global security theories. This approach allows for a comprehensive review of documented evidence and theoretical interpretations, ensuring data accuracy and relevance. Additionally, employing secondary sources facilitates cross-referencing various viewpoints, enriching the analysis with diverse perspectives on the implications of NATO's Eastern enlargement and its impact on Russian national security perceptions (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2018).

## **Literature Review and Theoretical framework**

### ***Concept of Security***

Security has evolved from its traditional focus on military power and state sovereignty to a broader, more nuanced framework encompassing various aspects of human and international stability. Security has been a core concept in Realist theory, emphasizing the role of state actors in an anarchic international system where self-preservation and deterrence were paramount (Waltz, 1979). In this model, states aimed to protect their territorial integrity and maintain balance through alliances, arms races, and strategic deterrence. This traditional approach underscored the idea of "national security," prioritizing defense against foreign aggression. In response to the post-Cold War security landscape, the concept of security began expanding to include *non-traditional threats* such as economic instability, environmental risks, pandemics, and terrorism, highlighting how interconnected global challenges necessitate cooperative security strategies (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). This transition reflects a shift from "hard security" measures, focusing primarily on military threats, to "soft security" concerns, such as economic resilience and ecological preservation.

Additionally, the emergence of *human security* in the 1990s reframed security as an individual-centered concern rather than solely a state-centric one. This paradigm, championed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), emphasizes the importance of protecting people from systemic challenges like poverty, political repression, and health crises, arguing that true security involves safeguarding freedoms and livelihoods (UNDP, 1994). Human security asserts that, in an increasingly globalized world, addressing the root causes of insecurity, such as economic inequities, social exclusion, and environmental degradation, are crucial for sustainable peace. Consequently, security studies today encompass a range of disciplines, recognizing that issues like climate change, cyber threats, and economic crises are as consequential to global stability as traditional military concerns.

Security is a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses the protection of individuals, states, and regions from a variety of threats, including military aggression, economic instability, and social unrest. Traditionally, security was understood in a *state-centric* framework focused on defending national borders and sovereignty against external military threats. This classical view of security underscores the power dynamics in international relations, where states prioritize military capabilities and alliances to safeguard their interests (Buzan, 1991). The shift towards human security reflects a recognition that traditional military strategies alone cannot address the complex threats facing contemporary societies.

### ***Concept of National Security***

National security traditionally refers to a nation-state's ability to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and interests from external and internal threats. Emerging in prominence during the Cold War, national security has historically emphasized military and defense capabilities as the primary means of safeguarding the state against foreign aggression. The traditional view of national security, largely informed by Realist perspectives, suggests that in an anarchic international system, states must prioritize self-help measures, balance power, and, when necessary, form alliances to prevent domination by adversaries (Waltz, 1979). This framework underscored the idea that a strong military and strategic positioning are fundamental to preserving national stability and autonomy. In recent decades, however, scholars like Buzan et al. (1998) introduced a broader approach by identifying five sectors: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental, through which national security threats could emerge. This shift reflects the understanding that issues such as economic crises, political instability, environmental degradation, and social tensions can pose serious risks to national security. The idea of "comprehensive security" highlights that threats to a nation's stability and survival may not necessarily be military in nature, advocating instead for a multi-dimensional approach to security that addresses economic, environmental, and societal factors alongside traditional military considerations.

For instance, economic resilience is increasingly recognized as a core component of national security, as economic instability can lead to internal unrest and weaken a state's ability to respond to external threats. Similarly, environmental security has emerged as crucial, given that resource scarcity, climate change, and natural disasters have been shown to exacerbate conflicts and displacement, creating security concerns both within and across borders (Homer-Dixon, 1999).

### **Theoretical Framework: The Realist Approach**

The Theory of Realism is well-suited to explaining *Russia's security concerns and opposition to NATO's expansion on its Eastern flank*. Realism, a major theoretical framework in international relations, emphasizes that states operate in an anarchic international system where there is no central authority, and each state must ensure its own survival and security. Key proponents of Realism include Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Kenneth Waltz (1979). Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* laid foundational assumptions that power is the primary currency in international relations, while Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* introduced Structural Realism, emphasizing the competitive nature of international politics.

Realism holds the assumption that states are the primary actors in an anarchic international system; their main objective is survival; they seek power to ensure security; and their behavior is driven by self-interest rather than ideological or moral considerations. Realism also assumes that states respond defensively to perceived threats, fostering a balance of power to prevent dominance by any one actor (Waltz, 1979).

