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The Eastern Flank as NATO's Geopolitical Code: A Conceptualisation (2014–2023)

Wschodnia flanka jako kod geopolityczny NATO.
Próba konceptualizacji (2014–2023)

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The Eastern Flank as NATO's Geopolitical Code: A Conceptualisation (2014–2023)

This article focuses on NATO's Eastern Flank. It addresses the identified research gap in literature concerning the insufficient conceptualisation of NATO's Eastern Flank. Specifically, the authors attempt to answer two fundamental questions: what geographical area constitutes NATO's Eastern Flank, and which member states should be considered part of it? The analysis adopts a geopolitical perspective, with particular consideration of the concept of geopolitical codes. In so doing, it provides an answer to the question of whether international organisations are capable of defining geopolitical codes. Consequently, it brings a supplementary value to the theoretical field by establishing a framework for the analysis of geopolitical codes created by international organisations.

Wschodnia flanka jako kod geopolityczny NATO. Próba konceptualizacji (2014–2023)

Artykuł koncentruje się na problematyce wschodniej flanki NATO. Podejmuje zidentyfikowaną w literaturze przedmiotu lukę badawczą dotyczącą niewystarczającej konceptualizacji pojęcia wschodniej flanki NATO. Autorzy stawiają dwa zasadnicze pytania badawcze: jaki obszar geograficzny obejmuje wschodnia flanką NATO oraz które państwa członkowskie należy uznać za jej część? Analiza została przeprowadzona z perspektywy geopolitycznej, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem koncepcji kodów geopolitycznych. W tym kontekście artykuł odpowiada również na pytanie, czy organizacje międzynarodowe są zdolne do definiowania kodów geopolitycznych. Tym samym wnosi wkład do rozwoju teorii poprzez zaproponowanie ram analitycznych służących badaniu kodów geopolitycznych tworzonych przez organizacje międzynarodowe.

The problem of defining NATO's Eastern Flank

Following the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, there has been a significant increase in the use of the term *NATO's Eastern Flank* by scholars, analysts, essayists and politicians. It is particularly noteworthy that the latter frequently utilise the term in a loose manner disregarding strategic considerations and failing to engage in any form of spatial reflection. Overall, the term is rarely defined or conceptualised. Academic articles and professional analyses have not clarified the matter either by providing several different definitions of the term. It has been posited by certain authors that the geographical expanse of NATO's Eastern Flank extends from the Arctic to the Caucasus, encompassing the littorals of both the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea.¹

Conversely, alternative perspectives point that the term refers principally to Poland, the Baltic states and Romania² or constitutes the easternmost extent of the EU and NATO, comprising: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria.³ Furthermore, a considerable proportion of the extant literature focuses on the Baltic states and Poland when analysing NATO's Eastern Flank.⁴ In the post-2023 literature, some scholars have expanded the geographical scope of the Eastern

- 1 Ben Hodges et al., *One Flank, One Threat, One Presence: A Strategy for NATO's Eastern Flank* (Washington: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2020), accessed 17 January 2026, <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/OneFlank-OneThreat-OnePresence-Report.pdf>.
- 2 Justyna Gotkowska, *NATO's Eastern Flank – a New Paradigm* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 2016), accessed 17 January 2026, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-07-13/natos-eastern-flank-a-new-paradigm>.
- 3 Jerzy Biziewski, "Eastern Flank of EU and NATO – Challenge and Opportunity," in *Security and Defence in Europe*, ed. J. Martín Ramírez and Jerzy Biziewski (Cham: Springer, 2020): 179; Judy Dempsey, "NATO's Eastern Flank and Its Future Relationship with Russia," *Carnegie Europe*, 23 October 2017, accessed 17 January 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2017/10/natos-eastern-flank-and-its-future-relationship-with-russia?lang=en>.
- 4 David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2016), accessed 17 January 2026, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf.

Flank to include Finland and Sweden.⁵ In addition, other concepts have been proposed that potentially encompass, at least in part, the geographical area under consideration. These include NATO's North-Eastern Flank⁶ and NATO's South-Eastern Flank,⁷ however they do not necessarily constitute integral components of the Eastern Flank.⁸

As stated in the above reviewed literature, the initial group encompasses the Czech Republic, whereas the latter comprises Turkey – countries infrequently regarded within the ambit of the Eastern Flank.⁹ Such differences in terminology have the potential to create conceptual ambiguity in the academic literature where precision is essential.

The concept of NATO's Eastern Flank can also be analysed from a geo-strategic perspective. A significant contribution to this field was made by Ioana Constantin-Bercean who distinguished four strategic sub-theatres of the Eastern Flank: the Arctic area, the Baltic Sea, the continental

5 Alexander Lanoszka et. al., "Will the Eastern Flank Be Battle Ready?," *Globsec*, 12 July 2023, accessed 17 January 2026, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/will-eastern-flank-be-battle-ready>.

6 Christopher S. Chivvis, et al., *NATO's Northeastern Flank: Emerging Opportunities for Engagement* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), accessed 17 January 2026. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1400/RR1467/RAND_RR1467.pdf.

7 Carmen Sorina Rijnoveanu, "Romania's Approach on Deterrence," in *Detering Russia in Europe: Defence Strategies for Neighbouring States*, ed. Nora Vanaga and Toms Rostoks (New York: Routledge, 2019): 261, 263, 264.

8 See Andrew A. Michta, "All Not Quiet on NATO's Eastern Front," *Carnegie Europe*, 28 June 2016, accessed 17 January 2026, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/63934>.

9 Interestingly, Polish authorities include both the Czech Republic, which participates in the Bucharest Nine format, and Turkey, which was described by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs as one of the pillars of NATO's Eastern Flank, within their broader narrative of NATO's Eastern Flank. More generally, member states differ both in their perceptions of the region and in the ways they conceptualise the notion of the *Eastern Flank*. Consequently, national geopolitical codes relating to the Eastern Flank and their comparison warrant further research and constitute a promising avenue for future analysis. See Polska Agencja Prasowa, "Czaputowicz: Polska, Rumunia i Turcja to trzy filary wschodniej flanki NATO," 28 April 2020, accessed 17 January 2026, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C634904%2Cczaputowicz-polska-rumunia-i-turcja-trzy-filary-wschodniej-flanki-nato.html>.

Eastern Flank and the Black Sea.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the term's meaning extends beyond geostrategy. Nor can it be reduced to political geography, as not all of the NATO Eastern frontiers are considered Eastern Flank countries.¹¹

Research problem and theoretical approach

While it is methodologically justifiable to freely define notions and concepts – particularly those that are vague or ambiguous – it is essential to reflect more systematically on the definition and geographical scope of NATO's Eastern Flank. Therefore, the authors of this text postulate the need for a conceptualisation of the term *NATO's Eastern Flank*. In doing so, the study complements the existing literature and helps to fill an important gap in research on NATO's most recent deployments in Central and Eastern Europe. The foregoing considerations give rise to the following primary research questions: What constitutes *NATO's Eastern Flank*, and what is its geographical scope? In other words, which countries does the term encompass?

In fact, the notion of *Eastern Flank* emerged on the international agenda in response to specific and tangible geopolitical developments. Yet it should not be regarded as a purely geostrategic term. Rather, it is frequently linked to concepts such as reassurance, deterrence, militarisation, and the threat posed by the Russian Federation. It is also associated with the United States' involvement in the region, as well as some specific events and patterns of states' behaviour.

The term *Eastern Flank* thus combines a wide range of political and geographic factors. Evidently, it is not predicated merely on objective geographic criteria. For this reason, this article adopts the geopolitical paradigm which is understood as a way of conceptualising international relations and, more broadly politics, through the prism of space. Given that the study focuses on the meaning of the term *Eastern Flank*, it also takes into account some constructivist factors, particularly the meaning-making and narrative.

