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ENHANCING THE EASTERN FLANK OF THE NATO IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GROWING PERIL FROM THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

WZMOCNIENIE WSCHODNIEJ FLANKI NATO W KONTEKŚCIE ROSNĄCEGO ZAGROŻENIA ZE STRONY FEDERACJI ROSYJSKIEJ

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Abstract: Based on an analysis of the identified materials, a consideration was made of measures to strengthen the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in response to the growing threat from the East. With this circumstance in mind, the aim of this study is to identify and analyse the essence of strengthening the described part of NATO. The main research problem is an attempt to answer the question: what activities and actions the Alliance undertakes within the framework of increasing its presence in Eastern Europe. The article hypothesises that NATO is constantly conducting regular activity to prevent the outbreak of conflict between the Alliance countries and the Russian Federation. The research methodology was based on a critical analysis of the literature, as well as inference, synthesis, generalisation and comparison. The research confirmed the view that the primary purpose of the Pact is to deter a potential aggressor, clearly identified and defined. The adversary's awareness that the undertakings of several states are a clear and coherent message requires the importance of effort, and creating this in times of crisis further enhances this effort. This can be achieved with continuous planning and coordination of policies, capabilities and concepts.

Abstrakt: W oparciu o analizę zidentyfikowanych materiałów przeprowadzono rozważania dotyczące działań mających na celu wzmocnienie wschodniej flanki Paktu Północnoatlantyckiego w odpowiedzi na rosnące zagrożenie ze wschodu. Mając na względzie powyższą okoliczność celem niniejszego opracowania jest wskazanie i analiza istoty wzmocnienia opisywanej części NATO. Głównym problemem badawczym jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie: jakie aktywności i przedsięwzięcia podejmuje Sojusz w

ramach zwiększania swojej obecności w Europie Wschodniej? W artykule przyjęto hipotezę, iż NATO stale prowadzi regularne działania, aby zapobiec wybuchowi konfliktu między krajami Sojuszu, a Federacją Rosyjską. Metodyka badań oparta została o krytyczną analizę literatury przedmiotowej, a także wnioskowanie, syntezę, uogólnienie i porównanie. Badania potwierdziły opinię, że zasadniczym celem Paktu jest odstraszenie potencjalnego agresora, jasno wskazanego i określonego. Świadomość adwersarza, iż przedsięwzięcia podejmowane przez kilka państw są jasnym i spójnym komunikatem, wymaga znacznego wysiłku, zaś tworzenie tego w czasach kryzysu dodatkowo potęguje ten wysiłek. Możliwe jest to do osiągnięcia przy stałym planowaniu i koordynowaniu polityki, zdolności i koncepcji.

Słowa kluczowe: bezpieczeństwo, NATO, Federacja Rosyjska, obrona, zagrożenie.

Keywords: security, NATO, Russian Federation, defense, threat.

Introduction

The 75th Anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation summit was celebrated in Washington in July 2024, focused primarily on supporting Ukraine and strengthening NATO's eastern flank. The Alliance was established in 1949, in response to the Berlin Crisis (1948) and the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia. One of the primary objectives of the Alliance was to deter Soviet aggression. Currently, the country that directly threatens NATO is the Russian Federation. The Washington Summit 2024 confirmed that the Alliance was largely strongly united in opposing Russian aggression in Ukraine and hybrid war against the West. A sharp increase in defence spending, the development of new war plans or joint exercises were the basic tenets of the member states (Courtney, 2024).

The likelihood of the risk of conflict between Russia and the West weakening appears to be low in the future. This is a result of Russian assumptions that it is Western democratic systems that pose the fundamental threat to Russia. The persistence of imperialist ideologies underpins the expansion of its influence. Russia seeks to re-gain control and capture the former Soviet bloc states in Eastern Europe that joined the Alliance after the end of the Cold War. As a result of the atrocities committed in Ukraine, the Alliance has undergone a kind of change in the concept of deterrence as well as defence. The idea of exchanging space for time has been replaced by deterrence and forward defence, which should involve, among other things, the implementation of the permanent stationing of significant NATO forces within the eastern flank. Such a move is also intended to increase the level of credibility and allied claims for the defence of a territory (Niec, Jensen, 2024).

