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NATO’s new front:
deterrence moves eastward

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Going eastward has been a prominent feature of NATO’s post–Cold War history.¹ The promise claimed to have been given to the Soviet Union (USSR) during the German unification debates that NATO would move ‘not one inch’ to the east² has evolved into the proclamation that it will defend ‘every inch of Allied territory at all times’³ in response to Russia’s war against Ukraine. In a striking contrast with its Strategic Concept adopted in 2010, which aimed for a ‘true strategic partnership’ with Russia,⁴ the alliance’s 2022 Strategic Concept identifies the Russian Federation as ‘the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area’.⁵ For the critics, NATO’s extension into

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¹ The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined the North Atlantic Alliance in 1999; Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Slovenia followed in 2004; Albania and Croatia in 2009; Montenegro in 2017; and North Macedonia in 2020.


⁵ NATO, NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, para. 8, https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept, para. 8. The 2022 Strategic Concept defined the alliance’s three core tasks (deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security) and pledged to ‘significantly strengthen our deterrence and defence as the backbone...
east European space has also contributed to its current renaissance as a military alliance focused on deterring its historical bête noire, turned again into the modern-day challenger, and the consequently renewed emphasis on the collective defence of the allied territory. Sceptics warn of the resulting pressure on the United States to ‘defend several Eastern European states of questionable strategic value … and of minimal long-term importance’.6 Meanwhile, moving the North Atlantic Alliance’s deterrence and defence establishment eastward in the military sense of the word has really been a rather recent phenomenon, with the introduction of the compact allied battlegroups in Poland and the Baltic states in 2017, and the 2022 decision to buttress the alliance’s force posture in the eastern flank from an earlier ‘tripwire’ set-up to a more robust ‘forward defence’ stance.

Why has NATO taken so long in adapting its deterrence strategy to Russian revisionism and extending its military presence to the eastern allies? Different intra-alliance political interests, capability deficiencies generated by decades of enjoying post-Cold War peace dividends in western Europe, lingering debates over burden-sharing and doubts about the persistence of the US commitment to European defence, divergent assessments of the scope of the Russian threat and NATO’s protracted erring on giving Russia’s political intent the benefit of the doubt all speak to the puzzle. This article investigates the tardy substantiation of the allied deterrence and defence pledge in NATO’s north-eastern flank as an instance of the alliance’s grappling with the security dilemma sensibility of its historical opponent. Navigating concerns over allied entrapment by the more exposed member states vis-à-vis Russia and eastern allies’ abandonment fears has been magnified by the classical alliance security dilemma—a condition wherein the adversary’s uncertainty about the alliance’s intentions leads to the misinterpretation of defensive measures as offensive ones out of fear.7 Hence NATO’s difficult task, to walk the line between reassuring weaker allies without provoking Russia. Following Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, I understand security dilemma sensibility as an ‘actor’s intention and capacity to … show responsiveness towards … the potential complexity of the military intentions of others’.8 Such responsiveness accordingly refers ‘to the ability to understand the role that fear might play in their attitudes and behaviour, including … the role that one’s actions may play in provoking that fear’.9 The belated extension of NATO’s extended deterrence apparatus to its eastern fringes unfolds as a story of the alliance’s demonstration of a greater security dilemma sensibility towards Russia than to its own eastern member states’ security concerns, until Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its

NATO’s new front intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014. In the words of Wess Mitchell, a former US assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs: ‘From the outset, western Europe has been halfhearted about defending the territory of Europe’s eastern members with the same level of commitment with which they defended West Germany during the Cold War … NATO’s eastern allies have been denied the full benefits of membership, in the form of substantial conventional deployments, permanent basing, and participation in NATO’s nuclear-sharing program, that were granted to earlier members.’

NATO’s efforts to assuage certain allies’ fears of being dragged into an undesirable entanglement on the eastern front, while managing the historical enemy-cum-partner, partner-cum-threat, invite us to examine NATO’s post-Cold War deterrence edifice as an evolution from alliance to a looser security community—and back again. During the Cold War, deterrence was a core trait of NATO’s rationale and self-identity. NATO’s forward presence in the alliance’s eastern flank states has unfolded as an exercise in reinventing conventional deterrence when it was thought no longer to be needed in the European space. The decision taken at the 2016 Warsaw summit to set up NATO battlegroups in Poland and the Baltic states thus went against the grain of the strategic and military direction the alliance had taken in the post-Cold War era with the focus on out-of-area operations, including expeditionary counterterrorism and counter-insurgency tasks—all at the time when Russia continued to nurture its preponderance of conventional forces in eastern Europe and became increasingly vocal about its status concerns in international politics. Exploring NATO’s contemporary delineation and practice of deterrence on its eastern flank thus enables the tapping into of the modern meanings of allied deterrence and the related self-definition of the North Atlantic Alliance as a whole.