10 Ioana Constantin-Bercean, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank* (Riga: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2017): 88.

11 It generally refers to Norway and Turkey.

The study employs the concept of geopolitical codes, as originated in critical geopolitics, in order to analyse the subject matter.¹² Understandably, the concept of NATO's Eastern Flank and its spatial coverage can be differently interpreted by various international actors. Yet, the primary objective of this article is to develop a conceptualisation of NATO's Eastern Flank, with particular emphasis on defining its geopolitical code at the Alliance's level. To achieve this, the article addresses the secondary research question, namely: Whether international organisations can generate their own geopolitical codes?

The primary segment of the analysis encompasses the period from 2014 to 2023. It is marked by two significant events: the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Finland's accession to NATO in 2023. The authors of the study believe that Finland's and subsequently Sweden's joining NATO will result in a transformation of the definition of the Eastern Flank as NATO's geopolitical code. Yet this process is ongoing, and it is therefore too early to assess it objectively.¹³

As asserted by Colin Flint, the geopolitical code is the manner in which a nation orientates itself towards the global community.¹⁴ The concept discussed here is that of a nation's role in the international system, and its attitude towards the external environment. The geopolitical code may assume the form of a catchy political slogan, characterised by its descriptive nature and facile interpretability for both domestic and foreign audiences. Gertjan Dijkink points that geopolitical imaginations, which he refers to as representations, evolve gradually and are shaped by national geo-

12 On critical geopolitics see: Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996); Simon Dalby, "Recontextualising Violence, Power and Nature: The Next Twenty Years of Critical Geopolitics?," *Political Geography* 29, No. 5 (2010): 280–288; Colin Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2006).

13 See North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Joint Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of Poland, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz," 18 December 2025, accessed 17 January 2026, <<https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2025/12/18/joint-press-conference-by-nato-secretary-general-mark-rutte-with-the-minister-of-defence-of-poland-wladyslaw-kosiniak-kamysz>>.

14 Flint, *Introduction*: 55.

ographies and histories.¹⁵ Consequently, geopolitical codes cannot be produced out of the wider context. They cannot be abstract. As Peter Taylor and Colin Flint continue to assert, each country defines its own geopolitical code based on five main calculations:

1. Who are our current and potential allies?
2. Who are our current and potential enemies?
3. How can we maintain our allies and nurture potential allies?
4. How can we counter our current enemies and emerging threats?
5. How do we justify the four calculations above to our public and to the global community?¹⁶

Geopolitical codes represent a component of the narrative conducted by states and their authorities. This communication is employed by policy-makers to address both domestic and international audiences, with the objective of substantiating their actions, cultivating public support, garnering the endorsement of other nations, and forging international coalitions. The intent behind this communication is to ensure that various international actors adopt a neutral stance on contentious policies. The geopolitical codes, in this sense, can be considered a form of soft power (perhaps even sharp power) which facilitates the infiltration of the noosphere – the mental layer of international politics – by a variety of international actors. Evidently, there is a strong correlation between geopolitical codes and mental maps. Dijkink argues that these codes are susceptible to manipulation.¹⁷ Thus, the present study employs the concept of geopolitical codes as an analytical model for the collection and interpretation of facts.

Geopolitical codes as an analytical model

An attempt to interpret *NATO's Eastern Flank* as a geopolitical code appears to be a methodologically valuable and applicable approach. Conversely, deciphering the geopolitical code within the context of an international organisation may present certain challenges. It is the countries that define geopolitical codes, and the state-centric approach remains dominant

15 G. Dijkink, "Geopolitical Codes and Popular Representations," *Geojournal* 46, No. 4 (1998): 293.

16 Constantin-Bercean, *Reinforcing*: 88.

17 Dijkink, "Geopolitical": 294–298.

in literature.¹⁸ Dijkink thus asserts that geopolitical codes are the intellectual tools for practising statecraft.

It should also be noted that geopolitical codes are not exclusive to states. This has been already demonstrated by Flint's analysis of al-Qaeda's geopolitical code or by Paul Adams in his research on the geopolitical code of the small nation of Quebec.¹⁹ Indeed, an apparent decision-making and narrative centre have been demonstrated to facilitate the identification and interpretation of countries' geopolitical codes. It is rare for international organisations, or alliances, to meet the requirement.

The same can be said about NATO which comprises 32 member states, each with its distinct geopolitical background. They also show differences in their interpretation of international affairs and the anticipation of future events. The absence of a supranational body exclusively responsible for the policies and narrative of the Alliance is a shortcoming. All of NATO's activities, including the establishment of geopolitical codes, require a consensus of all allies.

Despite these challenges, the Eastern Flank can be interpreted as NATO's geopolitical code. This conclusion has been drawn from the Alliance's collective narrative as it has been articulated through the declarations of its governing body – the North Atlantic Council and the statements issued by the secretary general.²⁰ Most significantly, it can be seen in the mili-

18 See: ibidem: 293–299; Flint, *Introduction*; Rebin Fard, "The New Foreign-Policy Pendulum: Geopolitical Codes of German Foreign Policy in the Post-Bipolar World Order," *Politics in Central Europe* 15, No. 3 (2019): 383–418; Thomas Ambrosio and William A. Lange, "Mapping Kazakhstan's Geopolitical Code: An Analysis of Nazarbayev's Presidential Addresses, 1997–2014," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 55, No. 5 (2015): 537–559; Igor Okunev, "The New Dimensions of Russia's Geopolitical Code," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 12, No. 1 (2013): 67–75; Saeid Naji and Jayum Anak Jawan, "US Hegemonic Leadership and Its Geopolitical Codes," *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 2, No. 7 (2011): 149–157, accessed 26 January 2026. <https://ijbss.thebrpi.org/journal/index/307>.

19 Paul C. Adams, "The September 11 Attacks as Viewed from Quebec: The Small-Nation Code in Geopolitical Discourse," *Political Geography* 23, No. 6 (2004): 765–795.

20 Despite the fact that the influence of the secretary general remains constrained by broader systemic and institutional limitations, the political significance of this role and the opportunities for successful action as a policy entrepreneur and internationalised actor have been amplified in the post-Cold War era. See Ryan

tary initiatives employed for strategic communication. While the latter may represent an unconventional form of narrative construction, their ability to construct coherent narratives should not be underestimated. As with verbal expressions, such activities may bring tangible consequences in the real world. Furthermore, they have the capacity to influence the imagination of the public, giving rise to new narratives and geopolitical codes. To respond to the questions posed in the article, a qualitative analysis of selected declarations, statements and strategic communication initiatives has been employed.

The study examines how these elements have contributed to defining the spatial scope of *NATO's Eastern Flank* and how they relate to the fundamental questions underlying the construction of geopolitical codes.²¹ In other words, it analyses both verbal acts (primarily records from NATO summits and statements issued by NATO's secretary general) and concrete actions in strategic communication. Evidently, it is the activities that are undertaken in these two domains which shapes NATO's collective narrative on the Eastern Flank.

The article presents them chronologically, focusing also on the developments which took place between NATO summits, thereby capturing the evolving nature of NATO's Eastern Flank. Both NATO's actions and its verbal communications are situated within the context of the core questions which are crucial for defining a geopolitical code, as it was outlined before. In particular, the analysis focuses on how Russia is defined, the initiatives NATO undertakes in response to it, whom the Alliance identifies as its allies, and the policies and initiatives it pursues towards or in cooperation with them.

The emergence of the Eastern Flank in NATO discourse

Prior to the establishment of the Eastern Flank's geopolitical code and the identification of pertinent strategic communication initiatives, it is imperative to ascertain the moment when the term first emerged on NATO's

C. Hendrickson, "The Changing Role of NATO's Secretary General," in *NATO's Post-Cold War Politics*, ed. Sebastian Mayer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 124–139.