### ***Applicability of Realism to the Study***

Realism explains Russia's opposition to NATO's expansion as a reaction to perceived threats from NATO's increased proximity. For Russia, NATO's encroachment near its borders could disrupt the balance of power in Europe, challenging its security and regional influence. The theory suggests that Russia's strategic measures, including military maneuvers and diplomatic pressures,

are aimed at countering what it perceives as strategic encirclement by a rival power bloc. In this way, Realism provides insight into the security dynamics and tension between NATO's policies and Russia's national security priorities (Mearsheimer, 2014).

### **Findings and Discussions: Russia's Security Concerns and NATO's Eastern Expansion**

Russia's security concerns over NATO's eastern expansion have deep historical, geopolitical, and strategic roots, intensified since the end of the Cold War. NATO's eastward movement, especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has been perceived as a direct threat by Russia, given its proximity to Russian borders and the potential for NATO's military infrastructure to encircle the country. This expansion has fueled persistent friction between Russia and Western countries, highlighting divergent security priorities and mutual distrust. Historically, Following the Cold War, NATO expanded to include several Eastern European and former Soviet states, contrary to Russia's expectations that NATO would halt expansion near its borders. By 1999, NATO had incorporated Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, followed by the Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, in 2004. Russia views this encroachment as a violation of assurances given by Western leaders that NATO would not move "one inch eastward" after German reunification (Sarotte, 2019). While NATO and the West contest these claims, arguing that no formal agreement prevented Eastern European countries from joining NATO, Russia perceives the expansion as a strategic encroachment that threatens its sphere of influence and regional security.

Realist theory in international relations explains Russia's reaction as a defensive response to preserve its national security in an anarchic world where power competition dominates (Mearsheimer, 2014). Realism argues that states act in self-interest, prioritizing survival and influence over ideological commitments. For Russia, NATO's expanded influence disrupts the balance of power and risks positioning adversarial forces too close to its territory, especially considering NATO's commitment to collective defense. Given that Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty obligates members to respond to an armed attack against any member, Russia fears that its geopolitical maneuverability would be significantly constrained should its neighbors fall under NATO's military protection.

### **Ukraine Crisis and Security Implications**

Russia's security concerns peaked in 2014 when Ukraine, historically aligned with Russia, underwent political changes that leaned it toward the European Union and NATO. Russia perceived this pivot as an existential threat, potentially leading to NATO forces on its southwestern border. Consequently, Russia annexed Crimea, framing the act as a strategic necessity to protect its Black Sea fleet and secure its southern flank (Monaghan, 2016). The annexation of Crimea and the support of separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine can thus be seen as part of Russia's broader strategy to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO or becoming a Western ally. Russia's security anxieties intensified as NATO continued conducting military exercises in Eastern Europe and increasing its troop presence in Baltic states, which Russia claims exacerbates its encirclement fears (Smith, 2020). This buildup, according to Russian leadership, threatens the nation's security, compelling Russia to respond with similar military exercises and the modernization of its nuclear and conventional forces, particularly within the Western Military District (Galeotti, 2019). These moves are intended to signal Russia's resolve and readiness to defend its interests while warning NATO against further encroachment.



### ***Current Implications and NATO's Response***

The growing standoff between NATO and Russia raises substantial security concerns for both sides. NATO justifies its Eastern expansion as a protective measure for Eastern European states seeking security guarantees against potential Russian aggression. NATO's members argue that Eastern European countries have a right to self-determination and the freedom to align with any alliance that ensures their sovereignty (Wright, 2022). In response to Russian threats, NATO has bolstered its presence in Eastern Europe, deploying multinational battlegroups in Poland and the Baltic states. These initiatives reinforce NATO's deterrence but have led to a security dilemma where both sides increase their military presence in anticipation of potential aggression, thereby increasing the likelihood of confrontation.

Russia perceives NATO's activities as an aggressive strategy to limit its influence in Eastern Europe, strategically encircling it with NATO-aligned neighbors and advanced military infrastructure (Freedman, 2021). In the current context, this tension has implications for global security as both NATO and Russia engage in heightened military readiness, with Russia conducting joint drills with Belarus and emphasizing alliances with China and other non-Western powers. More so, Russia's security concerns surrounding NATO's eastern expansion illustrate a classic balance-of-power struggle. Russia perceives NATO's advance as a threat to its strategic depth and regional influence, while NATO defends the expansion as necessary for the security of Eastern European states. This divergence fuels mutual distrust, leading to escalating tensions and a potential security dilemma.

