

# NATO Expansion and the Security Dilemma: Reassessing European Security Architecture in the Context of the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

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## Abstract

The article explores the consequences of NATO enlargement on the European security order in terms of the security dilemma, specifically in the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. It suggests that despite being touted as a defensive and stabilising initiative designed to promote democracy and collective security, NATO expansion has also created insecurity by fuelling threat perceptions in Russia. The analysis employs a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative measures such as military spending and conflict data to map the causal link between NATO expansion, perception of threat in Russia and escalation of conflict. As discussed in the analytical framework, the combination of structural power dynamics, identity-based narratives and institutional processes has created a security dilemma. The results of this study indicate that NATO expansion has played a role in the escalation of the security dilemma by provoking a series of mutual strategic moves, thereby raising the likelihood of conflict escalation rather than contributing to stability. The conclusion of the paper is that European security is still dependent on the combination of deterrence and effective de-escalation and institutional inclusion.

**Keywords:** NATO; security dilemma; Russia-Ukraine; European security; alliances; deterrence; geopolitics; international relations

## Introduction

The European security landscape in the post-Cold War era has been influenced by competing perspectives on security, sovereignty, and power. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO's expansion into Central and Eastern Europe was viewed in much of Western policy circles as a means of entrenching democratic rule and collective security. But it has also created ongoing tensions with the Russian Federation, which has repeatedly viewed NATO's eastward expansion as a threat to its security and influence in the region (Mearsheimer, 2014; Sarotte, 2021). This has found its manifestation in the Russia–Ukraine Conflict, which has had significant implications for the European security order.

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Underpinning this problem is the idea of the security dilemma, a central tenet of international relations. First formulated by authors like Herbert Butterfield, and formalised by Robert Jervis, the security dilemma refers to a situation where actions taken by a state to enhance its security, such as alliances with other states or military build-up, are seen as menacing by other states, leading to a counter-proliferation that ultimately decreases their collective security (Jervis, 1978). In the case of NATO expansion, efforts to stabilise post-Soviet Europe have been perceived by Russia as encirclement, leading to a mutually distrustful and reactive arms race (Sakwa, 2015; Glaser, 2010).

Crucially, the dynamics of NATO enlargement cannot be reduced to its military and material aspects. Narratives, identities and historical legacies have also been crucial in shaping the process. Western policymakers have regularly viewed expansion as part of a liberal integration project, while Russian political rhetoric has focused on the themes of betrayal, isolation, and the decline of Russia as a global power (Hopf, 2002; Tsygankov, 2016). These "socially constructed" understandings have been instrumental in escalating threat perceptions and policy responses on both sides.

This article considers whether NATO enlargement has been a source of stability or destabilisation in Europe. In particular, it addresses the questions: what role has NATO expansion played in the escalation of tensions that led to the Russia-Ukraine war, and how can the escalation be analysed using the concept of the security dilemma? The key thesis put forward here is that while NATO enlargement is institutionally characterised as defensive and stabilising, it has intensified the European security dilemma, by reinforcing adversarial perceptions - particularly in Russia - and has thereby contributed to escalation dynamics that subvert long-term regional security.

This research seeks to draw together perspectives from realism, constructivism and institutionalism to offer a more holistic re-evaluation of European security in the 21st century. In doing so, it connects theoretical discourse with empirical events, providing a nuanced perspective on the conditions under which alliance expansion is likely to deter conflict and under which it is likely to escalate it.

## **Literature Review**

The literature on NATO's expansion is highly controversial, reflecting fundamental theoretical differences in international relations. Realists are amongst the most vocal critics, contending that NATO expansion is a structurally disruptive event in an anarchic world. John J. Mearsheimer argues that great powers are particularly concerned about the balance of power in their immediate neighbourhood and that, as such, NATO expansion was always likely to lead to Russian insecurity (Mearsheimer, 2014). In this view, the inclusion of Eastern European countries in a Western alliance was a foreseen catalyst for the security dilemma. This view is supported by Robert Jervis' theoretical work, which showed how uncertainty about another's intentions can lead to spirals of distrust and escalation despite defensive intentions (Jervis, 1978). Likewise, Charles L. Glaser (2010) builds on realist insights by highlighting the importance of misperception, which he argues often exacerbates the security competition.

