Blinded by Bias

Chapter 4 | From "Brain Dead" to Crisis Forum: NATO HQ

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From "Brain Dead" to Crisis Forum: NATO HQ

The evolving tensions between Russia and Ukraine during the buildup to the full-scale invasion fundamentally tested NATO's cohesion. Having been declared "brain dead" by French President Macron in 2019, the organisation re-emerged as the cornerstone of their collective defence effort especially for many smaller European allies. As Russia escalated its military posture and rhetoric towards Ukraine, a non-NATO member, NATO's core mission which is to guarantee the security and freedom of its treaty-states, guided its response. Although no real fractures emerged within the alliance during the lead-up to the crisis, the period did expose divisions. Allies assessed the threat posed by Russia very differently which in turn informed different strategic approaches to deterring Russian aggression. As argued by one senior NATO official, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, acted as a bridge-builder, attempting to ensure "*having those conversations politically, touching base with all the key capitals, making sure that the response would be NATO's response and not, let's say, different capitals singing slightly different tunes.*"[1] According to another NATO official this was a deliberate part of NATO's broader strategy, which prioritised projecting unity and managing perceptions, even in the face of internal differences: "*The optics of not agreeing is considered the worst of all possible worlds.*"[2]

NATO-Russian Relations: From Bad to Worse

The relationship between Russia and NATO had featured ongoing disputes over NATO's enlargement that ran counter to Russia's vision of its sphere of influence and what the European security architecture should look like. In 2007, President Vladimir Putin publicly denounced the US-led unipolar world order and NATO's enlargement in his infamous Munich Security Conference Speech, warning of its negative consequences for Russia's security. Following NATO opening its door to membership for Georgia and Ukraine at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, Russia invaded Georgia in the short Russia-Georgia war in August 2008. Then US Ambassador to Russia Bill Burns had already warned about this in a February 2008 memo to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, stating that offering NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine could be seen as a provocation by Russia.[3] In 2009, Moscow

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[1]   Interview 2

[2]   Interview 44

[3]   William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (Random House, 2019).

> "For too long, politicians have viewed the world as they hoped it to be—predictable, controllable, and shaped by their decisions."

proposed the 'Medvedev Initiative' which envisioned a new European security architecture.[4] The agreement would prohibit any state from ensuring its own security at the expense of others while restricting military alliances that undermine common security.[5] The initiative did not go anywhere, and subsequent efforts to repair NATO-Russia relations did not yield lasting results.[6] The subsequent 2014 annexation of Crimea marked a turning point for NATO and its members, prompting the alliance to bolster its military posture in Eastern Europe, step up support for Ukraine, and implement a first round of economic sanctions against Russia. These developments considerably imprinted Russia as a strategic threat in the perception of senior political and military policymakers working at the HQ level and at NATO's Allied Command Operations.

In April 2021, when Russia amassed its forces along Ukraine's borders, alarm bells therefore started ringing at NATO HQ. Among some permanent staff, the Russian threat was quickly taken seriously. As one high-ranking NATO military official put it: "*It was immediately clear that it was a large-scale Russian invasion, unlike the Crimea incursion, when the 'green men' were not immediately labelled as Russians.*"[7] For others, however, the implications of the threat posed remained unclear, as another senior NATO military official recounted:

> "*At that time NATO thought it was extremely concerning [...] [and] it was perceived [as] coercion of Ukraine although it was not clear whether it was going to be long or short term*"[8]

This heightened threat awareness did not lead to a change in NATO's posture, however, as Ukraine was not part of NATO and thus lay outside its core mandate. According to a senior NATO official, *"This was also very present behind the scenes. Since it was Ukraine and not NATO, there was a lot less urgency."*[9] Even in the case of NATO membership, a change in posture would have required a political decision by the North Atlantic Council and approval by the, at the time, 30 member states. Such political resolve could not be expected, as the same high-ranking NATO military official observed that "*For too long, politicians have viewed the world as they hoped it to be—predictable, controllable, and shaped by their decisions.*"[10] In addition to these procedural hurdles, NATO allies' strategic attention was also distracted by Afghanistan, where alliance members were preparing for the final stages of their withdrawal. As a result, decisions about NATO's posture were delayed until the threat had become more concrete later that year.

Russia's annual Zapad exercise held in September 2021 amplified fears of a looming conflict among NATO officials, especially when seen in conjunction with the continued Russian military buildup near Ukraine's borders. NATO officials warned that the drills, "which follow a huge Russian military buildup on Ukraine's borders earlier this year, increase the risk of an accident

4   Yury Fedorov, 'Medvedev\'s Initiative: A Trap for Europe?', *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 3, no. 2 (2025), https://cejiss.org/medvedev-s-initiative-a-trap-for-europe.