21 The questions about enemies and allies are considered fundamental for the conceptualisation of the term.

agenda.²² The catalyst for the popularisation of the term *NATO's Eastern Flank* was clearly the war in Ukraine. The meaning of this term has yet undergone a significant evolution since 2014. In addition to its geographic attributes, it has acquired supplementary descriptive features. The Crimean operation, which resulted in the Russian annexation of the peninsula and further destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine, caused increased efforts among some NATO members to pursue an extension of the Alliance's collective defence initiatives over countries that had joined it in 1999 and 2004.

Thus, today, the concept of the Eastern Flank no longer signifies exclusively the eastern borderlands of the Alliance. Instead, it is associated with specific events, the behaviours of states, their objectives, the attitudes of authorities, and other factors. The first signs of the militarisation of NATO's Eastern Flank emerged as early as March 2014. Specifically, on 5 March 2014, the US secretary of defence announced an additional deployment of 6 F-15s and 1 KC-135 to reinforce NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission. In the subsequent month, NATO's Airborne Warning and Control System aircrafts were deployed over Poland and Romania. On 1 April 2014, Radosław Sikorski, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, expressed his desire for the deployment of two multinational heavy armoured brigades to Poland, stating that he would consider this a satisfactory outcome.

All in all, profound structural changes were introduced only following the NATO summits in Newport in 2014 and Warsaw in 2016, with a further intensification of this process after the Madrid Summit in 2022. The Warsaw Summit marked the Alliance's transition from reassurance to deterrence, while the Madrid Summit broadened this approach by placing equal emphasis on deterrence and defence.

Constructing the Eastern Flank: NATO's strategic communication (2014–2023)

Newport (2014)

In view of the events in Ukraine, the 27th Summit of the North Atlantic Alliance, which took place in Newport in September 2014, was of extraordinary importance for the Eastern Flank. The fifth paragraph of the sum-

22 The period of appearance outlines the timeframe of the analysis.

mit's declaration included the language about Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine. However, in the very same document the Russian Federation was still described as a challenge to NATO rather than its adversary. It was emphasised that the Alliance did not seek confrontation with Russia, but an agreement and cooperation on many levels, although without compromising the principles on which the Alliance was based.

Furthermore, it was announced that "in the eastern part of the Alliance" / "on the territories of the eastern Allies" (the term *Eastern Flank* did not appear in summit declarations or communiqués until the 2023 Vilnius Summit), ground, air, and naval forces would be deployed on a persistent rotational basis, accompanied by the necessary infrastructure, including equipment storage facilities. The communiqué also announced the enhancement of the NATO Response Force (NRF) through the creation of a new component – the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). Designed for rapid deployment, the VJTF is capable of deploying within days in response to crises on the Alliance's periphery. The allies also agreed to intensify joint military exercises in member states that had joined NATO after 1999, as well as to strengthen the Baltic Air Policing mission over the Baltic states.

The establishment of NATO Forces Integration Units was intended to coordinate activities in the six countries on the Eastern Flank: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. Additional units were established in Slovakia and Hungary, achieving full operational readiness in 2016–2017.²³

Overall, although the declaration issued after the Alliance's summit in Newport did not explicitly mention *NATO's Eastern Flank*, it put a strong emphasis on the need to strengthen NATO's eastern region, while pointing in many places to Russia's aggressive and illegal actions towards Ukraine as well as its interference in Georgia's politics. Additionally, the document revealed that the Alliance had identified other challenges posed by Russia's

23 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Wales Summit Declaration," 5 September 2014, accessed 17 January 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2014/09/05/wales-summit-declaration>; John R. Deni, "NATO's New Trajectories after the Wales Summit," *Parameters* 44, No. 3 (2014): 61, 65; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU)," accessed 17 January 2026, <https://lc.nato.int/operations/current-operations>.

activities, including those in Georgia and Moldova, yet still without perceiving the Russian Federation as a threat.²⁴

The naming of Ukraine as a long-standing and distinctive partner of the Alliance is also noteworthy. Nevertheless, although the security crisis on the Alliance's eastern border was a central theme of the summit declaration, it also revealed that there were differing threat perceptions among NATO member states. At the time, Russia appeared to be a significant threat to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia or Romania, but not necessarily to southern European states for whom the situation in the Mediterranean region was of paramount importance.²⁵

The direct result of Russia's annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas and the decisions taken at the Newport Summit was to increase the readiness of the Allied Joint Force Command (JFC) Brunssum and JFC Naples which were responsible for the North-Eastern and South-Eastern flanks, respectively. They moved from rotational command to permanent standby. In addition, the certification process was accelerated and the scope of responsibility of the Multinational Corps Northeast (MNC NE) in Szczecin was increased.²⁶

The term *Eastern Flank* entered into the official NATO discourse at the end of 2014, subsequently appearing with increased frequency in official statements issued by the Alliance's secretary general.²⁷ Concurrently, the term became more and more present in media and analytical dis-

24 "Wales Summit Declaration"; Deni, "NATO's": 61–68.

25 Ibidem: 57.

26 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO Response Force," accessed 17 January 2026, <https://lc.nato.int/operations/nato-response-force>; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "The NATO Response Force – NATO's Versatile Arrow in the Quiver to Quickly Respond to Any Security Challenge," 17 December 2021, accessed 17 January 2026, <https://jfcbs.nato.int/page5964943/2021/the-nato-response-force-natos-versatile-arrow-in-the-quiver-to-quickly-respond-to-any-security-challenge>.

27 Permanent Delegation of Romania to NATO, "Joint Statement by NATO Secretary General Mr. Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Romania, Mr. Klaus Iohannis, (Brussels 16 January)," 16 January 2015, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://nato.mae.ro/en/local-news/872>; Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, "Stoltenberg: NATO Summit to Raise Military Presence on Eastern Flank," 30 May 2016, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-summit-to-raise-military-presence-on-eastern-flank/27767373.html>.

course.²⁸ This trend was reflected in the growing number of *Google* searches for the phrase *Eastern Flank* (see figure 1).

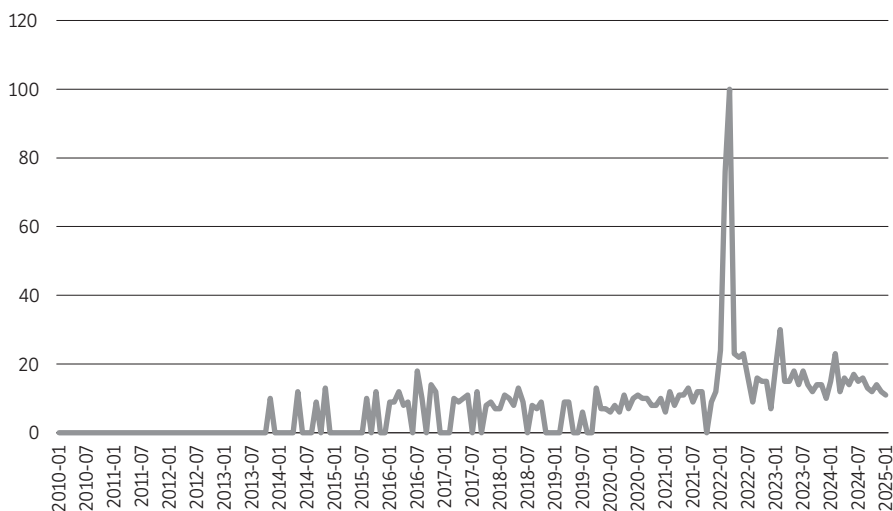


Figure 1. Interest over time for the term *Eastern Flank*

Source: own analysis. Values represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart during the selected period. A value of 100 indicates the peak popularity of the search term

Importantly, by the 2016 Warsaw Summit, the term *Eastern Flank* had already been frequently used in numerous analyses of the security situation in the region.²⁹ They included those authorised by NATO agencies.³⁰ Furthermore, the term was used in the declaration issued

28 Meghan Keneally, “‘Russian Invasion’ of Ukraine Prompts UN Emergency Meeting,” *ABC News*, 28 August 2014, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/russian-invasion-ukraine-prompts-emergency-meeting/story?id=25156827>; Jonathan Beale, “British Army in NATO Black Eagle Exercise,” *BBC News*, 21 November 2014, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-30142764>; Judy Dempsey, “Judy Asks: Should NATO Have Bases in Its East?,” *Carnegie Europe*, 4 June 2014, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2014/06/judy-asks-should-nato-have-bases-in-its-east>.