The ongoing debates over the optimal allied deterrence on NATO’s new eastern front illustrate the quandary of reconciling the ontological security needs of a defensive alliance—that is, the security of ‘the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice’, with the demands of delivering on its

10 As epitomized in German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier’s criticism of NATO’s ‘saber-rattling and war cries’ and calls for more dialogue with Russia ahead of NATO’s Warsaw Summit. Deutsche Welle, ‘Steinmeier criticizes NATO “saber-rattling”’, 18 June 2016, https://www.dw.com/en/steinmeier-criticizes-nato-saber-rattling/a-19339585. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 14 Nov. 2023).


13 For the conventional deterrence set-up of NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Poland and the Baltic states, the nuclear domain remains beyond the scope of this article.

physical security promise to all member states. The empirical differences between NATO’s declared forward defence approach and the continued de facto ‘tripwire’ allied posture on the eastern flank motivate a broader conceptual puzzle of this article: how is extended deterrence made to matter on the ground, and what political work does it do besides its standard strategic functions? Bringing the performance of allied deterrence into focus contributes an empirically rich understanding about this central international security practice and illuminates how NATO’s political identity is consolidated through reinventing its deterrence practice.

The following section of the article reviews the literature on extended deterrence in International Relations (IR), highlighting both the problem of credibility and the frequent compartmentalization of the effectively interwoven strategic and symbolic logics in this central international security practice. To address this problem, I develop a conceptual argument that allied deterrence draws its emotive power from ritual performances which seek to make the credibility of extended deterrence posture and messaging ‘stick’ with various audiences in the first place. Yet, deterrence remains militarily hollow without matching capabilities and speedy reinforcement options in the absence of a convincing regional force posture.

The next section will turn to the process of taking allied deterrence to NATO’s eastern flank in a practical sense, illustrating empirically via documentary and wider discourse analysis how NATO has played on the symbolic significance of the allied tripwire presence at the expense of committing sufficient capabilities to the Baltic region—until the systemic shock of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Stretching NATO’s deterrence edifice to the Baltic states and Poland has evoked important cognitive scripts of the Cold War. In the following empirical illustration, I summarize the meanings ascribed to NATO’s physical presence, training and exercising activities in the eastern flank by the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) contributing and receiving states, tapping into 36 semi-structured interviews conducted with allied diplomats, military representatives and analysts between 2020 and 2023. The conclusion recaps the theoretical and methodological implications of NATO’s eFP for the study of international relations.

The makings of extended deterrence

NATO’s extended deterrence has a nuclear and a conventional arm. Due to the obvious disproportionality of threatening a nuclear response in case of a limited

15 The interviewees were selected based on their insights into the evolution of NATO’s extended deterrence strategy and posture along the eastern flank in the conventional domain, prioritizing the traditionally under-represented voices from the eFP host nations. The sample includes permanent representatives and members of the international civilian and military staff at NATO, various officials, policy-makers and experts in the Baltic states and Poland. My interview guide focused on enquiring into the experts’ knowledge on setting up NATO’s eFP and their assessments of the credibility of NATO’s deterrence in the eastern flank. The majority of the interviews took place face to face in Tallinn and Brussels.

conventional attack, and the gradual strengthening of anti-nuclear norms\textsuperscript{17} with the effective tradition of nuclear non-use since Hiroshima and Nagasaki,\textsuperscript{18} the practical value of the allied nuclear deterrent remains tied to effective conventional and political deterrence posture in real time and place. What makes for an effective or credible (allied) deterrence has been at the heart of the voluminous sub-strand of security studies on the matter.\textsuperscript{19} In psychological terms, deterrence is a game of make-believe that is meant to work as a self-fulfilling prophecy: the credibility of a threat or allied commitment determines deterrence’s politically defined success. Conventionally, effective deterrence is tied to the combination of suitable and sufficient capabilities, effectively communicated commitment to carry out the threat, and the overall credibility of the deterring actor and its threat and/or commitment. Together, the ‘three “c”s’ should dissuade the opponent from undertaking an unwanted action. Scholars vary in laying their respective emphases on convincing capabilities to halt and push back a potential attacker or on the overall credibility of threats and commitments by the effective signalling of intentions and resolve to the challenger in combination with the military posture, typically via some type of force and equipment pre-positioning and military exercises.\textsuperscript{20}

