

Military Alliances: Catalysts for War or Architects of Peace? A Retrospective Analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict, 2014–2025

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigates the role of military alliances, particularly NATO, in influencing the escalation and regional security dynamics of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict from 2014 to 2025, aiming to determine whether such alliances function as deterrents or catalysts of hostilities. **Method:** Employing a qualitative research design grounded in neorealist theory, the study conducted content analysis of diplomatic documents, official statements, and media reports to examine perceptions and actions surrounding the conflict. **Results:** Findings indicate that NATO's eastward expansion and Russia's perception of strategic encirclement significantly contributed to heightened tensions, illustrating the dual nature of military alliances as both stabilizing forces and provocateurs in international relations. **Novelty:** This research advances understanding by critically highlighting the paradoxical impact of military alliances in modern conflict, emphasizing that while alliances may bolster security, they can also inadvertently escalate conflicts when perceived as existential threats. The study underscores the necessity for transparent diplomatic communication and confidence-building measures to mitigate security dilemmas inherent in alliance politics, offering valuable insights for policymakers engaged in conflict prevention and regional stability.

INTRODUCTION

The role of military alliances in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, extending from 2014 to 2025, provides a pivot lens through which to assess the dynamics of war, regional stability and geopolitical influence. This conflict, initially inflamed by the annexation of Crimea by Russia and fueled by the insurrection that followed in eastern Ukraine, attracted various military alliances, thus complicating the landscape of international relations. While various nations align through these alliances, the question arises: do such military partnerships exacerbate tensions and lead to war, or do they promote a semblance of stability and peace?

Military alliances, in particular in the context of NATO, were examined for their potential to degenerate confrontations. Critics claim that expansion towards eastern NATO has caused a Russian attack, the alliance perceived as a direct threat to national security [1]. This feeling has been taken up by various analysts who argue that the activities of the alliance along the eastern European borders not only manage Russia but also increase the probability of a military confrontation. The perception of the encirclement contributes significantly to the strategic positioning of Russia and its military posture in Ukraine.

Conversely, NATO and its affiliate members argued that their presence acts as a means of deterrence against new Russian incursions. The 2014 crisis catalyzed a renewed

commitment among the member nations of collective defense, devoted to Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. Concerted support from the West to Ukraine, illustrated by military aid and training, represents an effort to strengthen the defensive capacities of Ukraine while avoiding the aggression of Russia [2]. Such interventions undoubtedly contribute to short-term stabilization of the region, because the Ukrainian forces benefit from improved military resources and strategic providents.

In addition, the implications of military alliances extend beyond the immediate commitment of conflicts, which has an impact on long-term stability and development. Mhlanga and Ndhlovu highlight the wider socio-economic ramifications of the conflict on peace, justice, and diplomacy, suggesting that military alliances can play a double role. Although they can degenerate immediate tensions, they also provide a framework in which sustainable development and conflict resolution can be prosecuted [3]. The inclusive dialogues favored by multinational coalitions can lead to diplomatic solutions that deal with underlying problems fueling conflict.

The concept of peace agreements has another layer of complexity. Onyebuchi highlights the limits of these agreements in the realization of sustainable peace, stressing that, despite the presence of alliances aimed at promoting stability, the roots of the conflict often remain untreated. This indicates a paradox in which military alliances intended to promote peace can inadvertently maintain a cyclic scheme of hostility due to unresolved grievances and the politicization of military support [4].

Furthermore, the military alliances of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict played a role with multiple facets in the formation of the trajectory of war and peace in the region. Although there is substantial evidence that these alliances can exacerbate tensions – by perceptions of encroachment and military capacity building – they also have the potential to promote stability by supporting defense mechanisms and encouraging diplomatic dialogue. The delicate balance between these opposite forces highlights the complex reality of military alliances in contemporary geopolitical differences. In the end, while the conflict continues to take place, a nuanced understanding of these alliances will be crucial to assess their long-term impact on regional security and world peace.

Statement of the problem

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which began in 2014, marked a significant turning point in the European security scene and the dynamics of military alliances. The participation of strategic military alliances, predominantly from NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), influenced the course of this conflict and prepared the scenario for both escalation and efforts to achieve peace. This analysis seeks to examine how these military alliances acted as catalysts for war or peace within the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict from 2014 to 2025.

The beginning of the conflict dates back to Ukraine's objective toward closer integration with the West, which culminated in the Euromaidan protests of 2013–2014 and finally led to the annexation of Crimea by Russia. This act not only challenged Europe's security architecture but also tested the resolution of military alliances. NATO's position changed dramatically, embodying a collective defense approach that

inadvertently increased tensions with Russia. As Mukarzel argues, the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent military commitments of Russia led NATO to improve their military presence in Eastern Europe, thus solidifying the perceptions of an imminent conflict [5].