By contrast, liberal institutionalist analysis offers a more positive view of NATO enlargement, viewing it as a stabilising influence as part of a wider network of international institutions. Building on the insights of Robert Keohane (1984) and G. John Ikenberry (2001), this view emphasises the role of institutions in decreasing the uncertainty of the international system, allowing for cooperation, and promoting norms. NATO expansion therefore forms part of a broader project of integrating post-communist countries into Western political and security orders, and hence reducing the risk of conflict. Supporters contend that NATO has helped to promote stability in Central and Eastern Europe by preventing war and fostering democratic transition. Yet, even within this camp, it is recognised that the exclusion of Russia from the emerging European security architecture has undermined the effectiveness of these institutional strategies and has led to tensions (Ikenberry, 2001).

Constructivist approaches emphasise the importance of ideas, identities and discourse in world politics. According to authors like Ted Hopf (2002) and Alexander Wendt (1999), state actions are shaped not just by the balance of power, but also by socially constructed identities and norms. When it comes to NATO expansion, Russia's resistance cannot be reduced to military reasoning. It is grounded in narratives of historical injustice, betrayal and the loss of great-power status (Tsygankov, 2016). NATO is in this context not just a military alliance but also a symbolic code of inclusion and exclusion in Europe. These readings highlight that the security dilemma is not simply a structural outcome but is also shaped by perception, meaning and politics.

Historical research on NATO enlargement offers contradictory insights into its effects on European security. On one hand, studies indicate that enlargement has increased stability among alliance members by providing credible security commitments and minimising the risk of intra-alliance war (Reiter, 2001). However, other research suggests that it has heightened tensions with Russia, especially in the context of disputed territories, such as Ukraine and Georgia (Sakwa, 2015; Sarotte, 2021). Particularly important in this respect is the work of Mary Elise Sarotte, who maps the historical detail of diplomatic and security decisions in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War that have shaped long-term tensions between Russia and the West (Sarotte, 2021). She emphasises the missed opportunities in building a more inclusive European security order.

While much has been written, some key gaps remain. There is a lack of synthesis between realist narratives of the security dilemma and constructivist understandings of identity and perceptions, which leads to piecemeal analyses of conflict. Empirically, there are few longitudinal studies of how NATO expansion is related to escalation. Multidisciplinary analysis, drawing especially on sociology and political psychology, is under-developed, particularly in terms of narrative-building and public attitudes. Additionally, there is a dearth of practical policy recommendations that balance deterrence and de-escalation.

Situated at the crossroads of these debates, this research aims to move beyond simplistic readings of the effects of NATO enlargement as either inherently "stabilising" or "destabilising". Rather, it explores the intersections of alliance expansion with perception, identity and signalling to create nuanced and unintentional effects in the European security context.

## Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework puts down the analytical engine that will run the analysis, which integrates competing ideas into a unified description of how and why NATO expansion has been working with European security processes. Instead of defending one theoretical perspective, the synthetic framework is embraced to use the insights of realist, constructivist, and liberal institutionalist perspectives to address both material and ideational aspects of the security dilemma.

Fundamentally, the analysis is rooted in the notion of security dilemma, which was developed most systematically by Robert Jervis. Jervis (1978) states that states in an anarchic international system are unable to fully determine the intentions of others and thus they misinterpret defensive actions, like alliance formation or military reinforcement, as threats. This interplay results in a vicious circle of distrust, in which the very measures undertaken to grow the level of security end up lowering it. When applied to the NATO expansion, this paradigm indicates that expansion, although meant as a defensive and stabilising tool, could have been viewed by Russia as an offensive encroachment, thus leading to counteractions and a rise in tensions.