Amid a range of takes on deterrence credibility, there is a general agreement that the problems inherent to the practice of deterrence—such as the perennial credibility concern over one’s threats, commitments and promises, along with the difficulty of reading other minds\textsuperscript{21}—are magnified in cases of extended and collective actor deterrence, both of which involve discouraging attacks on third parties.\textsuperscript{22} Convincing threats and promises are arguably more difficult to make vis-à-vis and on behalf of one’s allies and partners. The stakes of conveying clear intentions to the opponent while making use of constructive ambiguity and keeping one’s allies assured are accordingly higher, compared to direct state-to-state interactions. So are the related material and diplomatic costs.\textsuperscript{23} It is only

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{17} Nina Tannenwald, \textit{The nuclear taboo: the United States and the non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
\item\textsuperscript{21} Captured evocatively by the phrase ‘he may think that I think he thinks I want to shoot’. Thomas C. Schelling, \textit{The strategy of conflict} [1960] (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 207.
\end{itemize}
apposite against this backdrop to describe the US projection of military power through NATO as traditionally 'more art than science'.

Rational deterrence theory in IR has, regardless, long grappled with determining the conditions under which deterrence is supposed to work. Material power-gereated approaches, such as offensive realism, have delineated practical rules of thumb for assessing the balance of conventional forces and the ability of an actor to defend itself successfully as a result. But the prescriptive parameters of deterrence theory face an impasse considering that 'even when the deterrer does the right things the challenger may still attack'. The attempts to generate parsimonious theoretical parameters of effective deterrence have tended to run into the empirical difficulty of determining concretely why particular deterrence postures end up being regarded as successful—particularly considering that the conventionally understood success of deterrence is manifested by 'nothing much happening'.

More recent waves of IR scholarship have turned the functional question of deterrence on its head. From early post-structuralist and constructivist critics who have considered deterrence as an elaborated social institution sustained by powerful discourses of appropriateness and practices of symbolic power to the more recent students of deterrence through securitization, ontological security and speech act theory frameworks, deterrence has been increasingly investigated as a politically consequential practice. This article ties in with the critical and interpretative scholarship on deterrence by asking—using the example of NATO’s modern reinvention of its allied deterrence profile—how allied deterrence is made to matter in the context of conventional deterrence.

I proceed from the premise that the practice of deterrence has prominent ritual-like features and functions. Purposeful ritualization—understood here as the

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27 Morgan, Deterrence now, p. 164.
31 'Ritual-like' grasps the family resemblances of practices which entail specific formal conventions of social interaction; the appeal to tradition or custom; invariant repetitions; specified rules for setting the limits of acceptable behaviour, legitimacy and authority; references to sacral significance of certain key symbols; and the
conventionalization and dramatization of deterrence performances—is particularly pertinent to allied deterrence, making it visible for relevant audiences and thereby leading to its perception as ‘real’. This is done by playing on symbols and senses, utilizing gestures and repetition to performative effect, and evoking the mythical and the sacred for the community/ies in question. Ritualization thus serves to 1) give deterrence encounters material, physical, emotional, political and social framing; 2) enhance or erode signals of threat and commitment, thereby shaping the credibility of deterrence and assurance; and 3) provide concrete acts for individual and collective political actors to perform in critical situations. Deterrence as an international security practice is hence more than a strategy of war prevention: it is a politically and symbolically loaded means of delineating boundaries and thresholds that together define the competitive space between the adversaries. Conceptualizing deterrence as a ritual-like performative practice offers novel theoretical and methodological insights for recognizing the politically productive power of deterrence beside and beyond its standard strategic functions. Extended deterrence can notably also be in the business of cementing the status quo or legitimizing change, generating a particular political reality or seeking to produce a solidary security community. Returning to a deterrence relationship with its historical enemy concurrently furthers and complicates NATO’s sense of self: on the one hand, the allied rearming and routinizing of its deterrence posture cements the familiar practices of enmity vis-à-vis Russia, while on the other hand it challenges the alliance’s ingrained defensive self-identity.