In order for all actions to have the right dimension and importance, the Alliance should demonstrate uniformity and consistency of action, so as to convince a potential aggressor that each member state will be protected to the same extent as any other if necessary. Furthermore, that in the framework of a conflict, this sharing of responsibilities, tasks will be shared within the scope of the member states.

One of the crucial positions from the methodological point of view of the present study is, among others, the publication by J. Apanowicz (Apanowicz, 2002).

In the framework of the own research undertaken, a procedure was developed according to which: the aim and object of the research were defined, the research problems were posed, a hypothesis was developed for the main problem and appropriate methods and nature of the research have been selected.

The subject of this study is the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's undertakings to strengthen the eastern part of the Alliance. The aim of own research was to identify and analyse the essence of strengthening the eastern part of this organisation. In turn, the research problem was contained in the following question: what activities and actions does the Alliance undertake within the framework of increasing its presence in Eastern Europe? Both inductive and deductive approaches were used in an attempt to answer the indicated question. For the research problem formulated in this way, a research hypothesis was put forward with the following content: NATO is constantly conducting regular activity to prevent the outbreak of conflict between the Alliance countries and the Russian Federation.

A so-called qualitative strategy was used to carry out the research, based on methods of analysis, inference, synthesis, generalisation and comparison.

Current state of knowledge

Conducting a search of the available literature revealed the need to supplement and attempt to systematise knowledge on the Alliance's eastern flank. Despite the existing studies treating Russian threats, hybrid warfare, attempts to rebuild Russian power or develop NATO capabilities, there is still a lack of items pointing to real-life examples. Hence, the above arguments indicate that the issues described are crucial and extremely interesting from a cognitive point of view.

The political aspect of the Alliance's activities in terms of increasing the intensity of exercises, deploying bases with equipment, and developing infrastructure is covered in one study, according to which the failure to strengthen the eastern flank could have disastrous consequences. In addition, a lack of defence and deterrence would translate into a greater threat to the Baltic states and at the same time expose the Alliance to a loss of its credibility element (Paszyn, 2015).

A division of sorts in the perception of the Russian threat is presented in an article by the Centre for Eastern Studies, which highlights the consensus of Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Czech Republic, Romania, while a more conciliatory approach towards the Russians is presented by Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia. Hungary remains an interesting player (although it ultimately subscribes to official NATO documents or EU sanctions), (OSW Team, 2023).

The issues of the Pact's eastern flank are also described by other authors. Securing the airspace as part of the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission, which has been taking place

since 2004, and its subsequent expansion to the Enhanced version in 2014 are elements of a response to the growing threat from the Russian Federation (Fiszer, Gruszczyński, 2022).

A study by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, which treats the intensification of activities following the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas and a full-scale war, is also useful. At the same time, it also points to some limitations in cooperation as a result of Hungary's Russia-friendly policy (Pieńkowski, Żornaczuk, 2024).

The issue of NATO-Russia relations is also addressed in the following study. The author draws attention to the practical strengthening of security guarantees, mainly with regard to the countries of NATO's eastern flank. He also stresses the importance of the U.S. military, which, prior to 2014 (Russia's annexation of Crimea), regularly reduced its force presence in Europe. It correctly assessed the provocative actions of the Russian Federation as testing the unity of the Alliance and readiness for collective defense. The constantly developing anti-NATO narrative, present both in Russia's strategic documents and its media, news coverage, should also be taken into account (Jureńczyk, 2019).

According to the aforementioned author, the Kremlin has misjudged the distribution of power in the international security system. Moreover, it overestimated both the military and political capabilities of the Russian Federation. It also misjudged that the Alliance was in crisis, while the Alliance showed unity and pursued a common security policy. NATO reacted together by recognizing the Russian adversary as a threat to the security of its members. Actions included: increasing defense and deterrence capabilities on the eastern flank, supporting Ukraine and suspending cooperative relations with Russia. The scale of this response can be debated (Jureńczyk, 2024).