5   'A New Security Architecture for Europe? Russian Proposal and Western Reactions - Egmont Institute', accessed 4 April 2025, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/a-new-security-architecture-for-europe-russian-proposal-and-western-reactions/.

6   Roy Allison, 'The Russian Case for Military Intervention in Georgia: International Law, Norms and Political Calculation', *European Security* 18, no. 2 (2009): 173–200, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662830903468734.

7   Interview 26

8   Interview 12

9   Interview 44

10   Interview 26

NATO would defend itself if invaded and stood behind Ukrainian sovereignty, but would not extent its territorial defence commitments to Ukraine.

or miscalculation that could touch off a crisis".[11] Despite NATO HQ viewing the exercise as escalatory, its institutional response remained measured.[12]

By early October, tensions escalated further. NATO expelled eight Russian diplomats from its mission in Brussels who were, according to a NATO official, "*undeclared Russian intelligence officers.*"[13] In retaliation Moscow decided to strip the credentials of NATO staff members in Russia. NATO responded to the move by stating that it "*regret[ted] Russia's decision*", while the wider alliance perceived the move as escalatory and responded with decisive measures.[14]

In mid-December 2021, Russia presented its *démarche* to the US and to NATO which NATO officials considered to be "*not acceptable,*" and subsequently rejected.[15] On 28 January 2022, NATO reinforced its eastern flank, with the US placing 8,500 troops on heightened alert while Moscow continued its military buildup. While not formally authorised, military planners at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) began informally preparing for more proactive deterrent responses in case of further escalation, while its primary focus remained on implementing the existing Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA). Meanwhile, at NATO HQ in Brussels political negotiations among the thirty Alliance members ensued about the alliance's appropriate response. Because decisions by the North Atlantic Council require unanimity, the alliance is bound by its lowest common denominator. This turned out to be the recognition that member states needed to respond as a united front when it came to Ukraine's sovereignty while at the same time making clear that it was not a NATO member and therefore Article 5 did not apply.[16] NATO would defend itself if invaded and stood behind Ukrainian sovereignty, but would not extend its territorial defence commitments to Ukraine.

No Consensus on the Threat

Discussions at NATO HQ about the threat posed by Russia in the lead-up to the invasion were shaped by varying degrees of scepticism among its staff and member states. As discussed in the previous chapter, certain allies held on to the idea that Putin would not actually go through with an invasion as the buildup was perceived as an attempt to renegotiate the European security architecture. Sceptical member states and NATO staff "*trusted Russia's assurances that no invasion would occur, exposing intelligence gaps within the NATO alliance,*" as one senior NATO official related.[17] The scepticism remained a prominent factor up until "a*t least one month before the invasion, [after which] there was consensus that war was going to*

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[11] 'Russia and Belarus Formally Open Huge War Games, Worrying NATO', World, *Reuters*, 9 September 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-belarus-formally-open-huge-war-games-worrying-nato-2021-09-09/.

[12] *Reuters*, 'Russia and Belarus Formally Open Huge War Games, Worrying NATO'.

[13] *Russia to Suspend Nato Diplomatic Mission amid Tension*, 18 October 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58959386.

[14] NATO, 'Military Liaison Mission Moscow', NATO, accessed 7 April 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50341.htm.

[15] Interview 2

[16] Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty states that: "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

[17] Interview 12

happen" as one senior NATO official recounted.[18] Another former high-ranking NATO military official recalled that for policymakers at NATO HQ, an important initial turning point resulted from US intelligence diplomacy with "*US intelligence briefings in November 2021 provid[ing] high-confidence assessments detailing Russia's intent to invade, including the use of false flag operations.*"[19] One interviewee observed that *"it came with assessments that Kyiv would fall within 72 hours, which also slowed the NATO response because nobody thought Ukraine had a chance.*"[20] This still prompted NATO member states to begin sharing intelligence more systematically. As one former NATO official noted:

> "*Intelligence sharing among key NATO allies—including the US, UK, Nordics, and Poland—greatly enhanced the alliance's situational awareness and ability to assess the impending threat.*"[21]

Still, the same interviewee highlighted that: "*Some NATO allies remained unconvinced of the invasion risk, in part due to Ukraine's own downplaying of intelligence warnings.*"[22]

These inconsistencies in threat perception across the alliance inhibited the preparation of more forceful responses politically. Paraphrasing a high-ranking NATO military official, NATO intelligence recognised the invasion threat, but there was no consensus among allies.[23] The official also argued that even with US efforts, led by then US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, which provided crucial evidence of Russia's military buildup, the threat assessment was not universally accepted among allies.[24] As a result, NATO's collective response was constrained.