Allied deterrence goes east

NATO’s post-Cold War enlargement and the extension of its material allied deterrence edifice to the member states in eastern Europe have occurred in distinct phases, without the United States placing combat forces on former Warsaw Pact territory nor NATO crafting a military strategy for defending notably strategic depth-challenged Baltic states for years post-accession. Until 2014, the overwhelming preponderance of Russian troops in the local balance of forces in the exposed Baltic region was counterweighed predominantly by NATO’s general deterrence promise, reminiscent of the ‘deterrence by alliance’ strategy NATO had originally relied on immediately after its creation. Effectively, the military substance of the allied commitment to the defence of the newly admitted east European members was akin to NATO’s early deterrence thinking, whereby

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the US commitment by treaty obligation to the defence of western Europe was deemed sufficient to dissuade the USSR from considering a military attack due to the American atomic monopoly, together with its economic and military prowess. NATO’s integrated military structure began to emerge only after the beginning of the Korean War, and gave way to a forward strategy-based deterrence thinking to defend the alliance ‘as far to the East as possible’, and the consequent basing of US combat divisions in West Germany.\(^34\) Whereas the troops stationed in the US European Command totalled around 300,000 throughout the Cold War, the US force presence in Europe was radically decreased after German unification in 1990, along with the American heavy combat capabilities in the continent. The alliance’s 1991 Strategic Concept sanctioned the reduction of NATO’s conventional forces both in size and readiness, with an emphasis on moving away from the earlier forward defence model toward a reduced forward presence in the Central Region and the consequent reliance on smaller active forces with mobilizable reserves, reinforcements and pre-positioned equipment.\(^35\) Russia’s full-fledged war against Ukraine has brought a new boost to US troop numbers in Europe, which since February 2022 have amounted to 100,000+ service members across the continent.\(^36\) NATO’s new Strategic Concept, adopted at the alliance’s 2022 Madrid summit, marks its coming full circle, as the alliance’s eastern flank is currently undergoing a remilitarization effort more reminiscent of the Cold War era than the alliance’s post-Cold War \textit{leitmotiv} of avoiding drawing a new dividing line in Europe.\(^37\) The post-Cold War logic of ‘Article 5 will do it’ has become increasingly questioned without concrete material substantiation of how, exactly, the abstract deterrence promise of the alliance would be delivered in the more Russia-exposed fringes of the North Atlantic space. Yet, as Mitchell has written:

Beneath the headlines of stepped-up budgets and new paper brigades remains the stark reality of an essentially two-tier alliance in which the United States and eastern members bear the brunt of the risk without the latter enjoying the same privilege of a presumption of the ability to host a large-scale, permanent troop presence that was extended to every member who joined NATO before 1997.\(^38\)

\textbf{From deterrence by alliance to Enhanced Forward Presence}

NATO’s conventional force posture in the post-Cold War age has been fundamentally dictated by Russia’s aggressive actions in its self-proclaimed ‘near abroad’—quite like the way in which the alliance’s conventional force posture took shape in response to the Korean War in the days of the Cold War.\(^39\) It was only after Russia’s

\(^{34}\) Michaels, ‘Visions of the next war’, p. 234.


\(^{38}\) Mitchell, ‘Western Europe is still falling short’.

\(^{39}\) Duffield, \textit{Power rules}, p. 28.
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annexation of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 that NATO first set up a substantive physical presence in the Baltic region—a step which had been avoided until this point out of the fear of thus alienating or provoking Russia. Long restrained by several European allies’ security dilemma sensibilities towards Russia and the fear of political backlash, the realization that Russia might present something of a systematic challenge to the European security order has dawned only gradually for NATO. The five-day war in Georgia in August 2008 made the absence of concrete allied contingency plans for the Baltic states (who had joined the alliance four years before, in 2004) a matter of public knowledge. Russia’s annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine led the United States to send fighter jets and support aircraft to Poland and the Baltic states on a bilateral basis from April 2014, along with the deployment of rotational company-sized US contingents in the region as an assurance device of the ongoing Operation Atlantic Resolve. NATO adopted the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) at its summit in Newport, Wales, in September 2014, followed by intensified allied exercises and the introduction of four rotational, multinational eFP battalion-sized battlegroups in Poland (led by the US), Estonia (led by the UK), Latvia (led by Canada) and Lithuania (led by Germany) from early 2017, comprising approximately 4,500 troops in total. Keeping the allied deployments relatively small and rotational allowed NATO to abide by the letter of the NATO–Russia Founding Act (NRFA).

With the Baltic Air Policing mission having served as the main tangible NATO military ‘footprint’ in the region for ten years after the alliance’s 2004 enlargement, eFP has been celebrated as ‘the biggest reinforcement of alliance collective defence in a generation’. In addition, the NATO Response Force (NRF) was tripled in size and currently comprises up to 40,000 troops. The NRF is to be

configured as either a spearhead or follow-on reinforcement force, with NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) serving as the spearhead element, deployable in 48 hours to support local forces in case of a crisis. NATO also established eight Force Integration Units in the alliance’s eastern member states to provide reinforcement forces with training logistics, pre-positioned equipment, and host-nation support. In parallel, a ‘tailored forward presence’ was set up in 2016 in the Black Sea region.