The article "The Russia-Ukraine War, NATO's Eastern Flank, and Ukrainian Refugees in Central Europe" attempts to assess the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine from the perspective of NATO's Eastern Flank countries. The author stresses that it is a mistake to identify Russia as a threat only through the prism of the Ukrainian conflict-as an internal, local one. Moreover, he points out the possible far-reaching consequences for NATO in the context of Russia's neo-imperialist policy in Europe. The text emphasizes the importance of consistent action and an effective deterrence policy (Stępniewski, 2022).

Other authors have attempted to estimate the strategic and tactical environment in Central and Eastern Europe, with particular emphasis on the European Union and Belarus. Assessments and analyses of Russian and Belarusian actions to date confirm that hybrid wars are being waged by superpowers as a continuation of their policy of domination over weaker states. These actions are one of the key tools in achieving strategic goals. The article emphasizes the importance of hybrid warfare, the analysis of which should focus on: the creation and description of combat

scenarios along with threats, a review of the geopolitical conditions of regions and nations, how to prepare defense capabilities in military, hybrid and asymmetric actions (Sadowski, Wąsowska, Maj, Pietrek, 2023).

Another study discusses the security of NATO's eastern flank in the context of Russian full-scale aggression on Ukrainian territory. The author points out that the deployment of the Alliance's capabilities near the border with the Russian Federation, the accession of Finland and neutral Sweden increase the security of the region. Close cooperation between countries and having more US troops in Europe guarantees security (Kwiatkowski, 2023).

The 2024 Bucharest Nine report focuses on the B9 countries Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The study analyzes the strategic areas of security policy, cyber security, hybrid threats or defense capabilities. The study described aims to provide opportunities for the formulation of policy objectives, while indicating how the Alliance and the Eastern Flank can enhance resilience to threats (Czub, Filote, Havlicek, Havryluk, Kozłowski, Obremski, Risko, Zeold, 2024). While the report focuses on analyzing the security status of individual B9 countries, it lacks a summary and comparison of specific activities and undertakings to strengthen NATO's eastern flank. It would be crucial to identify similarities and divergences within each country, with a view to understanding common security assumptions and goals in the region.

To summarise the above content, the issues of expanding the importance of NATO's eastern flank have been addressed by various authors, although this has only been realised in selected dimensions. Both, the English as well as Polish literature within this issue is constantly growing.

Methodology of conducted research

This paper attempts to take an interdisciplinary approach to the topic indicated. The most recent data has been taken into account, together with an analysis of changes in the framework of considering the budget of NATO countries. The article presents the most up-to-date information at the time of analysis, and also includes in the study Finland and Sweden, which joined the alliance in 2023 and 2024 respectively.

This article makes a statement of certain generalisations about the security issues of the member states with a particular focus on the country's policies. generalisation can emerge inductively from the collection and subsequent analysis of data (Cresswell, 2009). In addition, an attempt was conducted to identify possible implications related to the purchase of equipment or new technologies and the impact of this process on developments in the indicated region. The efforts were carried out to

estimate the causes of the implementation of an increased policy of deterrence by some states, as well as by the Alliance, in the context of the threat from an adversary.

The study uses critical analysis of the literature to understand and compare the quality of existing sources, inference as a thought process resulting in logical summaries according to available premises, observations or data. Analysis involves dividing the whole into its component parts and considering each separately. As an example of synthesis, the process of identifying and combining different data, information or research results to obtain a complete picture of a phenomenon can be indicated. Synthesis is the combination of factors, parts, elements of a certain structure or organization, which have been extracted by analysis (Apanowicz, 2002). This article confirms the view that the Alliance's goal is to deter a potential aggressor, and that sustained, planned and continuously carried out undertakings send a consistent message. They can also have influence and significance in the area of shaping the international situation in the European region. Generalisation, on the other hand, as mentioned, manifests itself in the formulation of general statements according to the data obtained.

The purpose of using the comparative method, particularly regarding NATO's spending and budget changes, was to identify differences and similarities, making it possible to assess the degree of each country's commitment to common objectives and alliance commitments. An attempt was also provided to indicate factors and variables affecting the described financial situation. The fundamental problems of the comparison method are that there are many variables and a small number of cases (Lijphart, 1971).

