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NATO'S STRATEGIC ADAPTATION IN THE ERA OF SYSTEMIC RIVALRY: FROM COLLECTIVE SECURITY TO MULTI-DOMAIN DEFENSE

СТРАТЕГІЧНА АДАПТАЦІЯ НАТО В ЕПОХУ СИСТЕМНОЇ КОНКУРЕНЦІЇ: ВІД КОЛЕКТИВНОЇ БЕЗПЕКИ ДО БАГАТОДОМЕННОЇ ОБОРОНИ

Olena Kovtun
PhD in Political Science, Associate Professor of the Department of International Organizations and Diplomatic Service, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv.
e-mail: olena_kovtun@knu.ua
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6416-0527

Dienis Terzi
PhD student, Department of International Organizations and Diplomatic Service of Educational and Scientific Institute of International Relations of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv.
e-mail: d3nis.terzi@gmail.com
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3109-8196

Олена Ковтун
Кандидат політичних наук, доцент кафедри міжнародних організацій і дипломатичної служби Навчально-наукового Інституту міжнародних відносин Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка.
e-mail: olena_kovtun@knu.ua
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6416-0527

Дєніс Терзі
Аспірант, кафедра міжнародних організацій та дипломатичної служби Навчально-наукового Інституту міжнародних відносин Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка.
e-mail: d3nis.terzi@gmail.com
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3109-8196

Abstract. *The article examines NATO's institutional and strategic transformation in the context of the transition from a liberal post–Cold War order to an era of renewed systemic rivalry. It analyzes how the Alliance has shifted from a crisis-management and cooperative security paradigm toward a deterrence-centered strategy focused on collective defense, forward deployment, and multi-domain operational integration. Particular attention is devoted to NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, enlargement dynamics following Finland's and Sweden's accession, increased defense spending commitments, and the institutionalization of cyber, space, and resilience policies. The study argues that NATO's recalibration reflects broader structural changes within the contemporary international security system, marked by the erosion of unipolarity, the resurgence of territorial revisionism, and the expansion of competition into hybrid and technological domains. The Alliance's evolution demonstrates institutional resilience under systemic pressure and highlights its growing role as both a military alliance and a platform for security governance in a competitive multipolar environment.*

Key words: *NATO, systemic rivalry, collective defense, deterrence, multi-domain security, international security system, resilience.*

Анотація. ***У*** *статті досліджується інституційна та стратегічна трансформація НАТО в контексті переходу від ліберального постбіполярного порядку, що сформувався після завершення «холодної війни», до епохи відновленого системного суперництва. Аналізується, яким чином Альянс здійснив перехід від парадигми кризового менеджменту та кооперативної безпеки до стратегії, зорієнтованої на стримування, з акцентом на колективну оборону, передове розгортання сил та багатодоменну операційну інтеграцію. Особливу увагу приділено Стратегічній концепції НАТО 2022 року, динаміці розширення після приєднання Фінляндії та Швеції, зростанню зобов'язань щодо оборонних видатків, а також інституціоналізації політик у сферах кіберпростору, космосу та стійкості.*

У статті визначено, що стратегічна рекалібрація НАТО відображає ширші структурні зміни в сучасній системі міжнародної безпеки, позначені ерозією однополярності,

відродженням територіального ревізіонізму та поширенням конкуренції на гібридні й технологічні виміри. Еволюція Альянсу демонструє інституційну стійкість в умовах системного тиску та підкреслює його зростаючу роль як військово-політичного союзу і водночас платформи безпекового врядування в конкурентному багатополярному середовищі.

Ключові слова: *НАТО, системне суперництво, колективна оборона, стримування, багатодоменна безпека, система міжнародної безпеки, стійкість.*

Introduction. Since its founding in 1949, NATO has undergone multiple strategic transformations in response to shifts in the international security environment. During the Cold War, the Alliance's primary purpose centered on collective territorial defense against the Soviet Union. Following the end of the bipolar era, NATO redefined itself as a collective security organization operating through crisis management and cooperative mechanisms within the broader liberal international order. However, the resurgence of geopolitical rivalry, territorial revisionism, and systemic competition among major powers has fundamentally altered the strategic landscape. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, combined with intensifying technological and economic competition with China, have accelerated NATO's strategic recalibration.