Based on this, the study integrates the neorealist ideas especially those that have been developed by John J. Mearsheimer, who focuses on the importance of power distribution and geographic proximity in the formation of state behaviour. In this sense, the great powers are particularly sensitive to military alliances creating around their borders as they can change the balance of power in the region (Mearsheimer, 2001; 2014). The expansion of NATO to Eastern Europe, thus, may be considered as a structural change that increased the Russian feeling of vulnerability. The security dilemma is however not necessary as put forth by Charles L. Glaser (2010); it is contingent on whether the states perceive the intentions of each other to be defensive or offensive. This brings in the crucial contribution of perception to an otherwise structural based model.

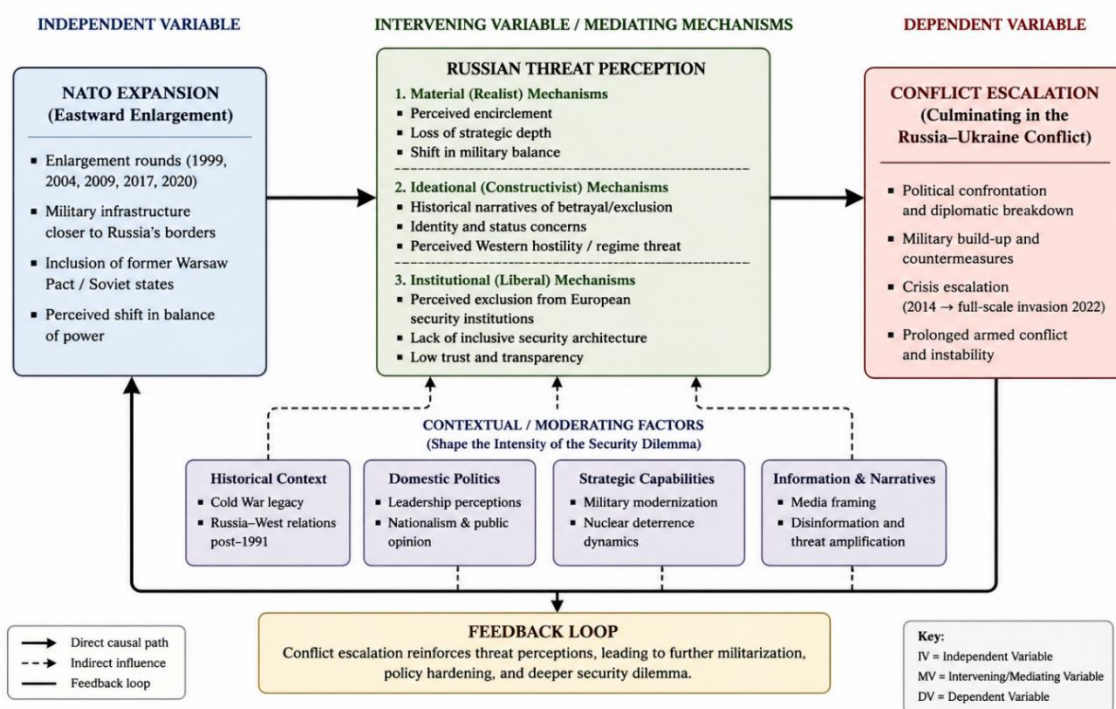
In order to explain this aspect, the framework incorporates the constructivist theory especially the work of Alexander Wendt (1999) and Ted Hopf (2002) that identifies the influence of identities, norms, and historical narratives in forming threat perception. According to a constructivist approach, NATO is not just a military alliance but rather a representation of political western identity which can be seen by Russia as exclusive or even hostile. The responses of Russia to the expansion of NATO are therefore not just a matter of material interest but also accounts of a sense of historical grievance, status anxiety, and a sense of marginalisation (Tsygankov, 2016). This level of analysis is useful in understanding why two or more material conditions can lead to different political results when interpreted in different ways.

On the same note, the liberal institutionalist theory offers a balance to this by focusing on the importance of international institutions in curbing conflict. According to scholars like Robert Keohane (1984) and G. John Ikenberry (2001), institutions such as NATO are able to lessen uncertainty, promote cooperation and entrench states into consistent normative structures. In this light, the NATO expansion is an attempt to expand a rules-based order in Europe. The framework, however, taken in this study critically assesses this assertion by looking at the

boundaries of institutional inclusion, in this case, the level to which Russia was not included or marginalised in this transforming order.