A hypothesis is a conjecture, it is a probability of the existence or not of a given event, phenomenon, process or thing defined by place and time. It can be assumed that a hypothesis is a proposed answer, which is verified after research. Within the identified hypothesis, an analysis was made of the pact's activities and undertakings, aimed at identifying areas strengthened by the Alliance, as well as member states. Considerations also included reference to the Baltic Sea, and even countries that do not constitute the classic eastern flank, such as Norway and Turkey, but are of huge importance.

Research methods may be defined as a system of rules or a systematic way of proceeding, which is applied in order to solve a specific research problem, obtain answers to indicated research questions or confirm specific hypotheses. It is an iterative process by which data are collected and analysed. In some distinguished forms of research, both qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analysed (Creswell, 2009).

Concluding, the above discussion, the main research problem is an attempt to answer the question: what activities and actions does the Alliance undertake within the framework of increasing its presence in Eastern Europe. The article hypothesises

that NATO is constantly conducting regular activity to prevent the outbreak of conflict between the Alliance countries and the Russian Federation.

Reasons and premises for the need for NATO to grow in importance in the region

NATO's deterrence and defence posture in the region is mainly manifested by its military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance's territory. In recent years, circumstances have arisen for Alliance members to strengthen NATO's forward presence in the area.

Russia's aggressive policy causing instability in the region was a direct stimulus influencing the mobilisation of action in the eastern part of the Alliance. NATO's actions had to reflect the changing situation, hostile actions towards our neighbours and the wider transatlantic community could not be passed over in silence. Russia undoubtedly poses the greatest threat to harmony, stability and peace across the Euro-Atlantic area. Already in 2016, seeing growing instability in the region, the heads of state and government of the Alliance at the Warsaw Summit decided to establish a NATO forward presence in the north-east and south-east of the Alliance (NATO, 2024). This resulted in the 2017 deployment of four multinational battalion battle groups in Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, commanded by the US, UK, Germany and Canada respectively. These deployments were aimed at strengthening the region in its ability to respond more quickly when needed, but there was also a heightened awareness of how volatile times are coming, and that interoperability between alliance states must be practised and solidified so that it does not fail when needed for use.

The next turning point, to some extent, for the need to increase NATO's importance in the Europe was 2022 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. In this situation, Alliance members had to reorganise and reinforce their existing battle groups, and decisions were taken to establish further multinational battle groups in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia. This brought the total number of multinational battle groups to eight, consequently doubling the number of troops and significantly increasing NATO's forward presence along the Alliance's eastern flank. The new battlegroups are intended to perform deterrence functions, making visible the strength of its members' ties and their solidarity and ability to respond to any aggression. At the 2022 Madrid Summit, it was decided to increase the strength and scale of the multinational battle groups from battalion to brigade level, where necessary.

Understanding the growing international instability and the strong position of NATO, more countries are more willing to join the Alliance by strengthening

it with their forces and command structure, these countries in recent years being Finland and Sweden.

The outright illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the armed attack on Ukraine in 2022 changed the face of the sense of security in Europe, NATO had a duty in this situation to seek to strengthen and protect all its members. It sought to carry out this enhancement in a defensive, proportionate manner in line with international commitments. It should be noted at this point that the Russian authorities, at the time of the annexation of Crimea, unequivocally declared irrelevant the treaties that ended the Cold War, including the abrogation of the Budapest Memorandum, in which Russia pledged to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine (Herbert, 2022) also declared invalid the 1997 Russia-Ukraine international treaty called the Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation (Nechypor, 2018). Russia also violated the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 2019, closing 25 per cent of the Black Sea to commercial shipping on an ad hoc basis, this was in response to the legitimate *US-led Sea Breeze-19* exercises (Obe, Hurt, 2020). Over the past years, Russia has repeatedly engaged in provocative, reckless air and naval actions against Alliance airships and warships, disregarding many bilateral agreements.

Indicating the attitude of the Kremlin authorities, one cannot believe that further agreements or contracts will be enforced with the country, one must learn from experience and prepare for real action to defend and preserve the stability of the region. There is political dialogue within the NATO-Russia Council several times a year, some of these meetings are useful, but most agree, the impact of these discussions on the conduct and outlook of Russian leadership is negligible (Obe, Hurt, 2020). Looking at Russia's continued historical violations of the tracts, it is unrealistic to assume otherwise. However, diplomacy and dialogue with Russia should be maintained, the positions of the Alliance states must be made clear, and its strong unanimous opinion has a valid deterrence function.