NATO actions can be interpreted as a defensive position; however, they also served to solidify the Russian narrative of threat from the West. The CSTO, in response to the perceived Western aggression, sought to strengthen solidarity among its member states. This dynamic illustrates how military alliances not only reinforce regional security but can also foster a mature environment for conflict. As Mhlanga and Ndhlovu pointed out, the role of alliances in conflict areas can turn from deterrence to provocation, depending on the actions and perceptions of the parties involved [6].

In addition, the inability of diplomatic negotiations to resolve persistent disputes has highlighted the limits of peace agreements to suffocate hostilities. According to Onybuch, the sets established through military alliances inappropriately address the complex political maneuvers that underlie the conflict. Peace efforts often hesitate without robust mechanisms for the application or guarantees of powerful allies, leaving space for a continuous military commitment. Therefore, the influence of military alliances on conflict micrognition requires an examination not only in its collective objectives but also in its broader implications for the consolidation of peace.

The response of Western nations through military alliances has significantly affected the trajectory of the conflict. The military assistance from the West to Ukraine, including weapons and training, was calculated to reinforce Ukraine defenses against Russia's sustained aggression. Jakupec postulates that such NATO responses and its member states were integral in the configuration of conflict dynamics. The military support received by Ukraine can be seen as a strategic deterrent element against Russian advances and a catalyst that sometimes has exacerbated the situation. The interaction between military preparation and diplomacy has created a double-edged sword scenario, where military alliances can help stabilize the region or cause an escalation in hostilities.

Therefore, it is crucial to elucidate how military alliances have shaped military commitments and diplomatic initiatives in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. An exhaustive evaluation reveals that these alliances act as crucial instruments in the international response to aggression, with its effectiveness depending on its ability to balance dissuasive strategies with sincere negotiations towards peace. Ultimately, this examination of military alliances clarifies the complexities involved in the influence of war or peace in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, highlighting the multifaceted challenges facing the international community in the search for long-term stability in the region.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict serves as a case study of double roles that military alliances can play in global conflicts. When reinforcing the defensive positions while limiting the ways for an effective diplomatic resolution, NATO and the CSTO have catalyzed and hindered peace efforts within this controversial geopolitical landscape. As the situation evolves the lasting influence of these alliances will inevitably shape future

efforts for the resolution and stability of conflicts in Eastern Europe. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the if the military alliances serve as a catalysts for war or architects of peace? A retrospective analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, 2014–2025. Specifically, the paper is guided by the following objectives:

1. Examine how NATO's post-2014 eastern expansion and collective defense posturing influenced the Russo-Ukrainian conflict's trajectory
2. Analyze the role of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and allied Russian security initiatives in shaping conflict
3. Evaluate the dual role of military alliances (NATO and CSTO) as both deterrents and provocateurs in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict

RESEARCH METHOD

Military alliance

A military alliance is essentially a formal agreement between two or more countries to work together on defense and security issues, particularly when conflict arises. These partnerships are based on shared interests, promises to defend one another, and collective security, giving member nations a strategic edge while discouraging potential threats. Over time, military alliances have had a major impact on global power dynamics, influencing not only military strategies but also the political, economic, and diplomatic relationships between countries [7]. Thus, by making these arrangements official through treaties or legal agreements, countries can commit to defending each other, strengthening their collective defense and making it easier to fend off external dangers [8]. The importance of military alliances is clear in how they boost the defense capabilities of all involved. When one nation's security is tied to the others, it creates a sense of unity. NATO, for instance, showcases this idea with its commitment to collective defense under Article 5 of its founding treaty, which states that an attack on one member is treated as an attack on all [9]. These alliances also promote economic cooperation, strengthen diplomatic ties, and help maintain regional stability [10].

NATO and Collective Defense; One of the most well-known examples of a military alliance is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established in 1949. NATO's definition of a military alliance is centered on mutual defense, as outlined in Article 5 of its founding treaty. This article asserts that an attack against one member is considered an attack against all [11]. The principle of collective defense is fundamental to NATO's operation, ensuring that member states can rely on the military support of others if faced with an external threat. This approach underscores the importance of solidarity and shared security responsibilities, where the security of each member is closely tied to the security of all.

Bilateral Military Agreements: Not all military alliances require large coalitions; sometimes, bilateral agreements can create powerful defense pacts. An example is the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, signed in 1951, which guarantees mutual defense in case of armed aggression against either nation [12]. In these alliances, the relationship is typically defined by specific terms, such as stationing military forces on foreign soil or sharing

intelligence and resources. While these alliances may not include the collective defense principle found in larger pacts like NATO, they still represent a strong commitment to mutual protection and often act as a strategic counterbalance to regional threats.