29 Shlapak and Johnson, *Reinforcing*: 1.

30 Eoin M. McNamara, “Securing the Nordic-Baltic Region,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 17 March 2016, accessed 18 January 2026, https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/nato-archives-online/b/8/2/b82f273335b4687c51a2bd4acb1340b40cf0fef64dafce7d9b23a99f41fba700/2016-03-17_Securing_the_Nordic-Baltic_region_ENG.pdf.

after the inaugural meeting of the Bucharest Nine (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) to specifically refer to these countries. The meeting was convened upon the initiative of the presidents of Poland and Romania. It took place in Bucharest in November 2015.³¹

The figures included in the study show the key initiatives undertaken by NATO as part of the construction of the Eastern Flank's geopolitical code, the geographical scope of the Eastern Flank in successive periods, its evolutionary character, as well as NATO's partners and adversaries (see figures 2–5). Through concrete actions, including the deployment of permanent units and the establishment of command structures in NATO member states, the geographical scope of the Eastern Flank was further specified.

Warsaw (2016)

The 2016 North Atlantic Council summit in Warsaw was primarily focused on the Russian threat, as evidenced by the summit's location. While Russia was mentioned 43 times in the declaration after the Newport Summit, two years later, in the declaration issued after the Warsaw Summit, it was mentioned 55 times. However, the contexts in which Russia was mentioned remained largely unchanged. For instance, even though Russia was identified as a key factor in the destabilisation of the situation in Ukraine, it was still characterised as a challenge to the Alliance. A significant portion of the communiqué was dedicated to strategic messages that underscore the absence of any negative intentions, or threats, from NATO towards Russia, and the openness to dialogue with Russia, contingent on its cessation of violations of international law. Noteworthy is the fact that the communiqué makes numerous references to NATO's partners in the Alliance's immediate neighbourhood.

It presented NATO's relationship with Sweden and Finland as mutually beneficial partnerships, emphasising the continuation of efforts to strengthen bilateral cooperation, particularly in areas of political consultations,

31 Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, "Joint Declaration on Allied Solidarity and Shared Responsibility," 4 November 2015, accessed 16 January 2026, <https://www.prezident.sk/en/article/joint-declaration-on-allied-solidarity-and-shared-responsibility/>; Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, "New Wave of Regional Cooperation in Central Europe as a Response to New Threats," *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 18, No. 1 (2020): 79–97.

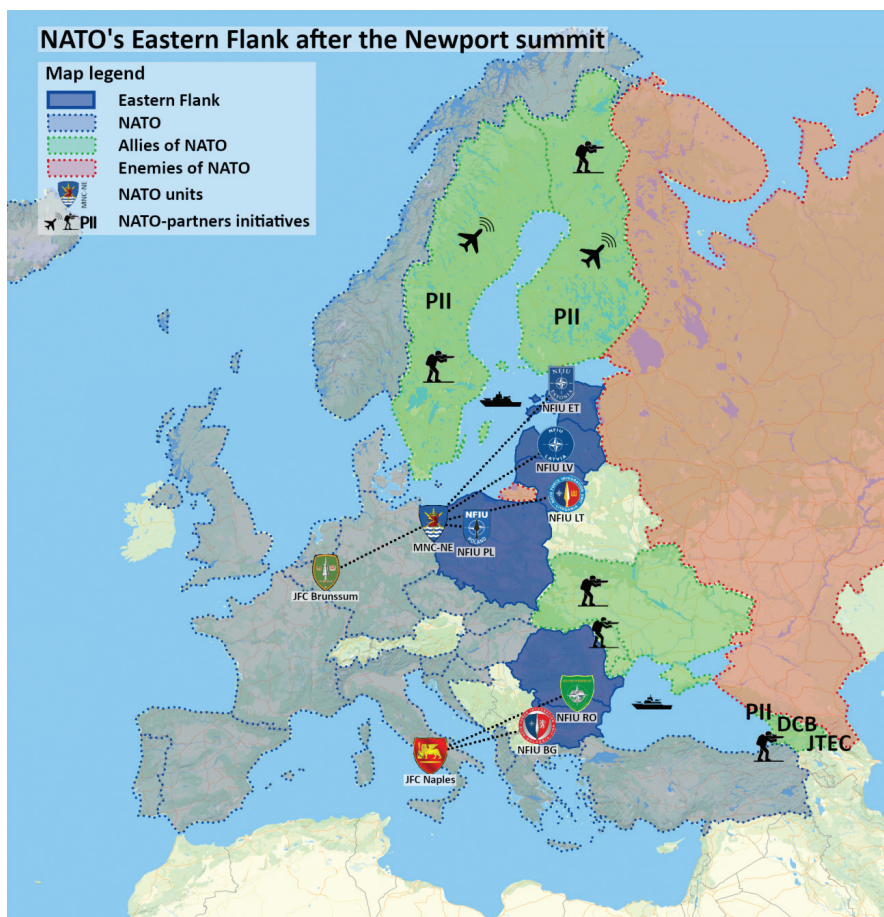


Figure 2. NATO's Eastern Flank after the Newport Summit

Source: own analysis. Includes selected major strategic communication initiatives involving NATO and partner countries: the Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII), Defence and Capacity Building (DCB), the Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC), manoeuvres, training exercises, naval exercises, and the opening of airspace to AWACS aircraft

improved situational awareness, and joint military exercises. Since 2014 these two countries have indeed intensified their military cooperation with NATO (predominantly with the United States), shifting their policy from neutrality to non-alignment. The communiqué also declared NATO's support and dialogue with Ukraine and Georgia to ensure security and stability in the Black Sea region, while for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova, which were referred to as partners, support was declared for their territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty.

Concurrently, the Warsaw Summit declared the establishment of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in the Baltic states and Poland, and the Tailored Forward Presence (TFP) in Bulgaria and Romania. Four multinational battle groups stationed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland and a multinational brigade in Romania were established consequently. The difference between EFP and TFP lies in their respective functions: while for the former it is deterrence, for the latter it is predominantly a training activity. These initiatives, in essence, entail the deployment of *de facto* permanent rotational multinational battalion battle groups, accompanied by heavy equipment, with the objective of fortifying the Alliance's deterrence capabilities along its eastern periphery.

This decision represented a significant shift in the Alliance's previous policy of excluding countries which had joined NATO after 1999 from collective defence initiatives. Moreover, the Alliance demonstrated a positive response to the Polish government's offer to establish a multinational division headquarters on the Polish territory, with the aim to coordinate the aforementioned battalion groups. As a result, the Headquarters Multinational Division North East (MND-NE) was formed in Elbląg. Simultaneously, an analogous Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast (MND-SE) was established on the Romanian territory. Significantly, the summit's final communiqué emphasised nuclear deterrence, which should be seen as an indirect response to Russia's leadership who repeatedly uses the threat of nuclear weapons as an instrument of foreign policy.³²

32 Artur Kacprzyk, "Conventional Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank after the Warsaw Summit," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 48 (898) (2016): 1-2; Alexander Mattelaer, "The NATO Warsaw Summit: How to Strengthen Alliance Cohesion," Washington: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University Press, 2016: 1-2, accessed 20 January 2026, <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/strategic-forums/96/>; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," 9 July 2016, accessed 18 January 2026, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO Multinational Battlegroups," accessed 18 January 2026, <https://mncne.nato.int/forces/nato-enhanced-forward-presence>; Amélie Zima, *NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in the Baltic States and Poland: Assets and Limits of the Multilateral Conventional Deterrence* (Paris: Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire, 2022): 6-7, accessed 26 January 2026, https://www.irsem.fr/storage/file_manager_files/2025/03/rp-irsem-131-zima-nato-en.pdf.