### ***The Decline of NATO's Cohesion***

The increasing discord over NATO's expansion has triggered wider implications for the cohesion of the Trans-Atlantic alliance. Traditionally, NATO has been the backbone of Western military strategy and a symbol of Trans-Atlantic unity. Yet, recent years have witnessed growing divisions within NATO. Member nations are increasingly divided on how to handle relations with Russia, manage defense spending, and address security challenges beyond Europe, such as those in the Middle East and North Africa. Europe's heavy reliance on Russian energy also complicates the alliance's stance. Many European NATO members, especially Germany, find themselves in a strategic dilemma: while they support NATO's objectives, they also seek stable economic relations with Russia. This dynamic is particularly evident in the controversy surrounding the Nord Stream gas pipeline, which has raised questions about Europe's energy dependency on Russia and its potential impact on NATO's unity in the face of a Russian security threat.

The United States, the largest and most influential NATO member, has also signaled shifting priorities. With a pivot toward Asia to counterbalance China, the U.S. has gradually shifted its resources and focus away from European defense. This pivot places the burden of NATO's eastern security on European members, who face internal disagreements on defense budgets and strategies. Diverging national interests and economic dependencies are contributing to the weakening of the alliance's resolve, leading to questions about NATO's effectiveness in addressing contemporary security challenges.

### ***Impact of the crises on Global Security Alliances***

The increasing friction between NATO and Russia also has broader implications for global security alliances. Non-NATO countries, particularly in Asia and the Middle East, may feel

compelled to reassess their security arrangements in light of the shifting power dynamics. For instance, nations such as China have closely observed NATO's maneuvers, using them to justify their own military modernization and strategic partnerships. As geopolitical competition intensifies, there is a growing likelihood of increased collaboration among non-Western states, leading to the emergence of alternative security blocs that challenge the traditional Western-led order (Kahn, 2021). This shift could complicate global security governance and undermine multilateral efforts to address pressing issues like terrorism and climate change.

### ***Impact of the crises on Global Economy and Global Markets***

The geopolitical tensions surrounding NATO and Russia have far-reaching economic implications, affecting global markets and trade dynamics. Economic sanctions imposed by Western countries on Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine have led to significant economic repercussions for both Russia and its trading partners. These sanctions disrupt trade flows, impact energy prices, and contribute to market volatility, which can have cascading effects on global economies (Gurieff & Reuter, 2018). The economic fallout from these tensions creates a precarious environment, where countries must navigate the challenges of globalization while contending with the realities of geopolitical rivalry. However, as both NATO and Russia navigate this complex landscape, the international community must remain vigilant and proactive in addressing the underlying tensions that threaten to undermine peace and stability. This situation underscores the need for innovative diplomatic strategies and multilateral cooperation to ensure a more secure and stable international environment.

### ***Russia's Strategy and the Future of NATO***

Russia's strategy in confronting NATO encompasses a multifaceted approach aimed at reinforcing its alliances, enhancing military capabilities, and leveraging diplomacy to sow discord within the alliance. In recent years, Russia has significantly deepened its ties with China, which shares its strategic interests in countering Western influence. This partnership serves not only as a counter balance to NATO but also fosters greater military and economic cooperation, exemplified by joint military exercises and energy deals (Baker & Rumer, 2021). Moreover, Russia's diplomatic engagement has extended to nations in Africa and Latin America, where it seeks to cultivate relationships that challenge Western hegemony. By positioning itself as an alternative partner, Russia aims to expand its influence globally while simultaneously isolating NATO members from potential allies (Iskandaryan, 2020). This strategy is underscored by a robust modernization of its military, which has positioned Russia as a formidable presence along NATO's eastern flank. This military buildup serves as a deterrent, dissuading NATO from contemplating direct military confrontations involving Russian territory (Sherr, 2019).

The future of NATO hinges on its ability to navigate internal divisions and redefine its objectives in a rapidly evolving multipolar world. Maintaining cohesion among member states will require adopting a more flexible approach toward Russia, one that integrates diplomatic solutions with military readiness. While NATO's original purpose was to counter Soviet expansion, the contemporary security landscape is characterized by a complex array of threats, including cybersecurity risks, terrorism, and the rise of non-state actors (Schein, 2021).