Under these conditions, the study of NATO's institutional and strategic adaptation acquires particular significance for understanding the transformation of the modern international security system. The Alliance's recalibration—manifested in renewed deterrence policies, expansion into cyber, space, and hybrid domains, and the strengthening of its political coordination functions—reflects deeper structural shifts from a predominantly liberal security order toward a more competitive and multipolar configuration. Consequently, analyzing NATO's evolution provides important insight into the resilience, flexibility, and changing functions of security institutions amid systemic rivalry and global power rebalancing.

The purpose of this article is to examine how NATO is adapting institutionally and strategically to the reemergence of systemic rivalry and to assess what this transformation reveals about the evolution of the contemporary international security system. Specifically, the study analyzes NATO's shift from a post–Cold War crisis-management framework toward renewed deterrence, multi-domain operational integration, and expanded governance functions in areas such as cyber defense and resilience

Literature review. Scholarship on NATO's evolution reflects broader debates about alliance durability and systemic transformation. Early post–Cold War analyses emphasized the structural stability of U.S.-led unipolarity *(Wohlforth, 1999)* and questioned NATO's continued relevance after the Soviet collapse. Rather than dissolving, the Alliance reoriented toward crisis management and cooperative security, codified in the 1999 Strategic Concept *(NATO, 1999)* and operationalized through missions such as Afghanistan *(Rynning, 2015).* Liberal institutionalist scholars interpret enlargement and partnership mechanisms as instruments of norm diffusion and order-building *(Keohane, 1984; Schimmelfennig, 2003),* while *Ikenberry (2018)* situates NATO within the architecture of the liberal international order. In contrast, realist perspectives *(Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001)* emphasize balance-of-power dynamics and threat perception as enduring drivers of alliance behavior.

Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, a new wave of research reassesses NATO's strategic recalibration. The 2022 Strategic Concept re-centered deterrence and collective defense *(NATO, 2022),* reflecting what Brands (2022) describes as a renewed era of great-power rivalry. Freedman (2023) and Fiott (2023) analyze the return of high-intensity warfare and its implications for European deterrence, while Smith (2023) and Sloan (2023) examine alliance cohesion, resilience, and political adaptation in the post-2022 environment. Rynning (2024) frames the war in Ukraine as a structural inflection point in NATO's historical trajectory. Together, this literature underscores NATO's transformation from a crisis-management institution to a deterrence-centered, multi-domain security actor, though fewer studies systematically connect this adaptation to the broader transition from liberal unipolarity to competitive multipolarity—an analytical gap this paper addresses.

Main results of the research. The end of the Cold War produced what many scholars characterized as a unipolar moment dominated by the United States *(Wohlforth, 1999).* In this

environment, NATO's traditional adversary had dissolved, raising questions about the Alliance's continued relevance. Rather than disbanding, NATO reinvented itself as a crisis-management actor engaged in out-of-area operations, particularly in the Balkans during the 1990s. Interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo marked a significant departure from strictly territorial defense.

These operations reflected a normative shift toward liberal interventionism and the stabilization of fragile states. NATO's 1999 Strategic Concept emphasized crisis response and cooperative security as central tasks *(NATO, 1999)*. The Alliance framed security as indivisible and increasingly globalized, thereby expanding its functional mandate beyond Article 5 collective defense.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, further entrenched NATO's expeditionary orientation. For the first time, Article 5 was invoked in response to a terrorist attack on the United States. NATO assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in 2003, engaging in prolonged counterinsurgency and stabilization efforts *(Rynning, 2015)*. These missions reinforced NATO's identity as a crisis-management institution operating far beyond its traditional geographic boundaries.

Yet such operations also exposed limitations in alliance cohesion, burden-sharing, and strategic clarity. Divergent national caveats and uneven contributions complicated operational effectiveness. The Afghanistan experience, in particular, raised questions about NATO's capacity to conduct long-term stabilization missions amid political fatigue and shifting priorities.