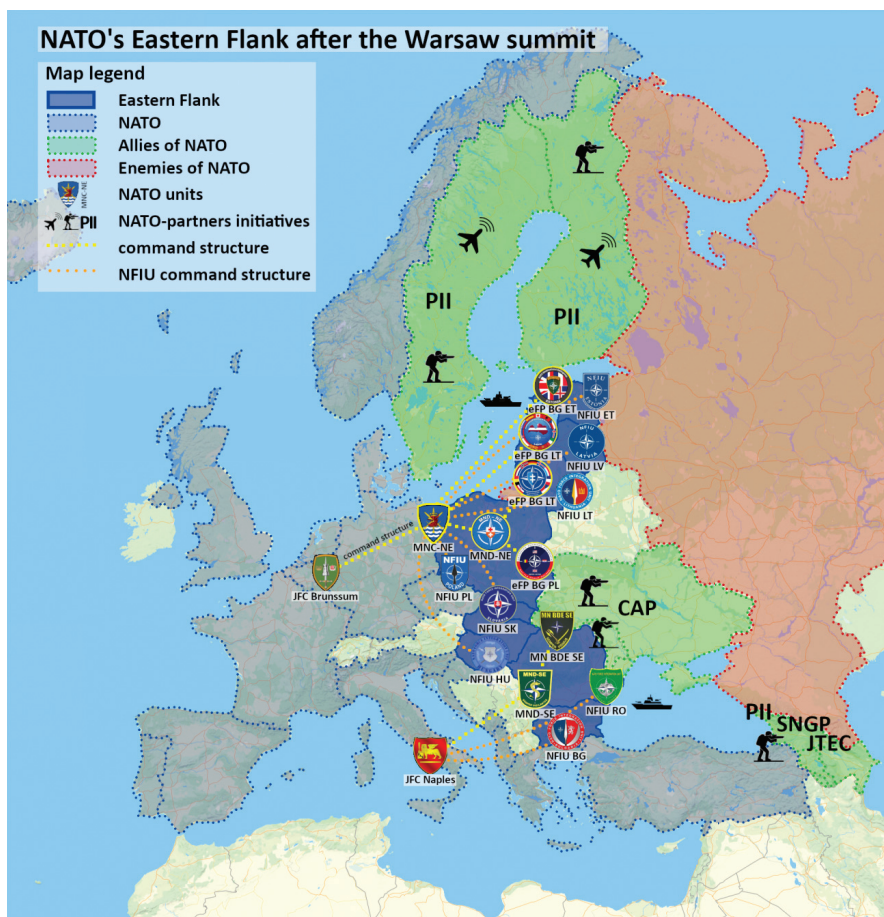


Figure 3. NATO's Eastern Flank after the Warsaw Summit

Source: own analysis. Includes selected major strategic communication initiatives involving NATO and partner countries: the Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII), the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP), the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP), the Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC), military manoeuvres, training exercises, naval exercises, and the opening of airspace to AWACS aircraft

Brussels (2018)

From the perspective of this study's research objectives, the outcomes of the 2018 Brussels Summit were of limited significance. The meeting was dominated by intra-alliance debates over defence spending, with European allies continuing to spend substantially less than the United States. In terms of discourse, there were no significant departures from previous summits; the criticisms directed towards Russia remained largely unchanged, including that of the illegal occupation of Crimea and

the violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as well as its support for separatists in Donbas. More broadly, concerns have been raised about undermining of the Euro-Atlantic security and international order through hybrid actions. It was repeated that the Alliance neither poses a threat to the Russian Federation nor seeks confrontation with it.

However, allegations that Russia violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) through the deployment of the 9M729 Iskander-K missiles were a new development.³³ With regard to NATO's partners in Eastern Europe, the summit once again reaffirmed its support for the territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. It also reiterated the commitment made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia would eventually become a member of the Alliance.

The Alliance reiterated its commitment to Ukraine, highlighting the country's progress in implementing reforms while acknowledging its aspirations for further integration into NATO. At the same time, Ukraine was described as a longstanding partner of the Alliance. A separate paragraph was devoted to cooperation with the European Union (EU), indicating that it is a unique and essential partner for NATO, while bilateral cooperation "is particularly important in the face of common security challenges in shared eastern and southern neighbourhoods."³⁴

While there were already signs of growing impatience in some Western European countries regarding the situation in Ukraine – and perhaps even a desire to return to the pre-2014 *status quo* – the summit also announced concrete measures to strengthen the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture by enhancing the NRF through the NATO Readiness Initiative. Even though the post-Brussels Summit declaration did not explicitly state

33 See also Artur Kacprzyk, "NATO's Stance in the INF Treaty Crisis," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 164 (1235) (2018): 1–2, accessed 18 January 2026, https://pism.pl/publications/NATOs_Stance_in_the_INF_Treaty_Crisis; Lanoszka, "The INF Treaty: Pulling Out in Time," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, No. 2 (2019): 48–67, accessed 18 January 2026, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-13_Issue-2/Lanoszka.pdf.

34 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Brussels Summit Declaration," 11 July 2018, accessed 26 January 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2018/07/11/brussels-summit-declaration>.

against which country these forces were to be used, it did refer to their use to deter a potential aggressor (due to their nature, it could obviously be a state aggressor) or for collective defence in an event of an attack. This clearly referred to Russia.

The final element in increasing the Alliance's ability to effectively counter conventional military threats was the command system reform. In this regard, the establishment of the JFC in Norfolk in the United States (responsible for the possible redeployment of troops across the Atlantic) and the Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm in Germany (responsible for logistics on the European continent) was of key importance. Furthermore, the process of establishing new NATO command structures, decided on at NATO's Warsaw Summit, continued with the establishment of the Headquarters Multinational Division North (MND-N) in Denmark and Latvia (framework nations: Denmark and Latvia) and the Headquarters Multinational Division Centre (MND-C) based in Hungary (framework nations: Hungary and Croatia).

These entities attained operational readiness in 2022 and 2023, respectively. While not explicitly articulated, these actions by the Alliance can be interpreted as a response to the escalating threat posed by the Russian Federation – the sole state capable of conventionally endangering the Alliance's security in Europe. NATO developed capabilities to address such threats.³⁵

London (2019)

The aim of the December 2019 NATO Summit in London was to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Washington Treaty and the end of the Cold War. While the event was intended to cement transatlantic unity, it was convened at the time of a growing political crisis within the Alliance. On the one hand, there was a discernible trend towards strategic retrenchment among the Anglo-Saxon powers, exemplified by the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU in 2016 as well as the United States' growing strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific region and the challenge posed by China. On the other hand, there was a notable rift among the allies, most notably reflected in the growing

35 Ibidem; Artur Kacprzyk, "Perspectives on NATO's Deterrence and Defence on the Eastern Flank," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 125 (1196) (2018): 1–2.

