

NATO, Russia, and the Challenge of Hybrid Warfare

2017 International Student Summit Background Briefing Paper¹

Introduction

For more than four decades, the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**² and **Soviet Union** were locked in the **Cold War**, an era defined by **proxy wars**, military buildups, and diplomatic standoffs between countries divided into **Eastern** and **Western Blocs**. The end of the Cold War in 1991 ushered in a brief period of peaceful dialogue and cooperation between NATO and Russia, but now the future of this post-Cold War stability may be in jeopardy.



Source: European Press Agency, Oliver Hoslet

With Russia's seizure of the Ukrainian peninsula of **Crimea** in 2014 and its military support for revolts in eastern Ukraine, Western governments have become increasingly concerned by Moscow's continued pattern of aggressive military activities and **rhetoric**. Beyond Ukraine, Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war, interference in the democratic processes in Western Europe and the United States, and increased military deployments to Russian territory adjacent to the **Baltic States** and Poland, have also served to increase tensions among leaders in the West. Meanwhile, Russia's use of **hybrid warfare** a type of conflict widely understood to blend conventional/unconventional combat, disinformation campaigns, and **cyber warfare**, has changed the perception of security threats around the world, while reminding world leaders of Russia's regional and global ambitions.

In this charged atmosphere, relations have deteriorated with lasting damage to trade, financial ties, energy cooperation, and diplomatic interaction between Russia and the West. Mistrust and growing concern on both sides have led members of the NATO alliance to reaffirm their vows of **collective defense** and treat the security commitments made to its east European members with greater seriousness.

What is NATO?

A cornerstone of **transatlantic security**, NATO is an alliance of 29 countries from Europe and North America. Founded in 1949 to counter a **Soviet** military threat, the alliance provides a unique link between these two continents, enabling them to consult and cooperate in the field of defense and security, and to collectively manage disruptive and unexpected events that threaten to harm member countries.

Politically, NATO promotes **democratic values** and allows members to consult and cooperate on defense and security-related issues to solve problems, build trust and, in the long run, prevent conflict. If

¹ This briefing paper was excerpted and adapted from the Council on Foreign Relations' Topic Backgrounder [The North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#), (May 2017).

² NATO is commonly referred to as "the alliance."

diplomatic efforts fail, NATO has the military power to undertake operations to address a full spectrum of crises – before, during and after conflicts. These are carried out under the collective defense clause of NATO's founding treaty, *Article V of the Washington Treaty* — that an armed attack against one or more member countries in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all — or under United Nations permission, alone or in cooperation with other countries and international organizations.

Today, NATO operations have expanded from a narrowly defined Soviet threat to combatting al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as new threats to security such as cyberattacks, and global threats such as terrorism and piracy that affect the alliance and its global network of partners.

NATO's Post-Cold War Turn

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, Western leaders intensely debated the future direction of NATO. President Bill Clinton's administration favored expanding the alliance to both extend its security oversight into **Central and Eastern Europe** and strengthen democratic gains in the former Eastern or Soviet Bloc. On the other hand, some U.S. officials wished to peel back U.S. commitments in Europe with the fading Soviet threat.

European members were also split on the issue. London feared NATO's expansion would weaken the alliance, while Paris believed it would give NATO too much influence. Many in France hoped to integrate former Soviet states via European institutions, such as the **European Union (EU)**. Among Europeans, there was also concern about alienating Russia.

In his first trip to Europe as president, in January 1994, President Clinton announced that NATO enlargement was “no longer a question of whether but when and how.” Just days before, alliance leaders approved the launch of the **Partnership for Peace**, a program designed to strengthen ties with Central and Eastern European countries, including many former Soviet republics like Georgia, Russia, and Ukraine.

In 1999, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, all former Eastern Bloc countries, joined the organization. Another expansion came with the accession of seven Central and Eastern European countries in 2004: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Albania and Croatia joined in April 2009. The most recent member country to be added to NATO is Montenegro in June 2017.