Alongside crisis management, NATO pursued cooperative security through partnership frameworks such as the Partnership for Peace and the NATO-Russia Council. Enlargement toward Central and Eastern Europe was framed as consolidating democratic governance and embedding former Warsaw Pact states within a liberal institutional order *(Schimmelfennig, 2003)*. During this period, NATO functioned as both a military alliance and a political community, reinforcing norms of democracy and civilian control of the military.

This post–Cold War phase reflected an institutional optimism consistent with liberal institutionalist expectations that security cooperation could mitigate traditional power politics *(Keohane, 1984)*. However, this cooperative paradigm increasingly confronted structural and geopolitical constraints.

By the late 2000s and early 2010s, the foundations of the liberal international order began to erode. Economic crises, domestic populism, and geopolitical revisionism undermined the post–Cold War consensus. Scholars have argued that liberal hegemony generated countervailing pressures from rising and resurgent powers dissatisfied with Western dominance *(Ikenberry, 2018)*.

Russia's assertiveness and China's growing influence challenged assumptions of linear liberal convergence. The international system began to exhibit characteristics of competitive multipolarity, marked by renewed great-power rivalry and contested norms.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 constituted a watershed moment. It violated core principles of territorial sovereignty and demonstrated the reemergence of conventional interstate conflict in Europe. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine further underscored the return of high-intensity warfare and large-scale mobilization. These developments re-centered NATO's attention on deterrence and collective defense *(Beaumont, Wilhelmsen, Gjerde, 2024)*.

The reemergence of territorial revisionism undermined earlier expectations that interstate war in Europe had become obsolete. It also revealed the limitations of cooperative security arrangements, including the NATO-Russia Council, which proved insufficient to prevent confrontation.

Systemic rivalry increasingly unfolds across technological and hybrid domains. Cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, election interference, and economic coercion have blurred the boundaries between war and peace. Gray-zone tactics complicate traditional deterrence models by operating below the threshold of armed attack *(Marsh, 2024)*.

Moreover, emerging technologies—including artificial intelligence, space capabilities, and advanced missile systems—have transformed military competition. The diffusion of dual-use technologies has intensified the strategic significance of critical infrastructure, supply chains, and digital networks. Security is no longer confined to territorial defense but extends into societal resilience.

In response to Russian aggression, NATO has undertaken a substantial strategic reorientation. The 2014 Wales Summit introduced the Readiness Action Plan, enhancing rapid deployment

capabilities and establishing the Enhanced Forward Presence in Eastern Europe. The 2022 Strategic Concept explicitly identifies Russia as the most significant and direct threat to Allied security *(NATO, 2022)*. This shift marks a return to deterrence-centered strategy. NATO has increased forward-deployed forces, strengthened command structures, and expanded high-readiness formations. The emphasis on credible deterrence reflects recognition that crisis management alone is insufficient in an era of systemic rivalry.

NATO enlargement has regained geopolitical salience. The accession of Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024 significantly alters the strategic balance in Northern Europe. Enlargement demonstrates both the continued attractiveness of NATO membership and the Alliance's adaptive capacity *(Black, Kleberg, & Silfversten, 2024)*. At the same time, enlargement reinforces Russia's perception of encirclement, contributing to intensified security dilemmas. This dynamic illustrates the complex interplay between institutional expansion and geopolitical contestation.

Burden-sharing has long been a contentious issue within NATO. The 2014 pledge to move toward spending 2% of GDP on defense has gained renewed urgency. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several member states have substantially increased defense budgets, signaling a re-prioritization of hard power. Enhanced spending supports modernization, interoperability, and force readiness. It also reflects recognition that credible deterrence requires sustained material commitments, not merely rhetorical solidarity *(NATO, 2025)*.

NATO's adaptation extends beyond conventional forces. In 2016, cyberspace was recognized as an operational domain, followed by space in 2019. These steps institutionalize multi-domain integration, enabling coordinated responses across land, sea, air, cyber, and space. The Alliance has established structures such as the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence and enhanced intelligence-sharing mechanisms. This multidimensional approach acknowledges that contemporary threats traverse physical and digital boundaries *(Gilli, Gilli, & Grgić, 2025)*.