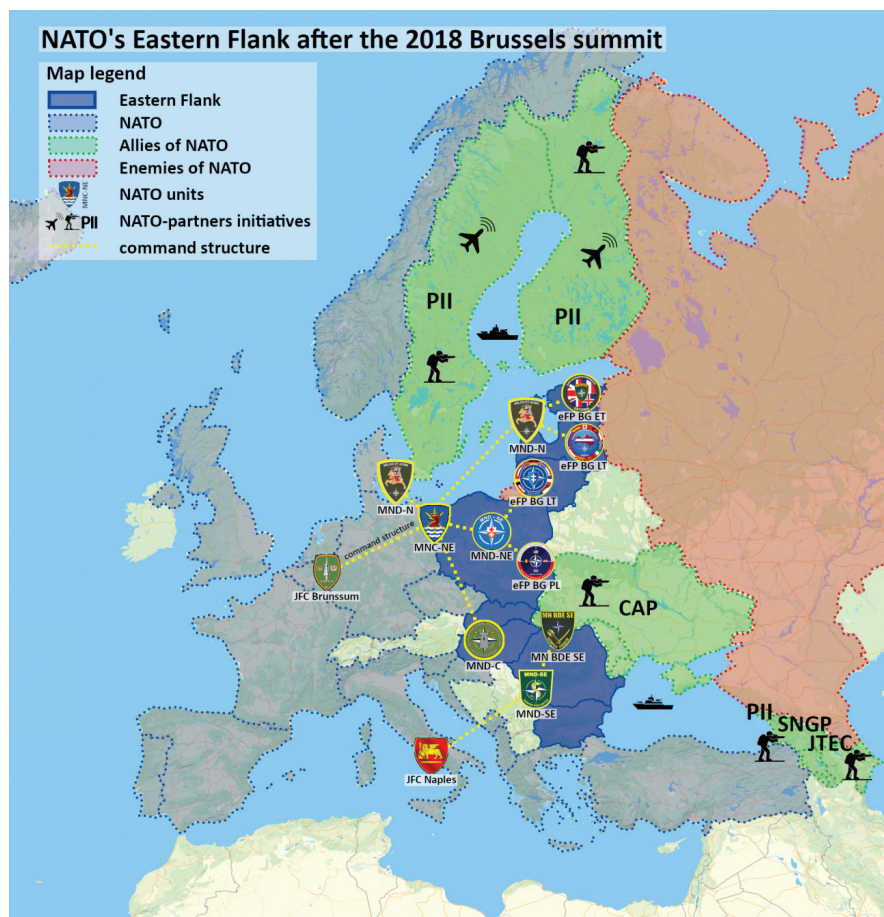


Figure 4. NATO's Eastern Flank after the Brussels Summit

Source: own analysis. Includes selected major strategic communication initiatives involving NATO partner countries: Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII), Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP), Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC), manoeuvres, training activities, naval exercises, and the opening of airspace to AWACS aircraft

rapprochement between Turkey and Russia³⁶ and the increasingly assertive calls by Western European leaders, most notably the French President Emmanuel Macron, to ensure a strategic autonomy for Europe. These calls

36 See Krzysztof Strachota and Andrzej Wilk, "The S-400 for Turkey: The Crisis in Turkish-American Relations Escalates," *OSW Commentary*, No. 305 (2019): 1-9, accessed 26 January 2026, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-06-12/s-400-turkey-crisis-turkish-american-relations-escalates>.

met scepticism in Central and Eastern European countries, where the United States is widely regarded as the primary security guarantor within NATO.

Nevertheless, the summit proved to be a breakthrough in many respects. Although the final declaration was short, and included only nine points, the Russian threat occupied a prominent place in it. Namely, for the first time the Russian Federation was actually called a threat to Euro-Atlantic security. In addition, it was articulated in the declaration that the Alliance was standing in opposition to Russia's persistent breaches of the INF Treaty, thereby underscoring the significance of nuclear deterrence. The Alliance's endeavours to ensure the security of non-NATO member states were also explicitly mentioned, thereby highlighting the ever-increasing cooperation with partners in neighbouring and non-neighbouring countries (not explicitly mentioned), as well as international organisations – EU in particular. However, no mention was made of the Alliance's eastern periphery, or even of the Eastern Flank, which is central to the research problem addressed in this article.³⁷

Brussels (2021)

From a symbolic standpoint, the 30th NATO summit held in Brussels was of a considerable significance. Firstly, it was convened in the midst of the most severe health crisis in decades. Secondly, it was intended to symbolise, at least in the eyes of European leaders, a new chapter in transatlantic relations following the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States. At the declarative level, the United States demonstrated its commitment to these expectations by confirming its obligations under article 5 of the Washington Treaty and consenting to the extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) for another five years.

The communiqué issued by the Brussels summit was consistent with those from the previous years, with Russia being mentioned in it for 61 times and once again explicitly identified as a threat to the Euro-Atlantic

37 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "London Declaration," 4 December 2019, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2019/12/04/london-declaration>; Rafał Lipka, *The London Summit as a Test for NATO Unity* (Warsaw: Casimir Pulaski Foundation, December 2019): 1–7; Paul Belkin, *NATO: Key Issues Following the 2019 Leaders' Meeting* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2020): 1–13.

security. The communiqué accused Russia of conducting hybrid activities against NATO member states and their non-NATO partners, including attempts to manipulate election results. It also criticised Russia's nuclear coercion, its violations of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and its aggressive actions against shipping in the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea.

In the light of these claims, the Alliance formally declared the cessation of all forms of collaboration, both military and civilian, with the Russian Federation. At the same time, it expressed its willingness to engage in dialogue with Russia, provided it refrains from aggressive actions that undermine the international order. In parallel, NATO declared its intention to continue developing both conventional and nuclear deterrence capabilities. The declaration reaffirmed Alliance's earlier assertion that in the future Georgia and Ukraine could join NATO. It highlighted the growing significance of the EFP and TFP in Central and Eastern European countries – a defence and deterrence instrument on the Alliance's eastern periphery. Notably, for the first time, a dedicated section was allocated to Belarus, underscoring that its policies and actions impact regional stability.³⁸

Importantly, the term *Eastern Flank* was incorporated into the official NATO report titled *NATO 2030: United for a New Era*, which was prepared by a group of experts appointed by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government in London in December 2019.³⁹ At that time, the allied countries decided on the need for a strategic reflection, thus laying the foundations for a new NATO Strategic Concept. It was to replace the security strategy adopted at the Lisbon Summit in 2010.⁴⁰

The concept of the Eastern Flank is mentioned in the new report only three times (and twice with the other flanks in a broader context) and mainly in the context of the Russian threat. At the same time, Russia is identified as

38 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Brussels Summit Communiqué," 14 June 2021, accessed 18 January 2026, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm.

39 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2030: United for a New Era: Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General* (Brussels 2020): 16–17.

40 Justyna Gotkowska, "NATO 2030: Towards a New Strategy," *OSW Commentary*, No. 398 (2021): 1, accessed 26 January 2026, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2021-06-23/nato-2030-towards-a-new-strategy>.

the Alliance's most important geopolitical challenge and the principal military threat over the coming decade. The report reiterates the key statements which were included in the summit's declarations. Namely, the Russian Federation is accused of using chemical weapons on the Alliance's territory (the case in question is the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom) as well as compromising the Euro-Atlantic security (including freedom of navigation and airspace over the Atlantic Ocean) – both the Alliance as a whole and individual member states. The report also advocated for maintaining NATO's existing dual-track approach which assumes both remaining open to dialogue with Russia, subject to prevailing conditions strengthening conventional and nuclear deterrence.⁴¹

Extraordinary summits (2022)

NATO's new security strategy was formally adopted at the Alliance's summit held in June 2022 in Madrid. However, prior to this event, on the day after Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, the heads of state and government of the Alliance convened for an emergency virtual summit, which was followed by a concise communiqué. It stated that, in NATO's view, Russia's aggression was the most significant threat to the Euro-Atlantic security in recent decades. It also expressed NATO's strongest condemnation of the actions of the Russian Federation and Belarus, which had provided support for Russia's aggression in Ukraine, and stated that those responsible would be held accountable. Concurrently, the allies declared their intention to provide Ukraine with both political and material support, while simultaneously increasing deterrence measures in the countries situated on the Alliance's eastern borders (including the deployment of ground and air forces in the region).