Regional Defense Alliances: In addition to global frameworks like NATO, military alliances can also be regional, where neighboring countries form security pacts to address shared concerns. An example of this is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a political and military alliance consisting of six Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. Although initially founded for economic and political cooperation, the GCC's security dimension has gained importance, particularly in addressing external threats and regional stability. Through this alliance, member states can pool military resources and coordinate defense efforts against common security risks such as terrorism or external military interventions [13].

Cross-Regional Security Cooperation: In today's interconnected world, military alliances can also form between states from different regions to address transnational security challenges. A notable example is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a strategic forum involving the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. While the Quad is not a formal military alliance like NATO, it shares many similarities, as the members collaborate on regional security issues, including counterterrorism, maritime security, and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region [14]. Although it is not explicitly structured for mutual defense, the shared commitment of Quad members to regional stability and security represents a unique form of cross-regional military cooperation.

Overall, a military alliance refers to a formal agreement between two or more countries to enhance their mutual security. The definition is broad and can include various structures, from large multinational pacts to smaller, bilateral agreements. The core purpose of a military alliance is cooperation between states to deter threats, enhance defense capabilities, and, if necessary, engage in collective military action. These alliances are influenced by factors such as geopolitical concerns, economic interests, and the desire for political stability. In essence, military alliances are formed to strengthen the collective defense of the group, making the defense more formidable than any single nation acting alone.

War

War, as a concept, has evolved over centuries, reflecting changes in political, social, and technological developments. It is often considered the most extreme form of conflict, involving organized groups or states in a struggle for power, resources, or ideological dominance [15]. The impact of war extends far beyond the battlefield, influencing economic conditions, cultural practices, and international relations [16]. As such, understanding its definition is complex and can vary based on the perspective and context in which it is analyzed. Several scholars have provided different definitions of war, each adding nuance to the broader understanding of this destructive human activity.

Carl von Clausewitz, a military theorist, defines war as “an act of force to compel our opponent to do our will.” This definition is rooted in the idea that war is

fundamentally a political tool, aimed at achieving specific objectives through violent means. Clausewitz's perspective emphasizes the purposeful and rational nature of war, where force is applied to enforce a desired outcome. War, in this sense, is not chaotic or arbitrary but a continuation of politics by other means, involving strategy, military tactics, and diplomacy [17]. This definition has remained influential in the study of military strategy and international relations.

In contrast, some scholars view war through a psychological lens. In this view, war is a violent interaction driven by fear, hatred, and emotions that transcend rational political calculation [18]. For instance, the sociologist George Simmel considered war as an expression of human aggression, where groups are pushed to violence not merely for strategic purposes, but also due to deep-seated psychological motivations. This definition sees war as an outlet for collective emotions and societal tensions, with impacts that extend into cultural and individual psyche. The brutality of warfare in this definition stems from the emotional toll it takes on those involved, leading to long-term psychological scars and social fragmentation.

International law offers yet another perspective, where war is defined by the formal declaration of hostilities between sovereign states or organized non-state actors, and is governed by rules such as the Geneva Conventions. According to this definition, war is not merely a violent conflict but a legally sanctioned state of affairs with specific rights and obligations. The Geneva Conventions set out the legal frameworks for conduct during war, focusing on the protection of civilians, prisoners of war, and the sick and wounded. This legal approach views war not just as an act of violence, but as an institution subject to rules designed to limit its devastation. The emphasis is on regulating and mitigating the worst excesses of warfare, striving for more humane treatment even during times of conflict [19]. There is still room for a broader or alternative definition of war that incorporates elements of contemporary geopolitical realities. One such perspective might consider the rise of non-traditional warfare forms such as cyber warfare or hybrid warfare. These developments are reshaping the understanding of what constitutes war, especially in the age of technology and globalization.

A more generalized definition of war is the violent conflict between groups, typically involving organized forces, with the aim of achieving political, territorial, or ideological objectives. It is characterized by the use of force, strategic objectives, and often, significant human suffering. This definition transcends traditional understandings, including the evolving forms of warfare that incorporate both conventional and unconventional tactics. According to modern scholars, war is not only an event involving state actors but can also involve transnational entities or insurgent groups, emphasizing the changing nature of contemporary conflict [20]. This definition encompasses not only traditional battlefields but also the cyber, economic, and informational theaters of conflict, making it a more holistic understanding of war in the modern era.