The different threat perceptions within NATO were not just the result of how intelligence was interpreted, but were rooted in deeper historical experiences, geographical proximity to Russia, and long-standing strategic assumptions. Eastern European states, shaped by past Soviet control and their closeness to Russia, were quicker to accept the invasion threat. In contrast, Western European states, having invested both diplomatically and economically in their relations with Russia, were slower to shift their thinking. Doing so meant questioning sometimes decades of official policies and adjusting the worldviews that shaped them. As one senior NATO official described it:

> "*Depending on how close you sit to Russia and what's your relationship to Russia histor-ically, breaking that, reconciling that dichotomy became easier. So, in other words, I think for East-Central, for, Latvia or Poland, for them it wasn't a big mental switch and they said, okay, we're going to believe the evidence. For countries that had, like Germany or France as well, invested so much in the political process, Minsk, etc, etc, and also the peace dividend, we all know what the facts are, trusting, believing the facts means essentially admitting that a lot of the strategic assumptions were fundamentally wrong, so that took longer.*"[25]

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[18]   Interview 2

[19]   Interview 3

[20]   Interview 44

[21]   Interview 3

[22]   Interview 3

[23]   Interview 17

[24]   Interview 17

[25]   Interview 2

In an effort to create shared situational awareness and understanding among thirty alliance members, a high-ranking NATO military official recalled that "*The NATO Joint Intelligence Center, established in November 2021, held weekly briefings, tracking Russia's military buildup and preparations.*"[26] This initiative represented a concerted effort to align intelligence efforts and improve the alliance's overall situational awareness, mitigating some of the earlier inconsistencies in threat assessments. Paraphrasing a high-ranking NATO military official, although intelligence reports on logistics, troop movements, and supplies indicated an imminent attack, some allies still disputed Putin's intent.[27]

In discussing the sources of disputation, one senior NATO official recounted:

> "*These are the numbers. and then some of the questions inevitably would be: 'But why would Putin do this? This is not in his interest'. And the intelligence response is: 'This is what we see.*"[28]

Eventually, as evidence mounted, the mood within the Alliance began to shift. The official continued:

> "*So I would say [...] in the month, you mentioned mid-January, [...] maybe even earlier, by then, there was the assumption that this one was going to [happen], that there were preparations, capabilities, and intent.*"[29]

Political Caution alongside Military Preparation

The preparation of the deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic area was the core focus at NATO HQ, alongside the coordination of a unified diplomatic response to Russia. Discussions held within the Normandy format (consisting of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine) in the context of the Minsk 2 Agreement made little progress, while the NATO-Russia Council meeting on 12 January 2022 also resulted in deadlock.[30] In the words of a senior NATO official, diplomacy proved challenging, as "*part of that did prey on some of our vulnerabilities, including low-risk aversion. Russia knows we want peace, which is good. But if you want, it's like you enter a negotiation and your opponent knows that you will do anything to make this stop. It's not a great place to start.*"[31] Russia identified NATO's preference for peaceful resolutions as a vulnerability, leveraging this inclination in negotiations to delay decisive action. Consequently, NATO shifted its focus toward deterring Russia from contemplating an attack on Allied territory. As one former high-ranking NATO military official put it:

> "*All of the key allies, the US and others, their general strategy was to deter through explaining consequences to Russia and that they were aware of the preparation and the potential for invasion [...]. And then to assure the allies don't feel threatened by potential*

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[26] Interview 26

[27] Interview 17

[28] Interview 2

[29] Interview 2

[30] 'NATO Open to More Russia Talks amid Ukraine Tensions', Deutsche Welle (DW), 12 January 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/nato-open-to-more-talks-with-russia-amid-ukraine-tensions/a-60395247.

[31] Interview 2

aggression, you know, the neighbouring allies. And then, of course, demonstrate that NATO was going to defend itself from potential Russian aggression through [...] increas[ing] the strategic awareness and the ability to respond in case of [...] escalation of the threat to NATO."[32]

Yet, despite the fact that NATO was and is a political-military organisation, deterrence efforts focused on economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation as the primary instruments of coercion. This was done to avoid direct military confrontation with Russia while exerting pressure through non-military means. As one senior official explained "*Military deterrence was avoided to prevent diluting Article 5 commitments.*"[33] This cautious approach grew from key members' concern of further antagonising Russia and escalating the situation, combined with doubts within the alliance about Russia's intention to invade discussed earlier As related by a former high-ranking NATO military official, the alliance's approach was to signal severe consequences to Russia: "*NATO began, then, I think, the US very clearly, to explain the consequences. If Russia invades, these are the consequences you can expect. And it would have all the consequences.*"[34] As it became increasingly clear that Russia was stalling, diplomatic relations soured further. As related by a senior NATO official, when the NATO-Russian Council convened "*it was in an unusual way, without previous agreement with Russia [...] Usually we would talk with Russia, agree on a time and date and schedule together the Council.*" [35] The same official argued that this was to no avail: "*Think about the demands made by Russia to NATO. [...] That to me does not suggest a genuine Putin's effort to negotiate.*"[36] Paraphrasing a high-ranking NATO military official, during the meeting on 12 January, there were no concessions from NATO, rejecting Russia's demand to roll back to pre-1997 alliance borders.[37] The meeting would turn out to be the last meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, and was taken as a signal by NATO's military leadership to start planning for the moment when things would escalate further, once they would get the official green light from the political leadership.

