

THE EVOLUTION OF THE GLOBAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT AND THE REDEFINED NATO MISSION IN THE CURRENT STRATEGIC CONTEXT

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Abstract

The article examines the major evolutions of the global security environment and the way they shape NATO’s redefined mission within the current strategic context. After three decades of a liberal international order based on multilateral cooperation, the world is undergoing a transition towards multipolarity, strategic competition, and systemic instability. Events such as Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, China’s rise, energy and technological crises, and the proliferation of hybrid threats have reshaped the global security architecture. The analysis highlights that NATO has returned to its core mission of collective defense while expanding its scope to societal resilience, cyber security, critical infrastructure protection, and counter-disinformation. At the same time, the Alliance integrates climate security, global cooperation, and Indo-Pacific partnerships, evolving from a regional military alliance into a global strategic actor. The paper also emphasizes Romania’s relevance as a member state on NATO’s Eastern flank, playing a vital role in the security of the Black Sea region. Through doctrinal adaptation, defense investments, and strengthened resilience, Romania can actively contribute to NATO’s strategic objectives.

Keywords: *NATO, global security, strategic competition, resilience, Romania, collective defense.*

The international security system is undergoing a profound structural transition in which the balance of power, governance rules, and instruments of competition are simultaneously transforming. Emerging multipolarity does not represent a stable balance but rather a systemic competition between divergent political and economic models. The strategic confrontation between Western democracies and authoritarian regimes is redefining globalization, while the space between peace and war is increasingly dominated by hybrid actions and grey-zone tactics.¹

¹ *Global Security and Technological Competition Report*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution (2023), available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/reports/global-security-and-technological-competition/>

Russia and China represent the main centres of revisionist power, each acting through military, economic, informational, and technological means to expand its regional and global influence. In this context, NATO finds itself in a process of deep structural adaptation, aimed at maintaining relevance amid instability marked by hybrid warfare, energy pressure, and attacks on critical infrastructure.

China has become a major factor in recent geopolitical developments. Since the beginning of the 21st century, it has increasingly asserted itself as a global actor with a clear and ambitious geopolitical agenda. China's economic expansion—driven by rapid GDP growth and openness to external markets—has been accompanied by a spectacular modernisation of its military capabilities. Among the most remarkable aspects of this evolution is the rapid growth of China's naval and space power, which has transformed it into a significant competitor on the global stage.

China, through its control over strategic trade routes and its massive investments in global infrastructure via the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), promotes a geopolitical vision that challenges Western dominance. The BRI—a vast project involving the construction of infrastructure such as ports, roads, and energy networks across Africa, Asia, and Europe—constitutes a form of economic competition and global influence that exerts pressure on the existing financial and political system. This initiative not only secures China a dominant position in key areas of the world but also imposes an alternative model of development, one based on political authoritarianism and state control over the economy.

Moreover, China's ambitions extend beyond the economic and infrastructural dimension to include the development of military and strategic capabilities that align perfectly with its geopolitical interests. Its expansion in the South China Sea—both through the construction of artificial islands and their militarisation—represents an attempt to alter the status quo in this crucial maritime region, which is essential for global transport routes and for the energy security of many Asian states. At the same time, China is making massive investments in technology and the development of cyber capabilities, which can be used not only for power projection but also for hybrid interventions in the geopolitical and security spheres.²

² *The Military Balance 2025*, London, available at: <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance>

In this context, NATO has found itself compelled to broaden its strategic analysis to encompass regions and scenarios within the Indo-Pacific area, where China is increasingly reaffirming its authority and promoting its strategic interests. The strategic competition between China and the West is therefore a global one, transcending traditional spheres of influence and requiring a more complex and diversified approach to foreign policy and international security.

On the other hand, the Russian Federation's aggression in eastern Ukraine continues this trend of reviving power politics and expansionism. In parallel, Moscow's active involvement in the conflicts in the Western Balkans and the Republic of Moldova represents further evidence of its intent to project power into key regions and to destabilise regional orders that do not serve its interests. These actions have seriously tested NATO's cohesion, as the Alliance has been confronted with dilemmas regarding how to respond effectively to Russia's provocations. At the same time, these conflicts have demonstrated Russia's efficiency and speed in mobilising and employing its armed forces in a regional context—an ability that has had a significant impact on the balance of power in Europe.

The culmination of this process of strategic competition was the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. This conflict has had implications not only for regional stability but also for the entire international order. It has become the most serious conflict in Europe since 1945, underlining both the gravity and the dangers of a major escalation. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has revealed the West's inability to respond rapidly and decisively to an act of aggression of such magnitude, as well as Europe's vulnerability in the face of an increasingly revisionist and aggressive Russia.

The Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine has reintroduced high-intensity conventional warfare in Europe, combining the use of artillery, drones, electronic warfare, and information operations. In response, NATO has launched its most comprehensive adaptation since the end of the Cold War, culminating in the decisions adopted at the

Washington Summit in July 2024, which expanded regional planning and multi-domain defence capabilities.³

Sweden's accession in March 2024 profoundly altered the Alliance's strategic architecture in Northern Europe, transforming the Baltic Sea into a fully integrated operational space. At the same time, the increase in defence budgets has become a generalised phenomenon, surpassing the 2% of GDP threshold in most member states, with a strong emphasis on investments in munitions, air defence, logistical infrastructure, and cyber capabilities.