Conflict

Conflict is a multifaceted and complex issue that has been studied in various fields like political science, sociology, psychology, and international relations. In simple terms,

it refers to situations where people or groups have opposing goals, leading to tension, disagreements, and often confrontation. Conflict can manifest in many forms, from small personal disputes to large-scale international wars. Scholars have developed various theories to understand its causes, nature, and how to resolve it in different contexts.

One common way to define conflict is as a struggle over resources, which can be physical (like land, money, or power) or abstract (such as influence, recognition, or ideology). In this view, conflict happens when different groups compete for limited resources. This perspective aligns with ideas from the materialist school of thought in social theory, especially those of Karl Marx, who argued that economic inequality and class struggles are key drivers of conflict. For example, disputes over valuable resources like oil or water often lead to conflicts, particularly in regions rich in natural resources. This definition highlights how unequal access to resources fuels competition, which can lead to violence or social unrest [21].

From a psychological standpoint, conflict is seen as a natural part of the human experience, arising from differences in values, beliefs, or perceptions. This view focuses on the emotional and cognitive aspects of conflict, suggesting that people may clash when they feel their identity, dignity, or worldview is threatened. Here, conflict isn't always about tangible resources; it can also stem from misunderstandings, miscommunications, or the desire for self-assertion [22]. Social psychologists like Morton Deutsch argue that conflict is often driven by incompatible goals or differing views on how to achieve those goals. This kind of conflict can be both internal, involving personal struggles, or external, involving tensions between individuals or groups. Resolving these types of conflicts often requires addressing deeper psychological causes like fear, insecurity, or a desire for power.

Another well-known definition sees conflict as a process that evolves over time, starting with the emergence of differences and potentially escalating or resolving as interactions continue [23]. This idea, supported by scholars like Dean G. Pruitt and Peter J. Carnevale, frames conflict as a dynamic process in which relationships, behaviors, and perceptions change. Conflict is not just a fixed condition but rather a series of events that can either drag on or be resolved quickly. It involves both the actions of the people involved and the larger context surrounding the conflict. By viewing conflict as a process, we can identify key stages—like escalation, bargaining, and resolution—that can be managed through strategies such as negotiation or mediation [24].

While these definitions offer valuable insights, there is still room for deeper exploration, especially in the context of today's rapidly changing, digital, and globalized world. The rise of cyber conflict, for instance, challenges traditional ideas of conflict, as it introduces new forms of disputes that occur in virtual spaces. It raises important questions about how conflicts evolve when they're no longer confined to physical locations, and how power dynamics shift when warfare involves digital tools instead of traditional weapons.

A more generalized definition of conflict includes the wide range of tensions and hostilities that arise when individuals, groups, or nations have incompatible goals or

needs. This definition acknowledges that conflict can take many forms, from personal disagreements to major wars, and is influenced by both material and psychological factors. According to modern conflict theory, conflicts are often rooted in power imbalances, identity issues, or competing ideologies. Resolving these conflicts requires addressing both the immediate triggers and the deeper, structural factors that sustain them [25]. In the end, conflict is an inevitable part of social life, and how we manage it plays a crucial role in ensuring peace and stability within societies. Solutions often involve negotiation, compromise, and institutional mechanisms to prevent escalation and foster mutual understanding.

Peace

Peace is a deeply valued and complex concept in both philosophical and political thought. While it's often defined simply as the absence of conflict or violence, peace encompasses much more than just the end of hostilities. It represents a state of harmony, security, and cooperation that promotes stability across social, political, and economic realms [26]. Peace isn't just something to be achieved after conflict; it's an ongoing process that involves creating systems that prevent future conflicts, promote justice, and improve relationships at all levels—from individuals to the international community. Given its importance, various thinkers, policymakers, and scholars have interpreted peace in different ways, each offering their unique perspective on how it can be achieved and maintained.

Negative Peace: The concept of "negative peace" is closely linked to Johan Galtung, a key figure in peace research. Negative peace refers to the absence of direct violence or conflict, mainly focusing on halting active warfare or physical harm. It's about stopping the fighting but doesn't address the underlying causes of violence. In this view, peace is seen as a temporary or superficial state—stopping the immediate violence without tackling the structural or social tensions that fuel it. Galtung argued that negative peace is necessary to end immediate violence, but it's not enough to create lasting peace. The root causes of conflict, such as inequality, poverty, and injustice, remain unresolved. Therefore, negative peace is essential but insufficient for long-term peace, as it only addresses the symptoms, not the deeper issues [27].