The increase in Alliance forces in response to the destabilising situation in the region is intended to be a tangible demonstration that an attack on one NATO member means an attack on all. According to the wording of Art. 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, Mutual Assistance Clause, "The Parties agree that an armed attack on one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against all of them and therefore agree that if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in the exercise of its right of individual or collective self-defence, (....) will render assistance to the Party or Parties attacked by taking promptly, alone as well as in concert with 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" this provision constitutes a kind of foundation of the Alliance (North Atlantic Treaty,

1949). As a consequence, NATO politicians often use the formula of „defending every inch of NATO territory” (Riegert, 2022).

Joint exercises between soldiers and personnel of NATO member states not only provide an expression of solidarity between countries but also allow familiarisation with the terrain in a given country of the location of important facilities and supplies, which will have a key role in rapid response in the event of conflict.

At the next summit in Vilnius in 2023, Alliance members decided to endorse a new generation of regional defence plans aimed at improving the coherence of collective defence planning, the core of which is to be efficient co-operation in terms of forces, command and control between NATO countries (Gatowska, Gaca, 2023). This is to help ensure the fastest possible response to a threat in any geographical area.

Since 2022, the US has provided significant assistance to the Ukrainian army through millions of dollars in loans, the provision of military equipment, since the invasion of Crimea it is estimated that this assistance has amounted to over \$5.4 billion, which has had a not inconsiderable impact on the situation in the region (Hernik, 2022). The question arises as to how the image of Western Europe would currently be created without this US aid. The US government is aware that the sovereign Ukrainian state located between Poland and the Russian Federation is a kind of valuable buffer zone that separates Alliance members from the real threat of aggressive moves by Russia. American support activities on NATO's eastern flank, show indirect military assistance to Ukraine at the same time have a powerful deterrent force, consequently cooling Putin's territorial ambitions. The US approach to assisting allies in Central and Eastern Europe in the face of the Kremlin's increasing aggressive policies is a test of sorts for security and integrity in the region. The US is doing its part, while sending a clear signal to Moscow of its disagreement with unlawful territorial claims (Hernik, 2022).

It is important to remember that modern warfare, including hybrid warfare, cyber-attacks and disinformation do not always require crossing NATO borders. An example of Moscow's aggressive actions was Nord Stream 2 supplying Russian gas and oil to Europe, such destabilising scenarios, also need to be taken into account in the defence strategy of NATO members (Ciesnik, 2023).

Security elements in the Euro-Atlantic area continue to evolve following the emergence of new threats and challenges. NATO members strive to keep the security environment in the region stable, through appropriate planning and increased troop levels. The Alliance will fulfill its role when its actions are coherent, credible and proportionate to the threat. The response to any aggression must be in solidarity and immediate. Joint exercises and training give the Alliance's forces an incredible amount of experience in working together, with the desired effect of increased readiness and interoperability. In the main, the buildup of NATO forces in the east reflects Russia's aggressive pattern of actions towards its neighbours, so the response to such policies and unlawful actions must be swift and unequivocal.

NATO and the full scale Russian invasion of Ukraine

The watershed moment for the commitment of forces and resources within NATO structures was when Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The unjustified and unprovoked attack on a country that is an immediate neighbour of the Alliance disturbed the peace in Europe. NATO states condemned this brutal act of violence (Mazurek, Widzińska, 2023, p. 6). The Alliance's main objective in the face of this aggression was to take action to prevent the conflict from spreading, and to show cooperation and unity among the countries in the region. The single voice of NATO and the European Union in the face of the Russian attack, and a united stance were crucial to maintain stability in the region. Russia, by its action, caused a direct threat to the maintenance of the military and political security of the NATO countries.