NATO increasingly operates as a governance platform facilitating coordination among member states and partners. While Article 5 remains central, many contemporary challenges—such as cyberattacks and disinformation—require collective consultation rather than immediate military response. Through standardized planning processes and political consultations, NATO shapes national policies and harmonizes threat assessments. This governance function enhances institutional resilience amid complex systemic competition.

Cyber defense represents a critical area of institutional innovation. NATO's Cyber Defence Pledge encourages members to strengthen national capabilities and integrate cyber considerations into defense planning. The Alliance also provides mechanisms for information-sharing and coordinated response. This integration reflects recognition that cyber threats can undermine societal stability without crossing traditional thresholds of armed attack. By embedding cyber resilience within alliance structures, NATO expands its security mandate into the digital domain *(NATO, 2016)*.

Modern systemic rivalry targets civilian infrastructure and societal cohesion. NATO has revived baseline requirements for civil preparedness, addressing energy security, transportation networks, and supply chain resilience. The concept of "resilience" has become central to alliance discourse. This emphasis broadens NATO's functional scope beyond military operations to encompass societal defense. The Alliance thereby acts as a coordinator of national resilience strategies, reinforcing the interdependence between military and civilian security.

NATO has also strengthened ties with Indo-Pacific partners, including Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand. Although NATO remains a Euro-Atlantic alliance, these partnerships reflect recognition of the global dimensions of systemic rivalry, particularly regarding China. Such cooperation illustrates NATO's evolving role as a node within a broader network of like-minded states. Rather than transforming into a global alliance, NATO functions as a hub for strategic coordination across regions.

NATO's adaptation demonstrates institutional resilience amid systemic change. Contrary to predictions of obsolescence, the Alliance has recalibrated its mission and capabilities. This resilience challenges realist expectations that alliances dissipate in the absence of immediate threats. However, adaptation also reflects fragmentation within the broader international order. The shift from cooperative security to deterrence underscores the erosion of shared norms and the reemergence of competitive blocs.

In a multipolar environment, alliances serve as mechanisms for balancing and coordination. NATO's renewed cohesion following Russia's invasion of Ukraine suggests that external threats can mitigate internal divisions. Yet long-term unity will depend on sustained political will and equitable burden-sharing. The Alliance's evolution highlights the enduring relevance of institutionalized cooperation in managing systemic rivalry. NATO functions not merely as a military coalition but as a framework for aligning strategic priorities among diverse democratic states.

Looking forward, NATO faces several potential trajectories. One scenario involves continued consolidation around deterrence and resilience, reinforcing transatlantic unity. Another entails strain arising from domestic political shifts or divergent threat perceptions. The trajectory of U.S. engagement will remain pivotal. Technological transformation will further shape alliance adaptation. Integration of emerging technologies and protection of critical infrastructure will test NATO's governance capacity. The Alliance's ability to balance deterrence with crisis management and partnership-building will influence the evolution of the international security system.

Conclusions. NATO's institutional and strategic adaptation to systemic rivalry reflects a significant transformation in its role and functions. The Alliance has shifted from a post–Cold War crisis-management organization to one centered on deterrence, broadened its scope into multi-domain security governance, and increasingly operates as a platform for coordinating responses to hybrid and technological competition.

These developments point to wider structural changes in the international system. The weakening of the liberal security order and the resurgence of great-power rivalry have compelled NATO to reemphasize collective defense while innovating in the domains of cyber, space, and societal resilience. Such adaptation demonstrates the continued relevance of alliances in managing systemic competition, even as the global order moves toward a more competitive multipolar configuration.

From a theoretical perspective, this case illustrates the capacity of institutions to evolve under structural pressure. Rather than fragmenting, NATO has redefined its core purpose and expanded its governance functions. Further research may explore patterns of alliance adaptation in comparative perspective and assess the long-term sustainability of multi-domain deterrence within an increasingly contested international environment.

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