Territory of the Eastern Bloc 1949 to 1989 (in red) on modern political borders of Europe. Source: The Economist

Beyond Collective Defense

Many defense planners also felt that a post–Cold War vision for NATO needed to look beyond *Article V* and focus on confronting instability outside its membership. “The common denominator of all the new security problems in Europe is that they all lie beyond NATO’s current borders,” said U.S. Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) in a 1993 speech.

NATO invoked its collective defense provision (Article V) for the first time following the September 11 attacks on the United States.

The breakup of **Yugoslavia** in the early 1990s and the onset of ethnic conflict tested the alliance on this point almost immediately. What began as a mission to impose a United Nations authorized **no-fly zone** over the former Yugoslav Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina evolved into a NATO bombing campaign on **Bosnian Serb** forces that many military analysts say was essential to ending the conflict.

NATO Operations

In 2017, NATO currently pursues several missions: security assistance in Afghanistan; peacekeeping in **Kosovo**; maritime security patrols in the Mediterranean; support for African Union (AU) forces in Somalia; and patrolling the skies over Eastern Europe.

Headquartered in Brussels, Belgium, NATO is a **consensus-based** alliance, where decisions must reflect the membership’s collective will (all or nothing). However, individual states or subgroups of allies (countries) may initiate action outside NATO sponsorship. For instance, France, the UK, and the United States began policing a UN-sanctioned no-fly zone in Libya in early 2011 and within days transferred command of the operation to NATO. Member countries are not required to participate in every NATO operation. For instance, Germany and Poland declined to contribute directly to the campaign in Libya.

NATO’s **Secretary-General** (currently Norway’s Jens Stoltenberg) serves a four-year term as chief administrator and international diplomat. The **North Atlantic Council** is the alliance’s principal political body, composed of high-level delegates from each member country.

NATO Funding: Sharing the Burden

The primary financial contribution made by member countries is the cost of deploying their respective armed forces for NATO-led operations. These expenses are not part of the formal NATO budget, which funds alliance infrastructure including civilian and military headquarters. In 2015, NATO members collectively spent more than \$890 billion on defense. The United States accounted for more than 70 percent of this, up from about half during the Cold War.

NATO members have committed to spending 2 percent of their annual GDP on defense, but by 2016 just five out of the twenty-eight members met this threshold—the United States (3.6%), Greece (2.4%), the United Kingdom (2.2%), Estonia (2.2%), and Poland (2%). U.S. officials have regularly criticized European members for cutting their defense budgets, but the Trump administration has taken a more assertive approach, suggesting the United States may reexamine its treaty obligations if the status quo persists. “If your nations do not want to see America moderate its commitment to this alliance, each of your capitals needs to show support for our common defense,” U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis told counterparts in Brussels in February 2016.

NATO-Russian Relations

Moscow has viewed NATO's post-Cold War expansion into Central and Eastern Europe with great concern. Many current and former Russian leaders believe the alliance's advance into the **former Soviet sphere** are a betrayal of alleged guarantees to not expand eastward after **Germany's reunification** in 1990—although some U.S. officials involved in these discussions dispute this pledge.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov speaks during a press conference after a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council in 2013.

Most Western leaders knew the risks of enlargement. “If there is a long-term danger in keeping NATO as it is, there is immediate danger in changing it too rapidly. Swift expansion of NATO eastward could make a **neo-imperialist** Russia a self-fulfilling prophecy,” wrote U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher in *The Washington Post* in January 1994.

Over the years, NATO and Russia took significant steps toward reconciliation, particularly with their signing of the 1997 *Founding Act*, which established an official forum for bilateral discussions between these two parties. But a persistent lack of trust has plagued relations.