By attacking Ukraine, the Russian military severed NATO-Russia relations, which were enshrined in the document „Basic Act on Bilateral Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation” (NATO, 1997) signed in 1997. This act was intended to reflect a commitment to building universal peace in the Euro-Atlantic region. Although the invaded Ukraine is not a member of the Alliance, but it cooperates with the Alliance in many areas and has sought to join the structures. NATO has strongly advocated the sovereignty and integrity of Ukraine within internationally accepted boundaries, „Ukraine participates in the Partnership for Peace programme and is also part of the NATO Response Force. It participates in many missions and takes part in the Alliance's military exercises” (Olchowski, 2020, p. 1).

The main task the Alliance countries have set themselves in the face of the Kremlin's aggressive policy is to prevent further escalation of the conflict, this is reflected in the unequivocal words of former Secretary General - Jens Stoltenberg „We are not part of this conflict. And we have a responsibility to ensure that it does not spread beyond Ukraine, because that would be even more destructive and dangerous. It could end up in a war in Europe, causing much more human suffering” (Słowejska, 2022). NATO has to constantly balance between wanting to help Ukraine non-armed through, among other things, systemic measures, equipment deliveries, and ensuring that it does not overstep its boundaries - a defensive Alliance. An example of this is the failure to close the skies over Ukraine for fear of an escalation of the war, „The training and equipment provided by NATO allies has made the Ukrainian army much stronger than in 2014 and able to push back the Russians in this way”, Stoltenberg said (Słowejska, 2022).

From the words of the NATO Secretary, it can be seen that the main idea of support for peace in the region is the method of deterrence through defence, the activation of rapid reaction forces, the increase in the number of troops, the strengthening of air defence are the aftermath of a rethinking of NATO's strategy in the

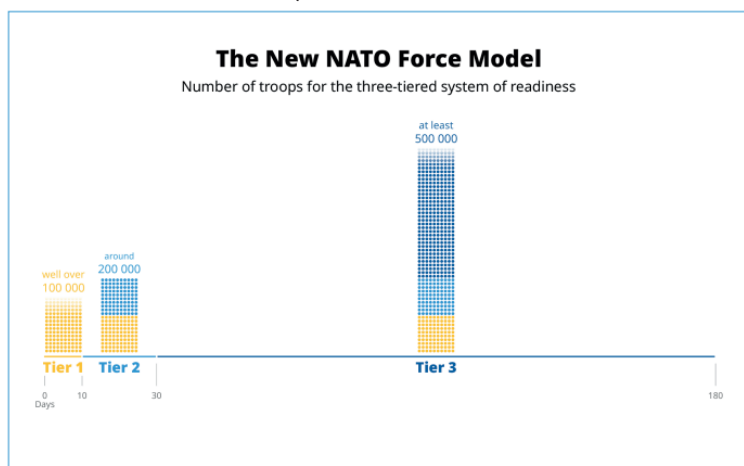
East. Maintaining the current peace and order in Europe required a strengthening of security based on greater cooperation and commitment between Alliance members.

Russia's attack on Ukraine prompted an immediate reaction not only from NATO, but also from the European Union, which, as an economic and political organisation, has a greater spectrum of possibilities in the direction of direct interference in Russia's economic system by, among other things, introducing economic sanctions. The decline in the Kremlin's importance as a partner in international relations is significant, but the North Atlantic Alliance must be on constant alert and respond uncompromisingly to any unlawful move by the Russian authorities. Both Nato organisations and the European Union are put in a challenging situation, on the one hand they have to uphold peace, on the other hand they cannot use their full capacity to avoid exacerbating the situation, using the full range of their sanctioning resources could lead to an escalation of tension in Russia, then the situation in the East could have many worse scenarios.

At this point, it is important to discuss more broadly about the Alliance's action in the context of deterrence against the illegal reaching of further sovereign states is, among other things, the new strategy agreed at the Madrid summit for the rapid reinforcement of NATO, guaranteeing a faster expansion of high-readiness forces where required (NATO, 2024). The agreement at the 2022 Summit also included the development of an integrated air and missile defence system, more equipment and weapons. The decisions reached at the 2022 NATO Summit point to a new significantly expanded force model, strengthened command and control over the region, and the modernisation of defence plans, all of which were implemented in the wake of Russia's unprecedented attack on Ukraine.

