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The “Estonianisation” of European Foreign Policy as a Challenge to NATO Cohesion

Recent Russian provocations directed against certain members of the North Atlantic Alliance have generated yet another axis of internal division within NATO. In this context, the Alliance faces a series of challenges in the sphere of strategic communication. The principal objective of NATO member states remains the mitigation of the adverse effects of such divisions on the stability of collective security guarantees.

Background to the Issue. On 22 September 2025, Gideon Rachman, writing in his *Financial Times* column, referred to the alleged dissatisfaction of certain representatives within Donald Trump’s administration with what they perceived as the excessively “hawkish” posture of the Baltic states towards Russia and their pronounced willingness to confront it. According to Rachman, the expression “Estonianisation of European foreign policy” originated in Washington, in part reflecting the appointment of the Estonian politician Kaja Kallas as the European Union’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy¹.

The argument advanced in the *Financial Times* illustrates a broader phenomenon precipitated by recent Russian provocations employing airborne attack means ([IEŚ Commentaries, no. 1434](#); [IEŚ Commentaries, no. 1438](#)) as well as other instruments ([IEŚ Commentaries, no. 1135](#); [IEŚ Brief Commentaries, no. 1453](#)). These developments have had a direct bearing on the cohesion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and on the credibility of its security guarantees.

The Objectives of Russia’s Actions in Relation to NATO’s Security Guarantees. One of Russia’s enduring strategic objectives in Central and Eastern Europe remains the elimination of Anglo-Saxon influence—now embodied primarily by the United States—from the region, and the dismantling of the security architecture founded upon regional alliances. A central focus of Russian activity in this respect has been NATO’s collective security system.

However, the erosion of the collective defence mechanisms enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty need not result from a full-scale—or even conventional—attack against an ally. Russia can pursue this aim indirectly, by fostering within the societies and political elites of individual NATO member states a perception that the Alliance’s responses to provocations and acts of aggression are insufficient.

This dynamic stems from the fact that the international security architecture, the system of alliances, and ultimately Article 5 itself, rely not only upon “hard” capabilities but also upon intangible and perceptual elements, such as allied credibility and trust. Accordingly, the maintenance of a coherent strategic communication framework is of crucial significance in cultivating the Alliance’s resilience to Russian provocations—an area in which NATO demonstrably faces difficulties, as evidenced by the divergent responses to Russian (and Belarusian) incursions into Allied airspace.

This challenge is likely to intensify in the near future. The measures adopted by NATO—such as Operation Eastern Sentry ([IEŚ Commentaries, no. 1434](#))—have undeniably enhanced operational capacities in the defence of airspace, yet they have not succeeded in deterring further Russian provocations. Illustrative examples include drone operations over civilian airports in Denmark and Norway at the end of September 2025; the brief, fifteen-second incursion of a Russian Su-30 fighter jet and an Il-78 aerial refuelling aircraft into Lithuanian airspace on

¹ G. Rachman, *Putin is playing a dangerous game with NATO*, *Financial Times*, 22.09.2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/2ee21b5c-24fc-400e-a51d-2c197d09c471> [3.11.2025].

23 October 2025; and the repeated penetration of Lithuanian airspace by meteorological balloons launched from Belarus at the end of the same month.

Hawks versus Doves. Within NATO member states—and, more broadly, among political elites—two distinct camps have emerged, each advocating divergent responses to Russian provocations in Allied airspace.

The first, which may be described as the “hawkish” group of states, comprises those who maintain that the effective deterrence of Russia and the prevention of further provocations necessitate decisive and assertive action. In this spirit, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, Prime Minister Donald Tusk, and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson all voiced their countries’ readiness to intercept and neutralise air assault assets (including fighter jets²) should such incursions reoccur. This position has found broader support among figures such as Lithuania’s then Minister of Defence Dovilė Šakalienė, former Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis, Chair of the Estonian Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee Marko Mihkelson, and President of the Czech Republic Petr Pavel.