By piecing these strands together, the study suggests a multi-level analysis model. On the structural level, NATO expansion is changing the balance of power and alliance patterns (realism). These changes are perceived at the level of perception and are explained by the identities and stories created historically (constructivism). On the institutional level, the existence (or lack of) inclusive frameworks determines the possibility of cooperation or conflict (liberal institutionalism). The dependent outcome, which is either escalation or stability, is therefore not specified by any of the factors but is a result of interplay of material capabilities, perceived intentions, and institutional arrangements.

Theoretical Framework: NATO Expansion, Security Dilemma, and Conflict Escalation



Source: Infographics Created by Author

Practically, the framework considers NATO expansion as the independent variable, Russian threat perception as an important intervening variable, and conflict escalation, which leads to the Russia Ukraine Conflict, as a dependent variable. Following the causal routes between these factors, the research will go beyond the deterministic explanations, but rather provide a more subtle explanation of how security dilemmas are being played out in the modern geopolitics.

Finally, this theoretical construct serves as the intellectual support of the analysis. It enables the study to mediate between competing interpretations, to systematically assess empirical evidence, as well as to produce insights that are theoretically-grounded and policy-relevant.

Methodology

This paper will be taking a comparative case study approach to analyse NATO expansion and

its responses by Russia. It adopts a longitudinal design which spans between 1991 and 2024 with the opportunity to track the changes and patterns over time.

The study is based on both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative sources encompass policy speeches, diplomatic documents, and documents of security doctrine. Examples of quantitative data are military spending, NATO troop presence, and conflict incident data like the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).

This analysis is a combination of various approaches. Threat narratives in the political language are examined through discourse analysis. Process tracing assists in attributing NATO expansion to particular escalation events. Statistical trend analysis will be used to evaluate the correlations between expansion and militarisation pattern.

### **Analysis**

The history of NATO expansion can be characterized as progressively though importantly changing the European security environment. In the short term (immediate post-Cold War) enlargement was packaged as a cooperative settlement to stabilise Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, this trend started to shift with the Bucharest Summit of 2008, when NATO indicated that Ukraine and Georgia may become members, thus adding a higher level of strategic uncertainty and tension. After 2014, especially with the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the growth and military stance of NATO gained momentum, entering a more aggressive stage in the policies of the alliance.

A sense of strategic encirclement has influenced Russia in its security perceptions. The leadership of Russia is becoming more and more inclined to understand the expansion of NATO as a threat to its sphere of influence and national security. The change in military doctrine that has seen the adoption of the more deterrence, rapid mobilisation, and asymmetric capabilities can be seen as a manifestation of this perception. Domestically, NATO has been presented as a foeish organization, which has strengthened the opinion of a more aggressive foreign policy position.

Instead, NATO explains its expansion by the principles of collective defence and promotion of democratic stability. Enlargement is advanced as a voluntary procedure, which is inspired by the dreams of member states. Meanwhile, deterrence is still the core of NATO policies, and forward deployments and military preparedness are focused on averting aggression. The dynamics of internal alliances such as differences in the perception of the threat between member states also influence the speed and character of NATO activities.

NATO and Russia is an example of a typical security dilemma. The growth of NATO has been accompanied by the Russian military build-up and this leads to the further consolidation and strengthening of NATO. This action-reaction cycle forms a spiral of escalation, as one side of the conflict views defensive actions by the other as offensive threats, making the chances of open conflict more probable.

The case of Ukraine is one of the critical cases in the dynamic. It is a geopolitical buffer state and is at the heart of both the eastward ambitions of NATO and the red lines of Russia. NATO

has been viewed by Russia to be an unacceptable security threat in its pursuit of closer relations with Ukraine which played a significant role in triggering a large scale conflict.

The results of the analysis indicate the evident trends of amplification of threats. Another thing is that there is always a gulf between intentions, which are usually expressed in defensive or cooperative terms, and how the actions are viewed by the other party. Also, the results show the shortcomings of deterrence reasoning, with actions that were supposed to deter war, in certain instances, escalation and heightened tensions.