Positive Peace: Contrasting with negative peace, "positive peace" goes further than just the absence of violence—it involves creating systems that ensure justice, equality, and social integration. Galtung expanded his work to define positive peace as the presence of conditions that allow individuals and societies to thrive. This includes economic equality, social justice, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Positive peace is a proactive approach that focuses on building environments where individuals and communities can live in harmony, with access to resources, opportunities, and political rights. This definition isn't just about ending armed conflict; it's about creating strong social systems that prevent violence and encourage inclusivity. According to Galtung, positive peace is more sustainable because it addresses the deep-rooted causes of conflict and fosters a society where everyone feels valued and included. It's a peace based on fairness, equity, and human dignity, ensuring that conflicts are resolved peacefully [28].

Sustainable Peace: Sustainable peace is often used in the context of post-conflict societies, aiming to build lasting peace that prevents future violence. It's not only about ending hostilities but also about establishing long-term solutions that promote social, economic, and political stability. Sustainable peace focuses on rebuilding societies, institutions, and relationships that may have been damaged during conflict. It includes processes like reconciliation, truth-telling, and justice, making sure the harms of past conflicts are recognized and addressed. Sustainable peace also emphasizes peacebuilding efforts that involve local communities, governments, and international organizations working together to foster a culture of peace. Scholars like Lederach stress that sustainable peace requires conflict transformation—addressing the root causes of violence and supporting the creation of stable, peaceful societies. This approach blends short-term peacekeeping with long-term peacebuilding, focusing on structural changes and reconciliation [29].

While these definitions provide valuable insights, it's important to consider how peace might be understood in the context of modern global challenges. Issues like climate change, cyber warfare, and economic inequalities complicate traditional notions of peace. These global challenges call for broader, multidimensional frameworks that take into account environmental, technological, and economic factors in the peacebuilding process.

A more generalized definition of peace combines elements of both negative and positive peace, recognizing it as a dynamic process that involves not just the absence of violence but also the presence of justice and the creation of conditions that enable human flourishing. Peace is more than just the absence of war—it's a comprehensive state of well-being for individuals and communities. This broader understanding of peace reflects that it is a multifaceted concept that requires concerted efforts to tackle both immediate and long-term issues. These include conflict resolution, social justice, and sustainable development. Modern definitions of peace emphasize that it's a complex, evolving idea that demands cooperation across different sectors of society—from local communities to global organizations—to ensure stability, fairness, and human dignity for all [30], [31].

Theoretical framework

Neorealism, also called structural realism, is a theory in international relations that focuses on how the structure of the international system shapes the behavior of states. Developed by Kenneth Waltz in his influential book *Theory of International Politics* (1979), neorealism builds on classical realism, which emphasizes human nature and the pursuit of power. However, Waltz shifts the focus from individual desires to the structure of the international system itself, arguing that the anarchy of international politics forces states to prioritize their security and survival above all else. In this view, the balance of power—the distribution of power among states—plays a key role in determining how states interact. Neorealism suggests that states act primarily to protect their own national interests, especially in terms of power and security. Military alliances, under this theory,

are seen as mechanisms for balancing against potential threats, as states seek to either boost their own power or counter the power of rivals [20].

Looking at the Russo-Ukrainian conflict (2014–2025), neorealism offers a useful perspective on how military alliances like NATO contribute to the escalation of tensions. From a neorealist point of view, the formation and expansion of military alliances can be destabilizing because they shift the balance of power, making one group of states more powerful and creating insecurity in others. NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe, and particularly its growing relationship with Ukraine, can be seen as a direct challenge to Russia's dominance in the region. According to Waltz's theory, Russia's aggressive actions toward Ukraine in 2014 and its military response can be viewed as a natural reaction in an anarchic international system, where a rising power seeks to preserve its position and counter the perceived threat posed by NATO's expansion [21].

Neorealism helps to explain why military alliances, rather than promoting peace, can actually intensify tensions, pushing states into competition and conflict. In this light, NATO's expansion is not just a peacekeeping force but, in fact, a trigger for conflict, as Russia perceives the alliance as an existential threat. This dynamic has played a crucial role in the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach, relying on secondary data to explore the role of military alliances in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict from 2014 to 2025. The data, gathered from scholarly articles, reports, and official documents, were analyzed through content and thematic analysis. This method enabled a thorough investigation of the complex interactions between military alliances, with a particular focus on NATO and the CSTO, and how they shaped the course of the conflict. The thematic analysis helped identify recurring patterns and key themes around security, power dynamics, and diplomatic efforts, offering insight into the dual roles of military alliances as both triggers of war and potential peacemakers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

NATO's post-2014 eastern expansion and collective defense posturing influenced the Russo-Ukrainian conflict's trajectory

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO underwent important structural and strategic transformations that aimed to boost European security against perceived Russian aggression. The incorporation of Eastern European countries in the NATO framework during this period was not simply an expansion of membership; rather, it represented a geostrategic recalibration aimed at strengthening the eastern flank of the alliance. This movement was largely interpreted as a direct countermeasure to Russia's military maneuvers, particularly its commitment in Ukraine, which caused a reexamination of NATO's posture and defensive preparation.