> Military deterrence was avoided to prevent diluting Article 5 commitments.

From Recognition to Rapid Response

While NATO prioritised intelligence collection and efforts on the diplomatic front, military preparations for the defence and deterrence of the Euro-Atlantic area also started taking shape. In response to Russia's buildup, paraphrasing a former high-ranking NATO military official, NATO reassured eastern allies by increasing defence readiness and strategic awareness.[38] It did so by implementing specific measures to reinforce deterrence such as aircraft patrols, signalling NATO's military preparedness and commitment to defending its member states, according to another senior NATO official.[39] These efforts were part of the prearranged Readiness Actions Plan (RAP) playbook formulated at the Wales summit in 2014. The RAP aimed to strengthen NATO's deterrence position by permanently placing a small but capable combat force on the eastern border. These measures could be implemented and expanded whenever the need or political will for it emerged. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine ultimately did both, but real urgency only developed one month before the invasion, as

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32   Interview 3
33   Interview 12
34   Interview 3
35   Interview 12
36   Interview 12
37   Interview 17
38   Interview 3
39   Interview 12

a senior NATO official recalled: "*NATO's crisis coordination meetings intensified in mid-January 2022, reflecting a growing sense of urgency.*"[40] While NATO's military leadership (Supreme Allied Commander Europe) was aware of the threat at this time, political consensus to take decisive action was lacking according to a high-ranking NATO military official.[41] Despite internal divisions, the official noted that the military side of NATO began revisiting its crisis response manuals. Although this amounted to little more than a few staff members reopening pre-written handbooks and reacquainting themselves with established procedures. While this did not reflect full operational readiness, it was a procedural step toward ensuring that planning and response options would be available, pending any political decision to activate them. A month later NATO held an alliance-wide exercise (Sea Breeze) in the Black Sea.[42] This exercise, as well as the wider NATO presence in the region, was meant to underscore the alliance's commitment to countering Russian assertiveness and demonstrated its willingness to challenge Moscow's growing dominance in the Black Sea region.

When the invasion ultimately materialised, NATO did respond gradually as it was quick to identify and call-out Russia's aggression, as highlighted by a high-ranking NATO military official: "*The North Atlantic Council (NAC) quickly identified Russia's actions as a full-scale invasion, unlike the 2014 Crimea annexation, which had been more ambiguous.*"[43] Because of this political decision, NATO approved its readiness plans within eight hours after the invasion, according to a high-ranking NATO military official, highlighting the effectiveness of its crisis response mechanisms.[44] Another senior NATO official notes, however, that this *"did not lead to a change in authorities for the military or towards the NATO reinforcement of troops. In the first hours/days/weeks NATO did little material in response to the invasion.*"[45] Still, the swift recognition of the threat at hand underscored NATO's lessons learned from past conflicts and reinforced its military ability to respond quickly once the political decision had been reached.

Conclusion

In the context of the crisis, NATO's number one priority was to defend NATO territory and prevent escalation to direct war with Russia. NATO consistently reaffirmed the importance of Article 5, while making also made clear that collective defence did not extend to Ukraine. Instead, individual member states were free to support Ukraine independently, as NATO served as a forum to discuss their policies. NATO HQ was slower in its preparation, being dependent on member states both for information and for authorisation to implement planning. However, NATO military HQ was able to get back on track in the initial months of the conflict. For more than eight years, military planners had been preparing for the potential outbreak of war, allowing NATO states to swiftly implement pre-established contingency plans once the situation escalated. These preparations included scrambling jets for patrols along NATO's eastern borders and mobilising rapid response forces. These measures were strictly focused on defending NATO territory and were consistent with NATO's stance from the outset, ensuring that while the Alliance reinforced its own security, it would not become directly involved in the conflict.

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40   Interview 13

41   Interview 17

42   NATO, 'NATO Ships Exercise in the Black Sea', NATO, accessed 14 February 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185879.htm.

43   Interview 26

44   Interview 17

45   Interview 44

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