Yet, until Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the ‘biggest reinforcement of alliance collective defence in a generation’ consisted merely of a small allied forward presence (i.e. contingents of between 1,000–1,400 troops each), relying on significant reinforcement in case of a crisis and/or the failure of NATO’s general deterrence. Any allied reinforcements have consequently depended on their successful passage through the bottleneck of the so-called Suwałki gap on land, or travel by air or across the Baltic Sea—all well within the range of Russian anti-access and area denial systems based in the enclave of Kaliningrad. Provided that determining the parameters of deterrence by denial or deterrence by punishment is not a clear binary, but a matter of assessment—in the eye of the one intended to be deterred—in a concrete political context, the military potential of NATO’s post-2014 small tripwire force to deny a possible Russian attack was a debatable match for Russia’s local preponderance. Until the reality check provided by Russia’s full-fledged invasion of Ukraine and the atrocities committed therein, NATO’s deterrence in the region effectively relied on the grim likelihood of having to deliver the deterrent promise by punishment (as a liberation war), rather than by credible denial of a fait accompli, such as a quick land grab, for Russia.

NATO’s agreement to the new posture—that is, an integrated and seamless approach to defence and deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic area, underpinned by the alliance’s revised military strategy MC 400/4 of 2019—emerged with some caution in the aftermath of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. As Sten Rynning highlights, there was a division between those wishing to develop elaborate defence

46 Shea, ‘NATO’s role’, p. 34.
47 Sten Rynning, ‘Deterrence rediscovered: NATO and Russia’, in Osinga and Sweijns, NL ARMS Netherlands, p. 18.
48 NATO, ‘NATO’s military presence in the east’.
50 Deterrence by denial amounts to a capability to defend, by deploying sufficient local military forces to defeat an invading force. Deterrence by punishment threatens severe penalties in case of an attack post factum.
51 A RAND Corporation study of February 2016 based on war-gaming scenarios arrived at the conclusion that Russian armed forces would have control over Tallinn and Riga within 60 hours, with NATO facing a certain defeat. David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, Reinfoming NATO on NATO’s eastern flank (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.
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plans against Russia in the Cold War tradition and others preferring to stick to broad-stroke contingency plans. The Graduated Response Plans that NATO approved in 2014–15 struck a compromise by having distinct regions and reaction forces attached to them, but the latter remained limited in number (effectively, the NRF), with only contingency plans for follow-on forces. In all, NATO’s development of a deterrence by tripwire and rapid reinforcement strategy was ‘incremental, temporal, and reactive’, with Russia’s ‘time, space, and mass advantages’ being insufficiently addressed. The political symbolism of NATO’s post-2014 force posture in the Baltic states outweighed its military credentials, albeit with Poland’s position as the alliance’s local hub in eastern Europe placing it on a distinctly stronger footing from the outset. The intention was, accordingly, for the pre-2022 eFP’s deterrence credibility and strategic significance to be enhanced via ritual messaging of allied unity, solidarity and resolve—or the continuation of deterrence by alliance by a mixture of military means.

From tripwire to forward defence redux

NATO activated its response force as the first ever deployment of NRF in a collective defence context, along with the allied defence plans for the eastern front, upon Russia’s full-fledged invasion of Ukraine. The invasion led to a number of changes in the broader configuration of NATO’s deterrence on its eastern flank, such as the introduction of four new battlegroups in Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania, and the initiation of NATO’s enhanced Vigilance Activity (eVA) as a series of drills and solidarity demonstrations in eastern Europe. It also intensified the demand from the eastern flank states to up the ante of deterrence by denial in the Baltic states, and prepare better for an actual allied defence of the region. The trajectory of buttressing the allied deterrence in NATO’s eastern flank, begun at NATO’s 2022 Madrid summit, points towards a further heightening of the costs that Russia’s incursion into NATO territory would entail, and a declared shift from the tripwire to a forward defence model in the region. Yet, as the commander of the NATO Battlegroup Estonia reiterated in an interview: 'eFP is still a tripwire concept: it was always understood that it’s not about mirroring exactly the forces

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on the other side. The raised level of commitment aside, the essential strategy is the same as of 2017. The commitment to scale up the existing battlegroups to brigade-size units where and when required has already proven to be a reality check for the eFP lead nations regarding their ability to maintain a continuous rotational presence of an entire armoured brigade outside their territories. Still, NATO’s ‘biggest overhaul of our collective defence since the end of the Cold War’ has included the US’s permanent basing of the 5th Corps headquarters in Poland and its positioning of further rotational troops in Romania and the Baltic states, in addition to the pledge to increase NATO response forces from 40,000 to 300,000, upgraded defence plans, more pre-positioned equipment and forward-deployed capabilities.