### Implications

The implications of the findings are of great political concern. They propose the necessity to re-evaluate the approaches to the expansion of alliances, especially in the situations when enlargement can be viewed as a direct security threat by the other powers. Such actions in a more multipolar world have a greater risk of miscalculation and escalation, which strengthen instability instead of weakening it.

Category	Key Implications
Political Implications	Rethinking alliance expansion strategies; higher risk of escalation in multipolar systems
Social Implications	Civilian suffering in conflict zones such as Ukraine; rise of nationalism and identity politics
Economic Implications	Increased defence spending; sanctions on Russia causing global market disruptions
Policy Relevance	Need for renewed diplomatic frameworks; importance of arms control and confidence-building measures

The social impacts are far-reaching. Increasing tensions and conflict directly affect civilians, particularly in conflict areas, like Ukraine. Simultaneously, the long-term geopolitical conflict leads to the emergence of nationalism and identity politics, which influence people and strengthen boundaries between and within states.

Economically, the dynamics discussed in this paper are that of increased defence spending and the redirection of resources to social and developmental concerns. The regime of sanctions, especially those implemented by the Western countries on Russia, have also played a role in the derailments of global markets, energy supplies, trade flows, and the economic stability of the regions outside the immediate area of conflict.

Policymaking-wise, the discussion demonstrates that the world is in dire need of new diplomatic frameworks that can help control tensions and minimize the chances of escalation. Armaments-control accords and confidence-building initiatives would assist in restoring confidence and establishing avenues of communication, and provide an avenue to more foreseeable and reliable security associations.

### **Limitations and Potential Biases.**

This research has a number of methodological limitations. It is extremely dependent on publicly accessible political utterances, which can be strategic messages or propaganda, instead of a sign of actual intent. These sources may cloud the motives behind it and add bias to the analysis. Also, it is intrinsically challenging to isolate definite causal relations within complex geopolitical systems as various overlapping factors affect the behaviour of the state and processes of escalation.

Theoretical limitations exist, as well. The use of realist views in the study might not give enough emphasis to the importance of domestic politics, economic interests, and non-security factors in influencing the state actions. Moreover, a significant part of the existing information is informed by the Western-centric sources, which can favour some interpretations and disfavour other opinions, especially those of the Russian or non-aligned opinions.

Another consideration is researcher bias. Language, framing, and contextual assumptions influence the interpretation of the political narratives. This opens the possibility of subjective readings in which the meaning is shaped by the subjective viewpoint analysis and not objective evaluation.

### **Conclusion**

NATO expansion has both acted as a security-giver and a tension generator, strengthening some states and increasing perceived threats to others. This dualism brings out the complex nature and contradictory nature of alliance politics in the post-Cold War period.

The war between Russia and Ukraine demonstrates the practical implications of the security dilemma, in which defensive operations are perceived as offensive threats, and the security dilemma results in the escalation of situations. The case illustrates that a misunderstanding and a strategic distrust can escalate regional tensions to a major conflict.

In the future, the future of European security will lie in finding a balance between deterrence and viable de-escalation mechanisms. In the absence of proper diplomatic interaction, arms control initiatives, and trust-building, the chances of further instability and face-off are likely to remain.

### **Suggestions**

Future studies can build on this research by conducting comparative analysis with other alliance systems, and determining whether the dynamics of expansion, perception and escalation are the same in any other context other than NATO. The comparison and contrast of various regional security arrangements could assist in determining more general dynamics and other models of stability.

The other significant route is the investigation of the place of new technologies, especially cyber warfare and artificial intelligence in defence. These technologies are transforming the face of conflict, the speed at which decisions are made, and may further complicate security issues by making them less predictable and slowing reaction time.

Lastly, the role of non-state actors in influencing security dynamics should be paid more attention to. These actors make the traditional state-centric models difficult and create new levels of uncertainty in conflict and escalation processes, starting with the formation of private military groups and continuing to cyber collectives and transnational networks.

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