NATO's Bucharest Summit in the spring of 2008 deepened suspicions. While the alliance delayed Membership Action Plans (assistance and practical support tailored to the individual needs of countries wishing to join NATO) for Ukraine and Georgia, it vowed to support their full membership down the road, despite repeated warnings from Moscow of political and military consequences. Russia's invasion of Georgia that summer was a clear signal of Moscow's intentions to protect what it sees as its sphere of influence, experts say.

Russia's takeover of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine in 2014 have poisoned relations with NATO for the foreseeable future. “We clearly face the gravest threat to European security since the end of the Cold War,” said NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen (2009-2014) after Russia's intervention in March 2014. Weeks later, NATO suspended all civilian and military cooperation with Moscow.

In an address honoring the annexation of Crimea, President Vladimir Putin expounded Russia's deep-seated grievances with NATO. “They have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders,” he told Russia's parliament. “In short, we have every reason to assume that the infamous [Western] **policy of containment**, led in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, continues today.”

In congressional testimony in March 2017, the NATO Supreme Allied Commander said “a resurgent Russia has turned from partner to antagonist,” and has remained one of the top security challenges in Europe. Moscow continued to flex its military muscles in the region, he said, sending its sole aircraft carrier on its first-ever combat deployment, moving nuclear-capable missiles into **Kaliningrad**, and conducting significant operations in Ukraine and Syria. Meanwhile, it is widely assumed that Moscow pursued destructive activities short of war, including misinformation and hacking campaigns against the United

States and European member countries, he said. The **Kremlin** has denied allegations it attempted to interfere in U.S. and European elections.

Ahead of a NATO summit in May 2017, Montenegro was expected to become the twenty-ninth member of the alliance, the first since Albania and Croatia joined in 2009. In a statement on the former Yugoslav republic's accession, the White House noted to other NATO hopefuls that, "the door to membership in the Euro-Atlantic community of nations remains open and that countries in the **Western Balkans** are free



to choose their own future and select their own partners without outside interference or intimidation." The Kremlin has warned that NATO's eastward expansion "can only result in retaliatory actions."

Another constant point of contention has been NATO's **ballistic missile defense shield**, which is being deployed across Europe in several phases. The United States, which developed

the technology, has said the system is only designed to guard against limited missile attacks, particularly from Iran. However, Moscow says the technology could be updated and provide a strategic advantage to the West.

From Tweets to Tanks: The Threat of Hybrid Warfare³

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has described hybrid warfare as a "mixture of military and non-military means of aggression, a combination of covert and overt operations and measures" that includes "everything from propaganda, from disinformation to actually the use of irregular forces, from tweets to tanks. Sometimes soldiers in uniform, sometimes out of uniform, sometimes in cyberspace and sometimes things that happen at our (NATO's) border."⁴

The roots of Russia's hybrid methods go back to the Soviet era, although the label is more recent. "Active measures," as hybrid methods were called during the Cold War – such as spreading disinformation and setting up fake organizations in the West – was an integral part of Soviet foreign policy. Today, some of Russia's tactics are surprisingly similar but the current information environment and rise of social media makes their use both more efficient and complex.

Today, countering hybrid threats is a priority for NATO, as they blur the line between war and peace - combining military aggression with political, diplomatic, economic, cyber, and disinformation measures. NATO's counter-hybrid strategy includes strengthened coordination with the EU, and also involves a new Intelligence Division, more training and exercises, and public diplomacy to counter propaganda with facts.

³ This section was excerpted and adapted from *NATO Review's* [Hybrid Influence – Lessons from Finland](#), (June 2017).

⁴ "[EU-NATO Hybrid Threat Center Launched in Finland](#)." *Deutsche Welle (DW)*. October 3, 2017.

Additionally, Western governments have revised their operational thinking about how to deal with a crisis and counter a hybrid threat. In Europe and the United States, military planners and senior officials heard their Ukrainian counterparts express regret about the slowness of their response to the appearance of “**little green men**” in Crimea—and their government’s failure to suppress this mini-invasion before it gained mass support and Putin’s public embrace. The little green men were in fact Russian military operatives, but they wore uniforms without insignias (state flag, coat of arms, or emblem), making it difficult to confirm their identity and giving Russia a way, however unbelievable, to deny direct involvement.