Russia’s war against Ukraine also brought about the activation of the alliance’s intensified cooperation protocol with Finland and Sweden, and led to both Finland’s accelerated joining of the alliance in April 2023 and Sweden’s pending membership. Dramatic shifts have further taken place in the defence policy of Germany, with its declared Zeitenwende decision to boost defence spending, including a €100 billion upgrade for the Bundeswehr and a commitment to achieve the NATO defence expenditure benchmark of 2 per cent of GDP. As the regional security constellation in the alliance’s north-eastern flank is notably changing, the alliance’s reading of the Russian threat has become significantly consolidated, thereby contributing to the political dimension of NATO’s respective deterrence strategy. At the Vilnius summit in 2023, a new generation of regional defence plans was set up, building on NATO’s existing strategic and domain-specific plans as a part of the ‘family of plans’.

The Russo-Ukrainian War has swung NATO’s deterrence pendulum yet further in the direction of traditional notions of defence, with a renewed emphasis on relatively large-scale peacetime forward deployment of combat-ready troops. Whereas the early phase of post-Crimea deterrence-building by NATO in its eastern flank was more about reassuring the anxieties of the exposed allies and consolidating NATO’s cohesion, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has reinvoked the Cold War era deterrence script of more substantial combat-ready forward defence. Yet, while echoing its Cold War era counterpart in name, the buttressed eFP model remains more lightweight compared to a standardized robust forward

58 Author interview with commander of the NATO battlegroup in Estonia, Tallinn, 18 May 2023.
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presence. More patchwork-like, NATO’s current deterrence posture in the eastern flank is cheaper and politically more agreeable across the alliance compared to its Cold War predecessor models, allowing for creative compromises and bargains between ‘host’ and ‘framework’ nations,\(^{64}\) and helping to accommodate the intra-alliance divergences of opinion on the endurance of the Russia challenge upon the conclusion of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Meanwhile, eFP’s proven ability to serve as a ground for NATO’s inventive scaling-up of its deterrence posture arguably matches the irritant effect of the US ballistic missile defence installations in Europe in the eyes of Russia.\(^{65}\)

Russia’s way of warfare in Ukraine has driven home the high price of deterrence by punishment for NATO’s easternmost allies. The alliance is currently taking steps to operate increasingly along the tracks of deterrence by denial with its emerging force posture in the eastern flank, even if this set-up, reminiscent of the Cold War era, is not quite numerically comparable to NATO’s forward defence posture during that period.\(^{66}\) The allies’ ritual allusions to the Cold War era deterrence playbook and its conventional reference points, such as forward defence, serve to enhance the credibility of the current make-up of the allied deterrence solution in NATO’s eastern flank. The newly adopted language and pledge of forward defence will be effectively in development regarding operational readiness for years to come. In the meantime, NATO’s purposeful rhetorical amplifying of the post-Madrid Summit shift helps to dramatize the sought-after performative effect of allied deterrence in the Baltic space.

Making the alliance matter

Doing deterrence is not just about preparing for defence and strategic messaging of one’s readiness and resolve. Deterrence-making is also alliance-making—a daily consolidation of the allied community of solidary commitment to each member state’s security through regular training, exercises and off-duty socializing. The political importance and success of extended deterrence has consequently much to do with deterrence’s generative role for the alliance in the first instance. As Bradley Klein noted at the end of the Cold War, ‘NATO’s success was due not to having deterred Soviet aggression, nor to having successfully managed repeated crises among its allies, but to having produced those various allies in the first place.’\(^{67}\)

The shifting centre of gravity of NATO’s deterrence edifice towards the east has accordingly also brought the eastern allies’ security concerns and deterrence rationales more to the alliance’s collective focus. Commonly regarded in NATO

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headquarters as somewhat paranoid about Russian intentions pre-2014, the Baltic and Polish representatives have gained a more sympathetic ear among the allies in the aftermath of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. If in a pre-2014 environment a military representative in NATO headquarters could mockingly suggest to their Baltic civilian counterpart that the Balts should get their air policing from the Russians for ‘they fly there anyway all the time’, Russia’s annexation of Crimea caught NATO ‘pants down … in compete shock and awe about what was going on’. The demand pattern from the Baltic states towards the allied attention and collective solutions has accordingly followed Russia-generated conflicts in the former Soviet-controlled space:

The issue of Baltic defence plans first came up in 2008. It was then when various [Baltic] leaders acknowledged that ‘our window will soon close again … for a moment, Russia has shown its colours, we need to get us covered within this window of opportunity’. The assumption at the time was that the West does not understand—let’s push through as much as possible there and then … Then came 2014, a new shock … but the local officials have been highly conscious of the fact that should they raise the alarm too high at the time when Russia was not actively proving what it was like, they would be regarded as hysteric Balts, yet again.