After the events of 2014, NATO adopted a series of explicitly designed defense strategies to dissuade greater Russian expansionism and guarantee the safety of its members in Eastern Europe, countries that had once been under Soviet influence.

Academics such as Reisner clarify that the actions of the alliance were based on an emerging understanding of Russian military doctrine, which increasingly emphasized hybrid war, an amalgamation of conventional force and non-traditional tactics such as cyber aggression campaigns and misinformation. This raised concerns within NATO about the vulnerability of member states such as the Baltic Nations and Poland, given their proximity to Russia, and led to preventive defensive measures under the framework of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) [22], [8].

These strategies included substantial increases in military exercises and the establishment of multinational battle groups in strategic places along NATO's eastern border, with the aim of projecting strength and cohesion against Russian threats. Hrebeniuk et al. highlight how these preparations not only fortified deterrence, but also played a crucial role in the configuration of security discourse within Europe, promoting a renewed sense of collective defense between member states that, for decades, faced fewer imminent threats [23].

The nature of NATO's response has underlined a dynamic interaction in which military preparation and new assertiveness of NATO improved not only its deterrent capacity but also influenced the military calculation of the Kremlin. Tyushka postulates that the increase in NATO forces along the eastern flank caused a reevaluation of Russian military strategies and operational positions, resulting in a growing arms race characterized by increased military exercises and the deployment of advanced weapons. This sequence of events generated a spiral of insecurity in Eastern Europe, where NATO's defensive measures are perceived by Russia as provocative, thus justifying their own military escalations [24].

Orlandić also argues that the altered European defense panorama after 2014 has required an evolution of war tactics used by Russia, which demands a nuanced analysis of cause-and-effect relations between NATO actions and Russian military responses. As NATO adopted a deterrence policy through visibility and presence, Russia adapted its operational strategies, leading to a complex interaction characterized by periods of high tension and competitive military posture [25].

In summary, NATO's post-2014 expansion and defense strategies have significantly influenced the dynamics of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The actions taken by NATO in response to Russian maneuvers represent both a reflection and a catalyst for broader regional instability, requiring critical examination of evolving security architecture in Europe. These strategies extend beyond immediate military considerations to cover broader geopolitical changes, shaping the future panorama of international relations in the region.

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict, particularly after 2014, reveals a complex interaction between NATO's strategic actions and Russia's military responses, characterized by an intensive cycle of military posturing and information warfare. NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe catalyzed Russian anxieties regarding the erosion of its sphere of influence. The enhanced military position of the Alliance, marked by increased troop displays and joint exercises in Eastern European states, fundamentally stimulated

Russian military strategy, directly influencing Kremlin decisions to increase military participation in Ukraine and neighboring regions [26], [27].

In response to NATO activities, the Kremlin deployed a robust propaganda apparatus to frame NATO as a direct threat to Russian sovereignty. Bosica and Bogonez Muñoz illustrate that these campaigns aimed not only to shape public perception but also served as mechanisms to internally justify military operations. By portraying NATO as an aggressive entity undermining Russia, the Russian government sought domestic support and legitimacy for military interventions, particularly in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin built a dichotomy of ‘West versus Russia,’ framing any NATO presence in Eastern Europe as imperialism, which justified defensive military measures rather than offensives [28], [29].

The cause-and-effect relationship extends beyond posture; NATO’s strategic frameworks, including economic sanctions and military assistance to Ukraine, have further influenced conflict dynamics. De Luca and Giungato argue that sanctions were not only punitive but aimed to dismantle financial and technological support systems enabling Russian military actions. Strict coordination among NATO member states in implementing these sanctions reinforced NATO’s collective defense commitment, provoking volatile Russian reactions perceiving these as invasions of their geopolitical interests [30].

Furthermore, NATO’s strategies have met corresponding Russian military responses, including military build-up near NATO borders and intensified combat in Eastern Ukraine. Giungato et al. detail how these responses include hybrid warfare tactics combining conventional military aggression with cyber operations and information warfare, complicating traditional understandings of interstate conflict. This evolution reflects tactical adaptation to counter NATO’s collective security measures, emphasizing the interplay between military positioning and strategic communications [30].

Additionally, the European Union’s commitment and alignment with NATO exemplify a broader transatlantic effort to counter Russian narratives and military actions. EU economic sanctions coordinated with NATO initiatives represent a multifaceted deterrence approach, incorporating political, economic, and diplomatic measures. These strategies following Russian aggression underline conflict complexities as both reflect and reshape narratives used by Russia. Sanctions targeting specific sectors of the Russian economy have intensified Kremlin information operations, accusing the West of economic warfare and perpetuating victimization narratives [31].