A Re-energized Alliance

Fears of further Russian aggression have prompted NATO leaders to reinforce defenses on its eastern borders. Since its Wales Summit in 2014, NATO has ramped up military exercises and opened new command centers in eight member countries: Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. The command centers, which are modestly staffed, are intended to support a new rapid reaction force of about twenty thousand, including five thousand ground troops.

Meanwhile, NATO members, particularly Denmark, Germany, the UK, and the United States have increased air patrols over Poland and the Baltics. In 2015, NATO jets scrambled to intercept Russian warplanes violating allied airspace some four hundred times. In 2016 this number doubled, alliance officials said.

NATO members have also increased direct security collaboration with Ukraine, an alliance partner since 1994. But as a nonmember, Ukraine remains outside of NATO's defense perimeter, and there are clear limits on how far it can be brought into institutional structures. The UK and the United States sent modest detachments of troops to train Ukrainian personnel in 2015, but the United States has refrained from providing Kiev (Ukraine) with lethal weapons to help counter the Russia-backed insurgency out of fear this would escalate the conflict.

In the longer term, some defense analysts believe the alliance should consider advancing membership to Finland and Sweden, two Partnership for Peace countries with a history of avoiding military alignment. Both countries have welcomed greater military cooperation with NATO following Russia’s intervention in Ukraine. (**Nordic** peers Denmark, Iceland, and Norway are charter NATO members.)

Simulation Goals for the 2017 International Student Summit

The 2017 International Student Summit will simulate an emergency NATO summit aiming to address a developing crisis in the Baltic region—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—similar to Russian actions in Ukraine. This meeting will take place against a backdrop of increased Russian military concentrations on NATO’s border, Russian support to **separatist groups** in the form of training and weapons, state-sponsored cyberattacks, and “weaponization” of information.

Representing a NATO member or partner country, student delegates will need to consider a number of variables as they meet to find a collective strategy and potential response, including how to balance diplomatic and military action, whether to impose greater economic sanctions, work efficiently with NATO allies and partners, and send Moscow a strong signal without provoking Russian aggression. The goal of the summit is to find a resolution that will defuse the crisis and restore cooperation and stability to the relationship between NATO and Russia.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

General Questions

1. What is the purpose of NATO? How has the alliance's purpose and focus changed since its founding in 1949?

2. What methods does NATO currently use to address issues and problems? What principle(s) is/are important to the success of the alliance?

3. What is NATO's collective defense clause (Article V) of the alliance's founding treaty?

5. How are decisions made at NATO? What obligation is required for a member's annual spending on defense?

6. What were some of the justifications for keeping NATO after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

7. How has Russia viewed NATO's post-Cold War enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe? What are some of the reasons (historical and strategic) behind Moscow's present concerns with the alliance?

8. How have NATO member countries and partners responded to recent Russian aggression and rhetoric?

Questions from the Perspective of Your Assigned Country

1. What is your member country's position on Russia's actions in Ukraine? What actions (or inactions) has your member country taken toward Russia in light of these actions?

2. What is the state of relations between your member country and Russia?

3. Does your member country benefit economically from trade with Russia? If so, how important is this relationship and how would economic sanctions impact your economy?

5. Has your member country been impacted by Russian propaganda efforts? If so, how has this impacted popular discourse and mainstream politics or elections in your member country?