Inside insights suggest that NATO was notably ‘out of touch’ with its delayed development of early warning indicators in relation to Russia, as further illustrated by a request for a contingency plan from NATO headquarters to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) issued under the political guideline of ‘do not escalate’ when Russia’s ‘little green men’ were already in Crimea. Many allies were ‘in denial’ about Russia and trusted ‘dialogue was the trick’, whereas there was further distrust among some allies about the US intelligence in the run-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This invasion fundamentally changed the picture: in the words of a high-level Baltic representative at NATO, ‘people who did not listen to us before, have now started to do so’. Yet, even though the individual and collective threat assessments have become increasingly aligned on Russia within the alliance, the inevitability of defence investments still rings with a distinct urgency for NATO members in Russia’s immediate proximity.

68 Author interview with Estonian defence official 1, Tallinn, 16 Feb. 2023.
69 Author interview with Estonian defence official 1.
71 Author interview with Estonian defence official 1.
75 Author interview with former Baltic defence minister, online, 19 May 2021.
a year on from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, deterrence has returned as a ‘daily activity’ for allies.\textsuperscript{77} In the words of the NATO Battlegroup Estonia commander: ‘It is now a normal thing to come to Estonia’.\textsuperscript{78} However, NATO’s self-identity as a defensive alliance has complicated its ability to promptly address the radically deteriorated security situation in Europe because of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. As a member of NATO’s International Staff put it in an interview:

I think it was only after the events of February 24 [2022] that we fully realized: we have to accelerate … and we have to start with changing our mindsets, to be more proactive and start thinking about how to gain initiative, because as a defensive alliance we are by definition responsive.\textsuperscript{79}

Notwithstanding the ‘overwhelming superiority of NATO both in terms of technology and troops’ \textit{vis-à-vis} Russia, there remains a ‘need’ to politically reassure the allies.\textsuperscript{80} While rarely expressed in public, the eastern flank host nations’ anxieties about the credibility of the allied tripwire in the Baltic region, and whether or not the reinforcement would actually materialize, are real: ‘those people who attend closely to how this soup is being made are very pessimistic … there is plentiful thinking that we have a couple of years of grace now, and then …’\textsuperscript{81}

Still, the presence of allied forces in the eastern flank is taken as an indication that NATO views Baltic security as a function of allied security,\textsuperscript{82} although NATO is ‘like a big ship: it moves slowly and can be turned only with difficulty’.\textsuperscript{83} eFP is there to change the calculation on the Russian side—‘if they were to invade, they would sustain a lot of casualties’.\textsuperscript{84} From an eFP framework nation’s perspective, ‘we are doing it because we are committed and like to think that NATO matters … in our view, NATO as a club relies on collective security and so you have to demonstrate what that means in reality.’\textsuperscript{85} Indeed, ‘our deployment in Estonia reminds every soldier what the Washington Treaty means.’\textsuperscript{86} Pragmatically, forward presence of allied forces has an added military benefit for the alliance to thus develop and maintain its interoperability,\textsuperscript{87} for

It is good to have armed forces doing what the armed forces are supposed to do—it’s no good having them sitting back in Salisbury or Gatwick—going to run four miles a day and fire their weapons in the range. It’s good to have them out and about, build the interoperability. And then the prestige element as well—even though the UK forces are now an

\textsuperscript{77} Author interview with NATO international staff member, Brussels, 24 Jan. 2023.
\textsuperscript{78} Author interview with commander of the NATO battlegroup in Estonia, Tallinn, 18 May 2023.
\textsuperscript{79} Author interview with NATO International Staff member, Brussels, 24 Jan. 2023.
\textsuperscript{80} Author interview with UK defence source, online, 21 Feb. 2023.
\textsuperscript{81} Author interview with Estonian journalist, Tallinn, 15 Feb. 2023; Author interview with defence analyst, Tallinn, 16 Feb. 2023.
\textsuperscript{82} Author interview with Estonian defence official 2, Tallinn, 17 Feb. 2023.
\textsuperscript{83} Author interview with the ambassador of the UK to the Republic of Estonia, online, 8 Feb. 2023.
\textsuperscript{84} Author interview with the ambassador of the UK to Estonia.
\textsuperscript{85} Author interview with a UK defence source, online, 21 Feb. 2023. As a US airborne company leader put it during the Distinguished Visitors Day (DV Day) of the Spring Storm 2023 exercise in Tapa, Estonia: ‘I bring my soldiers here to show them what NATO is’. Author field notes, Tapa, 22 May 2023.
absolute mess, they still command a certain amount of respect—being the head of this kind of operation contributes to that. 88