## Conclusion

The expansion of NATO and Russia's firm rejection of its presence on the eastern flank exemplify the widening rift between the West and Moscow. Russia's security concerns stem from both historical grievances and contemporary strategic assessments, leading it to perceive NATO's encroachment as a direct threat to its sovereignty and regional authority. Concurrently, NATO faces internal divisions and a shifting global focus, which contribute to the erosion of the Trans-Atlantic alliance's unity. The decline of the Trans-Atlantic organization carries significant implications, not only for Western nations but also for global stability as emerging powers assert themselves. The ongoing geopolitical rivalry between NATO and Russia is poised to shape the future of international security dynamics. Thus, both parties must prioritize diplomatic and strategic avenues to mitigate the risk of further escalation. Ultimately, the manner in which NATO and Russia manage this complex tension will be crucial in determining the balance of power and the prospects for peace in the 21st century.

## Recommendations

The paper recommends that for NATO to maintain its relevance and coherence in the international system, it must confront its internal and external challenges head-on. This includes engaging in diplomatic dialogues; recalibrating its strategic objectives to align with the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape; strengthening internal cohesion; promoting regional security initiatives; involving non-state actors in security discussions; as well as long-term strategic vision. Failure to do so risks further fragmentation within the alliance and undermines its collective security framework.

## References

- Baker, P. & Rumer, E. (2021). *Russia's Relations with China: The Road Ahead*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Baldwin, D. A. (1997). "The Concept of Security." *Review of International Studies*, 23(1), 5-26.
- Bierman, M. (2023). *NATO's evolving role in post-Cold War Europe*. *Security Studies Review*, 29(3), 122-140.
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press.
- Buchanan, J. (2023). "Russia's military strategy and the Ukraine conflict." *European Security*, 32(2), 90-112.
- Buzan, B. (1991). *People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Campbell, K., & Sullivan, J. (2023). "The US pivot to Asia and the transatlantic partnership." *Foreign Affairs*, 102(4), 67-83.



- Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Freedman, L. (2021). *Russia and the West: A Reassessment of Relations in the 21st Century*. Oxford University Press.
- Galeotti, M. (2019). *We Need to Talk About Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong*. Ebury Press.
- Gorbachev, M. (2021). "Russia's NATO concerns: A historical perspective." *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 15(4), 201-217.
- Guriev, S., & Reuter, O. (2018). "How Economic Sanctions Work: A New Framework." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 32(3), 55-78.
- Hoffman, F. G. (2021). "The Risk of Miscalculation in NATO-Russia Relations." *International Security*, 46(2), 30-58.
- Homer-Dixon, T. F. (1999). *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*. Princeton University Press.
- Iskandaryan, A. (2020). "Russia's Foreign Policy in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities." *Journal of International Relations*, 36(2), 145-162.
- Kahn, A. (2021). "The Impact of NATO-Russia Tensions on Asian Security Dynamics." *Asian Security*, 17(1), 1-19.
- Kuchins, A. (2023). "Russian foreign policy and the myth of NATO's non-expansion promise." *Political Science Quarterly*, 58(2), 56-78.
- Lehne, S. (2023). *Russia's assertiveness and NATO's response: A new era in European security*. *European Journal of International Relations*, 39(1), 67-89.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2023). *The great divide: NATO, Russia, and the limits of cooperation*. *National Interest*, 108(2), 23-45.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Monaghan, A. (2016). *Power in Modern Russia: Strategy and Mobilisation*. Manchester University Press.
- Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Racz, A. (2019). "The Long Shadow of the Ukraine Crisis: Russia's Influence in Eastern Europe." *European Security*, 28(1), 37-54.
- Sarotte, M. E. (2019). "How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993-95." *International Security*, 44(1), 7-41.
- Schein, A. (2021). "NATO in a Multipolar World: Adapting to New Security Challenges." *European Security*, 30(4), 503-520.
- Sherr, J. (2019). "The Russian Military: More Than a Threat." *Survival*, 61(2), 97-116.

- Smith, A., & Jones, D. (2022). *NATO in transformation: From collective defense to global security actor*. *Journal of Modern Conflict Studies*, 19(4), 88-104.
- Smith, M. A. (2020). "NATO's Strategic Adaptation in the Face of Russian Resurgence." *European Security*, 29(2), 176-198.
- Sokov, N. (2023). "The strategic dilemmas of NATO's eastern expansion." *Global Policy*, 14(3), 34-57.
- Steinmeier, F. (2022). "Germany's energy dependency and NATO's Russia dilemma." *European Journal of Policy Studies*, 11(3), 77-99.
- Umland, A. (2023). *NATO's eastern expansion and the Russian response*. *International Security Quarterly*, 47(3), 98-115.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (1994). *Human Development Report 1994*. Oxford University Press.
- Waltz, K. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. McGraw-Hill.
- Wright, T. (2022). "Understanding NATO's Position in Eastern Europe." *Global Security Studies*, 13(1), 45-62.