6. Does your member country see its relationship with NATO in a favorable or unfavorable light?

7. What assets could your member country lend to help resolve this developing crisis? These assets should include a mixture of diplomatic initiatives, military and economic measures, public messaging, and political support.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- **Ballistic Missile Defense Shield**: A type of defense system intended to intercept and shield an entire country against incoming missiles.
- **Baltic States**: Northeastern region of Europe containing the countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. All three countries were Soviet Republics during the Cold War.
- **Bosnian Serb**: A Slavic ethnic group that inhabits the nation state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and shares many cultural traits with the rest of the peoples of Southeast Europe.
- **Central Europe**: An area between Eastern and Western Europe, generally accepted as comprising Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland.
- **Cold War**: The period of hostility and tension between the Soviet bloc and the Western powers that followed World War II until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.
- **Collective Defense**: The NATO principle enshrined in *Article V of the Washington Treaty* that states that an attack against one NATO ally is considered as an attack against all allies.
- **Consensus-based**: Committed to finding solutions that all members of a group actively support.
- **Crimea**: A peninsula between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, which was an autonomous republic of independent Ukraine (1991–2014) and is now disputed between Ukraine and Russia.
- **Cyber Warfare**: A type of warfare that involves the actions by a nation-state to attack and attempt to damage another nation's computers or information networks.
- **Democratic Values**: Chief principles that underpin democracy, which include legal equality, political freedom, and rule of law.
- **Eastern Bloc (Soviet Sphere)**: The name applied to the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, including Yugoslavia and Albania, as well as the countries of the Warsaw Pact.
- **Eastern Europe**: An area of Europe that includes the countries of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine.
- **European Union (EU)**: A political and economic union of 28 member states that are located primarily in Europe.
- **German Reunification**: The process in 1990 in which the communist German Democratic Republic (East Germany) became part of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) to form the reunited nation of Germany.
- **Hybrid Warfare**: A military strategy that blends conventional warfare, irregular warfare, the spread of disinformation (fake news) and cyber warfare, where the aggressor intends to avoid credit or payback.
- **Kaliningrad**: Russian territory between Poland and Lithuania on the Baltic Sea.
- **Kosovo**: A disputed territory and partially recognized state in Southeastern Europe that declared independence from Serbia in February 2008.
- **Kremlin**: A fortress in central Moscow that contains the central offices of the government of Russia and, term used figuratively to mean the Russian government.
- **Little Green Men**: A term that refers to masked soldiers in unmarked green army uniforms and carrying military weapons and equipment that appeared during the Ukrainian crisis of 2014.
- **Neo-Imperialist**: Modern action that involves a country extending its power by the acquisition of territories.

- **No-fly Zone**: A territory or an area over which aircraft are not permitted to fly, usually set up in a military context.
- **Nordic**: Region in Northern Europe and the North Atlantic that includes the countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.
- **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**: A security alliance of 29 countries from Europe and North America.
- **Partnership for Peace**: A NATO program aimed at creating trust between NATO and 21 other states in Europe and the former Soviet Union, including Russia, Finland, and Sweden.
- **Policy of Containment**: A foreign policy doctrine operating on the principle that communist governments will eventually fall apart as long as they are prevented from expanding their influence.
- **Proxy War**: A war instigated by a major power that does not itself become involved.
- **Rhetoric**: Language or writing designed to have a persuasive or impressive effect on its audience.
- **Separatist Groups**: A group of people who want to be independent of a national, religious, or other group to which they belong.
- **Soviet Sphere**: See Eastern Bloc.
- **Soviet Union (USSR)**: A former state that consisted of a federation of 14 communist republics in Eastern Europe and Northern Asia, which included Russia and Ukraine (1917-1991).
- **Soviet**: Of or concerning the former Soviet Union.
- **Transatlantic Security**: Military cooperation concerning countries on both sides of the Atlantic.
- **Western Balkans**: A region in Southeastern Europe that includes the countries of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania.
- **Western Bloc**: A group of countries during the Cold War allied with the United States and NATO against the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.
- **Yugoslavia**: A former communist country on the Balkan Peninsula, made up of the now-independent nations of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia; it disintegrated in the 1990s.