The allies reaffirmed their obligations stipulated in article 5 of the Washington Treaty. The Swedish and Finnish governments were also participants in the meeting and signatories of the communiqué, which should be regarded as an indication of their future efforts towards integration into the Alliance.⁴²

41 *NATO 2030: United, passim.*

42 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government on Russia's Attack on Ukraine," 25 February 2022, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2022/02/25/statement-by-nato-heads-of-state-and-government-on-russias-attack-on-ukraine>.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO leaders convened another extraordinary summit in Brussels on 24 March 2022. During the meeting, they announced in response to the Russian aggression the deployment of 40,000 troops to the countries of the Eastern Flank, which marked the first time when this term was used in a summit declaration. In addition, NATO announced the establishment of four new multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, bringing the total number of such formations on the Alliance's Eastern Flank to eight.

Particularly noteworthy is the communiqué's reference to the potential threat posed by weapons of mass destruction and that NATO forces need to be adequately prepared to respond to the consequences of their possible use by Russia, including by supporting Ukraine in this regard. The allies also called on Moscow to end its unlawful aggression and urged China not to provide Russia with the material, political and informational support. Once again NATO's communiqué attributed the blame for the aggression not only to Russia but also to Belarus. It expressed the Alliance's readiness to both welcome new members and to announce a new strategic concept at the forthcoming Madrid Summit.⁴³

Madrid (2022)

As noted before, the Madrid Summit held in June 2022 introduced a new security strategy for the Alliance. It explicitly designated Russia as the most direct and significant threat to the security, peace, and stability of the Euro-Atlantic region. It did not rule out the possibility of a direct military attack by Russia against a NATO member state. This shows a significant departure from the previous Strategic Concept, in which Moscow was presented as NATO's strategic partner. Although the new Strategic Concept did not explicitly use the term *Eastern Flank*, it appeared in the Madrid Summit Declaration, which committed the Alliance to strengthening its forward defence through a persistent rotational presence and by expanding existing battlegroups to brigade-level formations.

43 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government," 24 March 2022, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2022/03/24/statement-by-nato-heads-of-state-and-government>; Wojciech Lorenz, "Special NATO Summit in Brussels," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 70 (2022): 1–2.

Importantly, the new document reaffirmed that the Russian Federation posed a direct threat to the Alliance, while abandoning the previously established formula of expressing openness to dialogue with Russia. Although it mentioned maintaining open channels of communication with the Kremlin to manage and mitigate risks and prevent escalation, it made it clear that Russia's hostile policies preclude any partnership with the Alliance.

Both documents place considerable emphasis on deterrence and defence, including conventional capabilities and nuclear deterrence. The declaration also pointed to Belarus's involvement in Russia's war against Ukraine, calling on Minsk to cease its support for Russia's aggression. Among the developments most relevant to the present analysis was NATO's invitation offered to Finland and Sweden to join the Alliance. It carries both symbolic significance, namely NATO's enlargement extends the broadly defined eastern periphery, and practical implications for deterrence and defence against aggression from the East, strengthening NATO's position in the Baltic Sea region and making the Baltic Sea an almost exclusively NATO maritime space.

For the first time, substantial recognition is given to NATO partners. Beyond the two Scandinavian nations, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, the document includes Bosnia and Herzegovina, Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Jordan, and Mauritania. Partnerships with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine are presented not only in terms of support for their independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, but also in relation to their Euro-Atlantic aspirations.⁴⁴

44 For further discussion of NATO's cooperation with the Indo-Pacific Four following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, see Jakub Bornio, "NATO Defence Ministers Meet Their Indo-Pacific Counterparts: Towards a Global Alliance?," *IEŚ Commentaries*, No. 1234 (2019) (2024): 1–4. See also: Justyna Gotkowska and Jacek Tarociński, "NATO after Madrid: How Much Deterrence and Defence on the Eastern Flank?," *OSW Commentary*, No. 462 (2022): 1–9; Dick Zandee, "NATO's Vilnius Summit," *Atlantisch Perspectief* 47, No. 3 (2023): 20–24; Daniel Kochis and Thomas W. Spoeher, "NATO Summit Madrid: Reinforcing Deterrence at This Crucial Time Is in the U.S. National Interest," *The Heritage Foundation Issue Brief*, No. 5276 (2022): 1–8; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Madrid Summit Declaration," 29 June 2022, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2022/06/29/madrid-summit-declaration>; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept* (Brussels 2022), accessed 18 January 2026, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf.

The term *Eastern Flank* had firmly entered the political discourse among NATO decision-makers around the time of NATO's Madrid Summit.⁴⁵ This is also the moment when it reached its highest point in *Google* search hits (see figure 1).

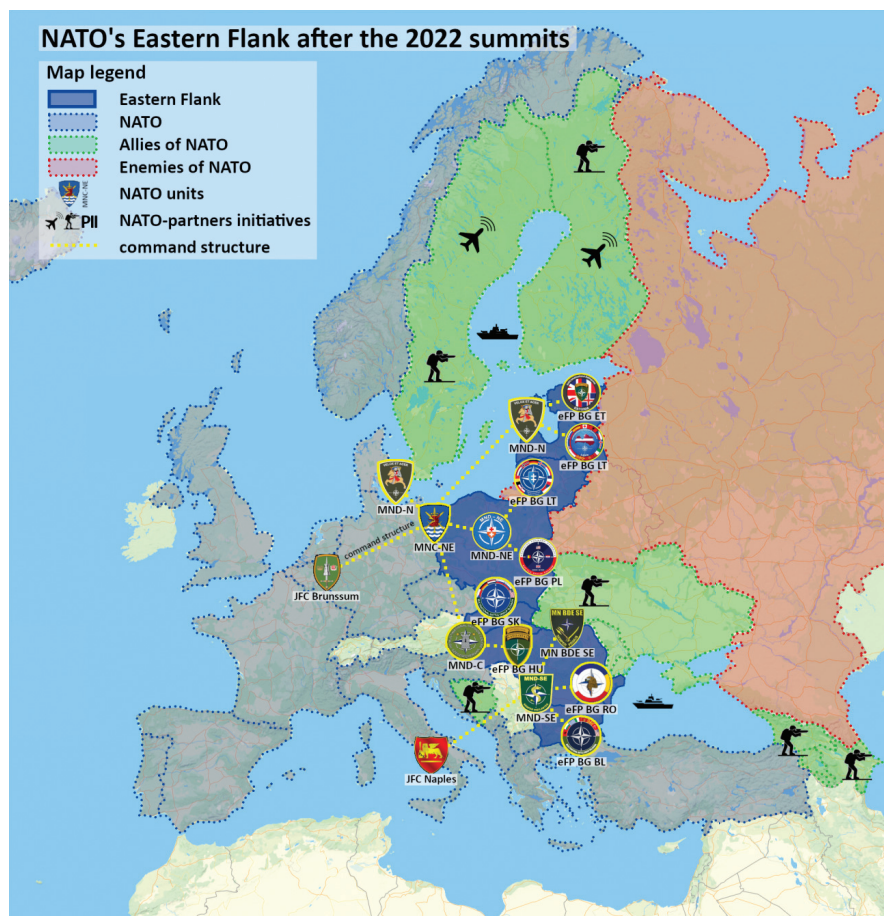


Figure 5. NATO's Eastern Flank after the 2022 summits

Source: own analysis

- ⁴⁵ See Xinhua, “NATO Chief Says to Boost Forces on Eastern Flank,” 16 June 2022, accessed 18 January 2026, <http://english.news.cn/20220616/f7214c6e8e1e4odba5901514be40d190/c.html>; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Joint Press Conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda,” 15 February 2023, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.nato.int/pr/2023-02-15-joint-press-conference-with-nato-secretary-general-jens-stoltenberg-and-the-president-of-poland-andrzej-duda/>

Vilnius (2023)

The next NATO summit, held in Vilnius in 2023, proved to be of key importance for the ongoing process of establishing the geopolitical code of the Eastern Flank. The summit communiqué used the term *Eastern Flank* five times, now capitalised as a proper noun. It did so in the context of reinforcing the region in line with the decisions taken at the Madrid Summit and enhancing air defence capabilities in response to the growing threat posed by Russian missiles and drones. References to Russia were particularly frequent, with the country mentioned 65 times, including the reiteration of the previous declaration's assertion that the Russian Federation remains "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area."⁴⁶

The communiqué also reiterated the claims that had been made at the NATO Summit in Brussels in 2021 in which Russia was blamed for the aggressive hybrid activities against NATO member states and their partners outside the Alliance. Simultaneously, openness to limited dialogue with Russia was maintained, with an aim to minimise risks and curtail escalation potential. However, it was also stated that any improvement in mutual relations would be possible only if Moscow fully complies with international law and ceases aggressive policies towards other states – this is what was declared in the communiqué's conclusions.