The new NATO force model envisages a three-tier readiness system. A Tier 1 force of up to around 100,000 soldiers should be ready within 10 days of an outbreak of a threat requiring a response, this force is mainly a so-called „on-site” force comprising both soldiers at home base and soldiers from other NATO member states on mission in the member state where the crisis has occurred (Deni, 2024). The next stage is a Tier 2 force with 200,000 troops to be on standby within 10 to 30 days, with the strength of already larger multinational formations such as a division, corps. The last largest is the Tier 3 force, where the number of troops can reach about 500,000 men and be ready for action in 30 to 180 days (Deni, 2024). The new NATO force reinforcement model is appropriately illustrated in the graphic below.

Figure 1. The New NATO Force Model (number of troops for the three-tiered system of readiness)



Source: Deni, J., 2024. The New NATO Force Model: ready for lunch? [online]. Available at: <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1937> [accessed: 12.11.2024]

Faced with the relocation, the return of war to the European continent, Alliance members were faced with a critical moment of testing their solidarity and the durability of the transatlantic ties between nations, where decisions were to determine international peace and security while maintaining the defensive nature of the organisation (NATO, 2024). NATO also expanded the scale of joint exercises through, among other things, appropriately fast-tracked exercises, inspection visits to be sure that forces deployed to a given location were properly equipped and trained and, most importantly, harmonised in their operations.

Member State's efforts as one common goal

Countries on NATO's eastern flank began gradually increasing spending as early as 2014, when Russia seized Crimea. Subsequent events, as mentioned prior to, culminating in a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have significantly reinforced this trend. More than two years after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, NATO's eastern flank, including its defence capabilities, has significantly expanded and changed. Alliance states have set their sights on modernising their armies, and unprecedented purchases of armaments and investments in the arms industry are being observed (Szpyrka, 2023). Poland is undoubtedly at the forefront of the Alliance countries when it comes to strengthening its armaments position, it is recognised as a very active state in the eastern flank, as one of the eight NATO countries Poland has

allocated at least 3 % of its GDP to defence (Szpyrka, 2023). Poland heads this list, as shown in the graphic below.

Figure 2. Defence expenditure of European states of the NATO - 2024



Source: Dudik, A., Hornak, D., Ojewski, N., Tammik, O., 2024. Eastern Europe's \$70 Billion Frenzy to Plug Defense Spending Gap [online]. Available at: <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/business/company-news/2024/10/09/defense-spending-frenzy-in-natos-east-jumps-to-70-billion> [accessed: 08.11.2024]

The following table shows defense spending real change 2014-2024 estimated. The Defense Ministry of each ally determines its current and estimated defense expenditures as agreed. Primarily the countries of NATO's eastern flank are included, although additionally the Czech Republic is included due to its location. Finland joined the Pact in 2023, while Sweden- 2024. Norway is not a classic eastern flank country, but it is of key importance in the context of the Arctic neighborhood with Russia. Arctic resources are becoming increasingly important, while Norway supports the Alliance in conducting monitoring and defense of the region. Turkey, by virtue of its geopolitical location and military strength, is also worth highlighting. Turkey is a key component of NATO's collective defense in the Black Sea region. Member states have significantly increased defense spending, often exceeding the 2% of GDP level set by the Alliance. Particularly noteworthy is the growing awareness of smaller Alliance countries, such as Lithuania and Latvia. As mentioned above, Poland leads the way in 2024. Hence, the cited studies indicate a significant increase in defense spending, which is an example of the implementation of the region's security policy.

Table1. Defence expenditure real change 2014-2024e of selected NATO Countries

COUN- TRY	2014	2024E	REAL CHANGE 2014- 2024E(%)	SHARE OF REAL GDP 2014 (%)	SHARE OF REAL GDP 2024E (%)
Bulgaria	643	1,395	117.09	1.31	2.18
Estonia	431	944	118.70	1.93	3.43
Lithuania	357	1,517	324.45	0.88	2.85
Latvia	246	1,022	316.36	0.94	3.15
Poland	8,557	26,839	213.66	1.88	4.12
Romania	2,324	5,490	136.25	1.35	2.25
Slovak Republic	832	2,118	154.56	0.98	2.00
Hungary	1,035	3,365	225.00	0.86	2.11
Czechia	1,683	4,567	171.30	0.94	2.10
Finland	3,387	6,170	82.19	1.45	2.41
Norway	5,865	9,653	64.59	1.54	2.20
Sweden	5,157	12,613	144.58	1.06	2.14
Türkiye	11,783	26,952	128.74	1.45	2.09