Training ‘nearer where the very likely adversary is [makes] it much more for real’. 89 On a political level, the set-up of the eFP framework nations in the Baltic states has further unfolded as an exercise on the part of the United States to remobilize the European allies to contribute more emphatically towards the allied defence effort: ‘do something, be the bloody tripwire’—as a Baltic diplomat privy to the negotiations over the allied presence in the region from the early days following the annexation of Crimea described the American rationale behind the original eFP set-up. 90 From the perspective of the Baltic host nations, the main message throughout the development of NATO’s eFP model pertained to the military credibility and meaningfulness of the allied presence. 91 Emphatically, it is stressed now and again that the allied deterrence in the eastern flank must not be a ‘paper tiger’. 92 Prompted by US President Joe Biden’s post-February 2022 discourse, the eastern flank states began arguing that with the tripwire, NATO could not protect every inch of its territory ‘unless it protects forward’—and hence the Cold War era concept of forward defence was brought out again. 93 After all, in principle, the concepts of forward presence and tripwire have not changed. 94 The symbolic significance of NATO’s recently adopted forward defence approach for the alliance’s eastern flank currently outperforms NATO’s substantively still more tripwire-like presence in the region. Meanwhile, it certainly features as an instance of creative improvisation for the post-Cold War alliance, 95 departing from NATO’s ‘largely static’ Cold War patterns. 96

Conclusion

NATO’s physical presence on the alliance’s eastern flank has evolved over the last decade from barely existent to symbolic, and on to militarily more tangible. Examining the evolution of NATO’s extended conventional deterrence posture in the alliance’s eastern flank reveals the extent to which deterrence-making and alliance-making are intertwined security practices. With the gradual strengthening of the allied presence in NATO’s eastern fringes, Baltic and Polish security anxieties have become part of the alliance’s mainstream threat assessment—albeit with a practical lag on NATO’s part in delivering on the situation appraisal.

This article shows how NATO’s reinvention of modern extended deterrence in its eastern flank mobilizes the renowned scripts of the Cold War era to enhance

88 Author interview with defence analyst.
89 Author interview with the ambassador of the UK to Estonia.
90 Author interview with high-level Baltic diplomat, online, 26 May 2021.
91 Author interview with Estonian defence official 2.
92 Author interview with Baltic representative at NATO, online, 4 June 2021.
93 Author interview with Baltic representative at NATO, Brussels, 24 Jan 2023.
94 Author interview with former Baltic defence minister.
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the gravitas of its commitment to the defence of the eastern flank states. While the historical analogy of the allied defence of West Berlin has potently informed NATO’s forward presence in the Baltic space since the annexation of Crimea, the allied military footprint remains notably lighter in the region compared to NATO’s set-up in the alliance’s Central Region throughout the Cold War. The alliance’s protracted security dilemma sensibility towards Russia has contributed to the piecemeal relaxation of NATO’s self-restraint in establishing a military presence in eastern Europe. With the militarily substantial forward defence posture in NATO’s ‘new front’ still emergent, the alliance makes inventive use of discursively aggrandizing the shift of its deterrence strategy in the eastern flank ahead of its practical delivery. The ritual enhancement of the stated deterrence strategy seeks to compensate for the lagging posture and create credibility effects both towards Russia and the eastern allies.

Two conclusions transpire for IR scholarship and deterrence practitioners. Methodologically, NATO’s scaling up of eFP in the eastern flank underscores the imperative of paying close attention to how deterrence policies, strategies and practices are made to ‘count as deterrents in a political sense’, along with their intended and unintended effects which have remained out of the purview of the current article. At a conceptual level, the story of NATO’s adaptation of its deterrence profile to the waxing and waning threat perceived from Russia while navigating the alliance security dilemma compels the already broad church of deterrence theory to make further space for the insights of ritual scholarship. Investigating the ritual features and effects of extended deterrence moves and signals advances our understanding of core problems in deterrence theory and practice, such as conveying believable intentions or determining the success of deterrent threats and promises. NATO’s reinvention of conventional deterrence in the post-post-Cold War era offers a critical case to that effect.

97 Vuori, ‘Deterring things with words’, p. 29.