The Russian narrative and military actions in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict can be understood as direct reactions to NATO’s post-2014 defense strategies. The interaction between military posturing and information warfare demonstrates sophisticated commitment strategies on both sides, highlighting the multifaceted nature of contemporary conflict. The ongoing situation requires nuanced examination of how these dynamics evolve amid changing geopolitical landscapes.

Role of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and allied Russian security initiatives in shaping conflict dynamics

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance of former Soviet republics, has played a significant yet often understated role in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Unlike NATO, which has a more pronounced international presence and a clear defensive pact in the West, the CSTO's role in the conflict has largely been reactive, aligned with Russia's geopolitical interests. The CSTO's response to the 2014 conflict following Russia's annexation of Crimea is indicative of its broader role in shaping conflict dynamics. Primarily, the CSTO has been a key element in bolstering Russia's strategic positioning in its sphere of influence, providing both political and military support to Moscow's policies. While the CSTO's contributions to military support have not been as overt as NATO's aid to Ukraine, its solidarity-building efforts among its member states have had significant consequences. These efforts have, on one hand, helped stabilize Russia's internal position, but on the other, they have intensified the East-West divide, effectively acting as a force multiplier for the escalation of hostilities [1].

One of the most notable features of the CSTO's involvement is its ability to provide a sense of unity and strategic cohesion among its members, such as Belarus, Armenia, and Kazakhstan. This solidarity has been crucial for Russia's broader regional security agenda. In response to NATO's eastern expansion, which Russia perceives as a direct threat, the CSTO has acted as a counterweight to the Western alliance. While its military interventions have been limited, the organization's political and diplomatic efforts have solidified Russia's military posturing. For instance, when Russia faced external pressure for its actions in Ukraine, the CSTO's diplomatic backing provided the Kremlin with a sense of legitimacy in its military operations, thus influencing the trajectory of the conflict in Russia's favor [2]. The alliance has also provided a critical platform for Russia to rally other post-Soviet states to its cause, strengthening Moscow's regional power and its narrative of resistance to NATO's perceived encroachment.

The CSTO's military initiatives, however, have often been more symbolic than operational. One example is the limited military involvement of CSTO forces in the conflict in Ukraine. While the CSTO's charter allows for collective defense, the organization's actions have primarily focused on internal stability, especially in regions like Central Asia and the Caucasus. In fact, CSTO forces have primarily been deployed in countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where domestic unrest posed a threat to Russian interests. This pattern of non-intervention in Ukraine further underscores the CSTO's reluctance to escalate military conflict directly. Nonetheless, the CSTO's public support for Russia has been a significant factor in the conflict's progression. Russia's ability to rely on the CSTO for diplomatic backing has provided the Kremlin with a veneer of regional legitimacy, thereby enabling it to maintain its aggressive posture without facing significant diplomatic isolation from its allies [3].

Moreover, the CSTO's support for Russian security initiatives extends beyond military backing. Russia's use of the CSTO as a diplomatic tool has been particularly

effective in shaping the conflict dynamics in favor of its long-term strategic objectives. While the CSTO's solidarity-building efforts have not always led to direct military intervention, they have created a broader geopolitical context in which Russia's actions are framed as part of a wider regional security agenda. The CSTO's response to Ukraine's shift toward the West – especially after the Euromaidan protests – has reinforced Russia's sense of urgency in maintaining its sphere of influence. This, in turn, has contributed to the intensification of the conflict. The failure of diplomatic negotiations, exacerbated by the CSTO's alignment with Russian objectives, has made it more difficult to resolve the conflict through peaceful means. This scenario highlights how the CSTO's role is not merely one of military solidarity, but one of geopolitical maneuvering, where its alignment with Russia serves to complicate efforts at peace negotiations, leading to further entrenchment of hostilities [4].

Dual role of military alliances (NATO and CSTO) as both deterrents and provocateurs in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

Military alliances, particularly NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), play a dual role in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, acting as both deterrents to aggression and provocateurs of heightened tensions. This complex dynamic reflects the paradox inherent in alliance politics, where defensive measures intended to prevent war can inadvertently contribute to its escalation. NATO's post-2014 actions, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support for separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine, have largely been perceived by Russia as a provocation. From a deterrence standpoint, NATO's military build-up along Russia's western frontier, including enhanced deployments in Poland, the Baltic States, and Romania, was framed as a necessary response to the threat of Russian aggression. This reinforced NATO's role as a defensive alliance, meant to provide security to its members in Eastern Europe. However, Russia interpreted NATO's growing presence as a direct threat to its sphere of influence, further solidifying its belief that the West was intent on encircling Russia. Consequently, NATO's actions, while aimed at deterrence, were viewed as provocations that contributed to the escalation of the conflict [1]. The continued enlargement of NATO, which included countries like Montenegro and North Macedonia, further exacerbated Russian fears and stoked tensions, demonstrating how defensive measures often carry the unintended consequence of provoking the very aggression they seek to deter.