Source: Own study based on: NATO, 2024. Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024) (online). Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_226465.htm [accessed: 10.12.2024]

It is worth analyzing the purpose of Finland's accession to NATO. The country shares more than 1,300 kilometers of border with the Russian Federation, hence it is a key component of the somehow part of eastern flank. Its location in northern Europe definitely strengthens the Alliance's capabilities in the region. In addition, Finland's investment in advanced equipment strengthens interoperability with the Pact. Sweden, which, lying in the heart of the Baltic Sea region, is a control point for military movements in the Baltic, can also be identified as a geostrategic presence.

In the area of investment, the purchase of modern equipment, including HIMARS launchers, F-16 and F-35 fighters, Apache helicopters, should be pointed out. „After 20 years when basically nothing was being done, this is a leap from first or second generation equipment straight to even fifth generation. It's like going from a 386 processor to the most advanced multi-core solutions today”, described General Daniel Zmeko, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of Slovakia (Nowak, 2024).

Other initiatives that draw attention to security issues on the eastern flank are, for example, international conferences where participants jointly try to develop plans and ways to coordinate actions.

One of the issues discussed in Estonia was the strengthening of the Alliance's collective defence and deterrence posture to be able to hamper Russian aggression and defeat it on the battlefield if necessary. New capabilities and further investment in defence, combined with creative solutions, are needed. Attention is also drawn to the cooperation of the European Union, which is expected to play an important role in enhancing preparedness (Loorents, 2024). Organizing and holding conferences on collective security is of growing importance in terms of building a narrative about the Alliance's cohesion, integrity and desirability. Hence, the vital role of strategic communications in crafting the message: NATO will defend every inch of Allied territory.

The process of evolving NATO's defense and deterrence systems on its eastern flank reflects a combined response to immediate threats, mainly from Russia, and building resilience against future challenges. NATO has created multinational battle groups, increasing them from battalion to brigade level even. A key aspect is the purchase of modern military equipment, including the deployment of Patriot missile systems or radar systems. Noteworthy are ventures in strengthening maritime security, infrastructure development (e.g., training ground centers) or cyber defense. Intensification of joint exercises and training missions ensures smoother cooperation between allied forces.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the dynamically changing security environment requires significant modifications, improvements and a alter in the perception of certain dimensions of combat and approaches. The Alliance is taking coordinated action to prevent the conflict in Ukraine from expanding and thus moving further into Europe.

The Alliance member states on NATO's eastern flank must be the backbone and the benchmark in preparing for the most effective deterrence and defence. Such actions can, and indeed should, encourage other members to fulfill their obligations as members of the Alliance.

In the future, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation will strengthen its eastern flank through forward deterrence, coordination of advanced missile and air defence systems and the development of long-range strike capabilities and capacities (Niec, Jensen, 2024).

The identified allied actions aimed at boosting forces in the east include: increasing the number of NATO troops in the region; an increased amount of deployed equipment and weapons stocks; strengthening command and control; improving

regional defense plans with forces assigned to defend designated allies. NATO demonstrates its solidarity, determination and ability to act immediately by responding to any possible aggression. Security in the Euro-Atlantic area is constantly evolving, and new challenges and threats are constantly emerging. The Covenant aims to further assure its members that all available measures are defensive, proportionate and consistent with international obligations (NATO, 2024).

The adversary's awareness that projects undertaken by several countries send a clear and coherent message requires significant effort and creating it in times of crisis further intensifies this effort. This can be achieved with continuous planning and coordination of policies, capabilities and concepts. The question arises whether the current capabilities are sufficient, which may be the subject of further, in-depth analysis.

The author has taken on the challenge of pointing out the general directions of development and changes of the Alliance within the framework of NATO's eastern flank, while giving examples of clear actions to confirm the implemented security policy of the region.

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