The document also explicitly affirmed that NATO does not pose any threat to any nation, thereby countering claims spread by Russian and Chinese propaganda. The communiqué negatively addressed Russia's announced suspension of the extended New START⁴⁷ and its withdrawal

www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_211808.htm; Katherine Walla, "All Options Are on the Table' for Eastern Flank, Says US Permanent Representative to NATO," *Atlantic Council*, 23 March 2022, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/all-options-are-on-the-table-for-eastern-flank-says-us-permanent-representative-to-nato/>.

46 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué," 11 July 2023, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2023/07/11/vilnius-summit-communiqué>.

47 Shannon Bugos, "Russia Suspends New START," *Arms Control Today*, March 2023, accessed 18 January 2026, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-03/news/russia-suspends-new-start>.

from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which further jeopardises the security of the Alliance.

It was reiterated that Moscow bears full responsibility for initiating the war against Ukraine. NATO allies urged Russia to unconditionally withdraw its forces from the Ukrainian territory and condemned the states that support the Russian Federation in its war efforts. Compared with previous summit documents, greater attention was given to Belarus. The communiqué referred not only to its role in facilitating Russia's war against Ukraine by providing its territory and infrastructure to the aggressor, but also to its malign activities directed against neighbouring states, implicitly referring to Poland and Lithuania.

Appropriate sections were dedicated to partnerships with Moldova and Georgia, and predominantly with Ukraine. It should be recalled that this particular summit was a source of considerable disappointment for Kyiv, as no invitation to join the Alliance was extended to Ukraine. The allies instead reaffirmed that Ukraine's future lies in NATO, while stopping short of providing a concrete timetable or formal invitation. In terms of practical measures, NATO maintained its policy of a persistent rotational presence of allied forces on the Eastern Flank.⁴⁸

Conceptualising the "Eastern Flank" as a geopolitical code

The analysis presented in this article yields several important insights into NATO's conceptualisation of the Eastern Flank and the delineation of its spatial scope. It should be emphasised that it examines only the geopolitical code of the Eastern Flank at the Alliance's level. Individual member states may construct, or reinterpret, this geopolitical code in different ways, to suit their own strategic cultures, threat perceptions, and foreign policy priorities.

48 Zandee, "NATO's": 23–24; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué"; Justyna Gotkowska and Jakub Graca, "NATO Summit in Vilnius: Breakthroughs and Unfulfilled Hopes," *OSW Commentary*, No. 526 (2023): 1–5, accessed 26 January 2026, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-07-13/nato-summit-vilnius-breakthroughs-and-unfulfilled-hopes>; Wojciech Lorenz and Marcin Terlikowski, "NATO Vilnius Summit Takes Crucial Decisions," *PISM Spotlight*, No. 30 (2023): 1–2.

First, it should be admitted that at the NATO level there has been no speech or document (with the exception of the map made public by NATO press agencies in 2022) indicating which countries are included when the term *Eastern Flank* is used. Second, looking at the research issue from a narrative perspective, it should be noted that two most recent NATO secretaries general Jens Stoltenberg and Mark Rutte used two terms, namely: *the Eastern part of the Alliance* and *the Eastern Flank*, interchangeably. However, until 2020 the term *Eastern Flank* was not explicitly employed in official NATO strategic documents. In summit declarations, it did not appear until the 2023 Vilnius Summit. Consequently, NATO's strategic communication between 2014 – when the term first entered the Alliance's discourse – and 2023 – when it was formally incorporated into a summit declaration – proved crucial in shaping both the meaning and the spatial scope of the concept.

Third, the analysis demonstrates that the spatial scope of the Eastern Flank evolved over time rather than emerging as a fixed geopolitical concept. Its boundaries expanded gradually through successive NATO initiatives and strategic communication efforts, only later coming to encompass Slovakia and Hungary.

An additional finding is that, despite being a member of the Bucharest Nine, the Czech Republic has not been the location of the key military initiatives associated with the Eastern Flank. This suggests that, at the NATO level, the concept of the *Eastern Flank* does not correspond directly to the Bucharest Nine format. Instead, the analysis indicates that the concept remains dynamic and may continue to evolve, particularly following the accession of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance.

Recent developments have strengthened diplomatic relations between these countries and the Bucharest Nine. In addition, several NATO members located in the vicinity of the region constitute the geopolitical hinterland of the Alliance's Eastern Flank due to their geographic, infrastructural, political, and industrial significance. This applies particularly to Denmark, the Czech Republic, and Germany. Their future formal participation in the Bucharest Nine format cannot be ruled out.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that, at the NATO level, the term *Eastern Flank* denotes a geographic space comprising Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. The initiatives examined further suggest that the concept is primarily associated

with the land domain. This became evident after the Vilnius Summit, when the battlegroups deployed on the Eastern Flank were re-designated as Forward Land Forces Battlegroups.

However, it cannot be excluded that in the future the term will also be used to refer to the maritime domain. Following the accession of Finland and Sweden, the Baltic Sea has become increasingly integrated into the organisation, to the extent that it can be considered NATO's inner lake. Consequently, defence initiatives are being implemented and military units are being established in this region as well.

Can international organisations construct geopolitical codes?

As it has been evidenced throughout the text, NATO possesses the capacity to construct geopolitical codes. Its strategic communication provides clear answers to the five questions identified by Flint as fundamental to the formulation of geopolitical codes. The geopolitical code of the Eastern Flank provides a precise definition of NATO's contemporary and potential allies in warding off the threat from Russia, as well as how these allies can be brought closer together.

This definition manifested itself in the form of both narrative and specific military and diplomatic initiatives. It encompasses joint manoeuvres, aid programmes, and efforts to support Ukraine in its defence against Russian aggression. The culmination of these efforts was the establishment of the highest possible form of Alliance enlargement, manifested in a series of accessions between 2017 and 2024. Admittedly, not all partners have remained within NATO's sphere of influence. Georgia is a prime example. The Eastern Flank code also provides a comprehensive delineation of NATO's current and potential enemies, encompassing both regional (Russia and Belarus) and global (China, North Korea and Iran) entities.

A broad range of strategic communication initiatives, combined with the development of military capabilities on the Eastern Flank, constituted NATO's response to the question of how to counter perceived adversaries. At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that the capacity of international organisations such as NATO to construct geopolitical codes is inherently constrained. Unlike states, whose geopolitical codes may be articulated more coherently and authoritatively, NATO's geopolitical narratives are the product of negotiation and consensus among its member states.

Consequently, the Alliance's communication is necessarily more cautious and less centralised than that of sovereign states. Finally, the construction of a geopolitical code extends beyond strategic narratives alone; it is also expressed through concrete political, diplomatic, and military actions, which reinforce and institutionalise the meanings conveyed in official discourse.

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