On the other hand, NATO's provision of military aid and training to Ukraine has further blurred the lines between deterrence and provocation. NATO countries have sent significant amounts of weapons, intelligence, and training to Ukrainian forces, thereby strengthening Ukraine's defense capabilities. This assistance, while serving to deter further Russian military incursions, also escalated the conflict by making Ukraine a more formidable adversary. As Ukraine received NATO support, Russia interpreted these actions as interference in its regional sphere of influence, which ultimately deepened its resolve to assert its dominance over Ukraine. The delivery of advanced weaponry, such as anti-tank missiles, air defense systems, and artillery, by NATO allies was perceived by Russia as an overt challenge to its strategic interests in Ukraine. While NATO's support

was intended to safeguard Ukraine's territorial integrity and promote self-defense, it paradoxically led to an intensification of military hostilities. For instance, Russia's increased military operations in Donbas and Crimea can be seen as a direct response to NATO's perceived encroachment on its geopolitical interests. This dual role of NATO as both a protector of Ukrainian sovereignty and a provocateur of Russian aggression is a defining feature of the conflict's escalation [2].

Similarly, the CSTO, which is primarily led by Russia, has contributed to the dual dynamics of deterrence and provocation. While it has not been as overtly active in Ukraine as NATO, its role in other post-Soviet states has provided Russia with a platform for solidifying its regional security strategy. The CSTO's support for Russian policies in Ukraine has largely been diplomatic, providing political backing for Russia's actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. This diplomatic solidarity has helped Russia project a sense of regional stability, yet it has also functioned as a provocation for NATO and Western allies, who view the CSTO's alignment with Russia as a challenge to the Western-led security order. The CSTO's collective defense mechanism, though rarely invoked in direct military interventions, has allowed Russia to maintain a firm grip on its former Soviet republics, thus creating a security architecture that prevents the expansion of Western influence in the region. However, this very architecture has served to heighten tensions between Russia and NATO, as the CSTO's existence is viewed by the West as an extension of Russian geopolitical ambitions. As such, while the CSTO aims to deter threats to Russian influence, its actions often provoke responses from NATO that exacerbate the conflict [3].

The paradox of deterrence versus provocation in the context of military alliances is most evident in the broader geopolitical context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Both NATO and the CSTO have acted as stabilizing forces by providing military support to their respective allies. However, their activities have also contributed to the intractability of the conflict by reinforcing opposing narratives and entrenching the positions of both Russia and Ukraine. NATO's support of Ukraine has served as a means of deterrence against further Russian aggression, but it has also provided the Kremlin with a pretext for escalating its military efforts [4]. Conversely, the CSTO's diplomatic support of Russia has reinforced Moscow's regional power but has simultaneously increased tensions with the West. This dual role, in which alliances function both as deterrents and provocateurs, has profoundly shaped the conflict's trajectory, making it more difficult to find a path to de-escalation. The ongoing military support from NATO, alongside Russia's defensive measures through the CSTO, underscores the complexity of the situation, where actions intended to preserve peace often end up prolonging conflict.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study demonstrates that military alliances such as NATO and the CSTO play a dual and complex role in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, simultaneously acting as catalysts for war and potential peacemakers. NATO's expansion and support for Ukraine heightened Russia's insecurity, triggering aggressive responses

consistent with neorealist theory, while also serving as a deterrent against further Russian advances. Meanwhile, the CSTO provided diplomatic backing for Russia, reinforcing regional security dynamics and resistance to NATO influence. **Implication** : The findings imply that military alliances, rather than solely fostering peace, may exacerbate security dilemmas and intensify conflicts by provoking reciprocal insecurities, thus complicating peace efforts. Therefore, diplomatic engagement, confidence-building, and cautious regional strategies are essential to mitigate escalation risks. **Limitation** : However, the study is limited by its focus on neorealist perspectives and regional military alliances without extensive empirical analysis of internal political factors or the roles of other international actors, which may also significantly influence the conflict dynamics. **Future Research** : Future research should incorporate multidimensional approaches that examine the interplay between domestic politics, international institutions beyond military alliances, and economic factors to provide a more holistic understanding of conflict causation and resolution in the region.

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