Recent events have demonstrated that hybrid aggression, cyberattacks, and sabotage operations targeting submarine infrastructure can produce strategic effects without formally triggering a state of war. The incident in the Baltic Sea in November 2024 highlighted the vulnerability of undersea cable and pipeline networks—critical for communications and energy supplies. NATO responded by strengthening cooperation among member states, the private sector, and European Union partners, establishing mechanisms for early warning, maritime surveillance, and information sharing. This reaction model confirms the Alliance's tendency to evolve from a purely military organisation into a multidimensional system of protection and resilience.⁴

NATO's mission today has been redefined along three converging directions: collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security. The *Strategic Concept* adopted in Madrid in 2022 enshrined these pillars, complementing them with new objectives—societal resilience, the protection of critical infrastructure, and technological innovation. The document reflects the recognition that the wars of the future will not be purely military but will also be informational, economic, and cognitive in nature. Thus, the three decades in which the global security environment appeared to embody a normality of peace have abruptly deteriorated, and “the Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace.” This inaugural

³ *NATO's July 2024 Washington Summit: In Brief*, Washington D.C., available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12217>

⁴ *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries – Updates*, Bruxelles, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_225291.htm

formulation of the 2022 Madrid *Strategic Concept* marks a clear discontinuity from the 2010 version and reflects the systemic nature of current threats.⁵

The same section emphasizes that an attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Allies cannot be ruled out, while the Russian Federation is identified as “the most significant and direct threat” to Allied security.⁶ Beyond the Russian vector, the 2022 *Strategic Concept* outlines a landscape of strategic competition, pervasive instability, and recurrent shocks, characterized by interconnected global threats.⁷

In parallel, China’s rise as a global actor and the growing tensions in the Indo-Pacific are prompting the Alliance to adopt a comprehensive vision based on the “360-degree” principle, encompassing all geographical directions and domains of confrontation—land, maritime, air, cyber, and space.⁸ Subsequent documents developed by Allied Command Transformation (ACT) specify that future multi-domain operations will integrate conventional, technological, and informational means, timing to generate convergent effects.⁹

Technology has become a central factor in security. NATO regards the digital, cyber, and space domains as essential front lines of strategic competition, promoting initiatives such as the *Defense Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA)* and the *NATO Innovation Fund*, both designed to preserve the Alliance’s technological edge.¹⁰ Richard

⁵ NATO. *Strategic Concept 2022*, available online at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-factsheet-strategic-concept-en.pdf

⁶ NATO. *Strategic Concept 2022*, available online at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-factsheet-strategic-concept-en.pdf

⁷ NATO. *Strategic Concept 2022*, available online at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-factsheet-strategic-concept-en.pdf

⁸ Allied Command Transformation, *Future Warfare Development Report*, Norfolk, 2023, p. 12.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 20–21.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

Fontaine and Kara Frederick define this new stage as the “age of techno-realpolitik,” in which geopolitical power is measured by the control of digital infrastructures and dates.¹¹

Climate change is introduced, for the first time, as “the defining challenge of our time” in NATO’s *Strategic Concept*, being regarded as a threat multiplier that affects energy security, supply chains, and societal stability.¹² The OECD *Climate and Defense Readiness Report 2024* complete this perspective, showing that the adaptation of armed forces to the effects of climate change is becoming an integral part of modern strategic planning.¹³

The human dimension of security, addressed in the *UNDP Human Security Report 2024*, underlines that the protection of populations, psychological resilience, and security education are essential components of collective defense. In the same spirit, the *EUISS Report 2023* highlights the growing NATO–EU cooperation in crisis management, military mobility, and the protection of critical infrastructure.¹⁴

For Romania, the redefinition of NATO’s mission carries direct strategic implications. The Eastern Flank is becoming a pivot of deterrence, while the Black Sea represents a key arena of geopolitical competition. The *Vilnius Summit Communiqué 2023*¹⁵ reiterates the importance of the region and confirms the Alliance’s commitment to strengthening its forward defence posture.

Thus, NATO’s redefined mission reflects a transition from a regional military alliance to a global strategic organisation. It integrates non-military dimensions—societal resilience, technology, climate, and human security—into the paradigm of collective

¹¹ Richard Fontaine; Kara Frederick, *The Age of Techno-Realpolitik*, CNAS, Washington, 2021, p. 15.

¹² NATO. *Strategic Concept 2022*, available online at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-factsheet-strategic-concept-en.pdf

¹³ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). *Accelerating Climate Adaptation*. Paris, 2024, available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/12/accelerating-climate-adaptation_b375907c/8afaaeb8-en.pdf

¹⁴ European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). *European Security after Ukraine: Strategic Autonomy and NATO Cooperation*. Brussels, 2023, p. 17, available at: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default>

¹⁵ NATO. *Vilnius Summit Communiqué 2023*. Vilnius, 2023, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm

defence. This evolution transforms the Alliance into an indispensable actor in maintaining international stability and represents, for Romania, an opportunity to assert itself as a key state on the Eastern Flank.

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