Nevertheless, this position is not uniformly shared by all eastern NATO front-line states. For example, Romania’s Minister of Defence Ionuț Moșteanu, President of Finland Alexander Stubb, and Prime Minister Petteri Orpo have advocated a tailored and proportionate response, viewing the downing of Russian aircraft as a measure of last resort. A similarly nuanced position was articulated by French President Emmanuel Macron, who remarked that such an option “should not be excluded.”

The second camp consists of political leaders who seek to avoid escalation with Russia³. As noted in Rachman’s column, this group includes the American circle of so-called “restrained” (*IEŚ Policy Papers, no. 1/2025*)⁴. A firm articulation of this perspective was offered by German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, who observed that Russian incursions into NATO airspace had “not yet displayed the degree of aggression required to justify their neutralisation.” He characterised calls for such action as “frivolous,” arguing that they would amount to falling into Vladimir Putin’s ‘escalation trap.’ Elaborating on his reasoning, he added that “prudence is not cowardice.”⁵

In recent weeks, a similarly de-escalatory position—both in intention and tone—has been adopted by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte. Initially, he announced that NATO would not shoot down Russian aircraft entering Allied airspace unless, in the view of the military authorities, they posed a direct threat⁶. A few days later, in a more surprising statement, he characterised the Russian incursions as “unintentional.”⁷ Rutte explained that, since NATO enjoys an objectively superior military capability to that of Russia, it need not engage in such responses; doing so, he suggested, would only reveal the Alliance’s weakness. Yet this interpretation is problematic in its Eurocentric—specifically Western European—assumptions, as it interprets Russian behaviour, including its readiness to escalate, through a prism of European values, strategic logic, and conceptions of power that are fundamentally alien to Russia’s political culture.

² For obvious reasons, the downing of unmanned aerial vehicles does not provoke as much controversy.

³ Nevertheless, the potential interception of Russian air assault assets could, paradoxically, serve to reduce tensions, in accordance with the principle of “de-escalation through escalation,” which also features within Russian strategic doctrine.

⁴ In the context of the issue analysed in this commentary, it is also pertinent to note the role of opinion-shaping figures associated with the MAGA movement. On 23 October 2025, Tucker Carlson declared that the United States should not support Poland “if it seeks confrontation with Russia.” https://youtube.com/shorts/IqZBYzQq56U?si=UE9Bpr6c3i75_gvk [3.11.2025].

⁵ L. Höller, *German defense boss urges ‘prudence’ over airspace breaches by Russia*, 24.09.2025, Defense News, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/09/24/german-defense-boss-urges-prudence-over-airspace-breaches-by-russia/> [3.11.2025]; A similar view was expressed by former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Boris Johnson. Ch. York, *Boris Johnson on what could stop Russia in Ukraine*, 15.09.2025, Kyiv Independent, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSBMrvslplw> [3.11.2025].

⁶ NATO.int, *Address by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the 71st Annual Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Ljubljana*, 13.10.2025, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions238380.htm> [3.11.2025].

⁷ L. D’Amato, *NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte endorses Trump’s approach to ending Ukraine war after White House talks*, 22.10.2025, Fox News, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/nato-secretary-general-mark-rutte-endorses-trumps-approach-ending-ukraine-war-after-white-house-talks> [3.11.2025].



Conclusions. The debate surrounding the appropriate form of response to Russian provocations—conducted among political elites and within the expert communities that influence decision-making centres in NATO member states—has a direct impact on the cohesion of the Alliance. Through its sustained efforts, Russia has succeeded in deepening internal divisions within NATO, divisions that risk undermining the credibility of allied security guarantees, particularly among the societies of the Alliance’s eastern members.

It should be emphasised that the resolute, “hawkish” posture adopted by certain NATO political leaders stems not only from their analysis of international politics and interpretation of Russian behaviour but also from a genuine societal demand for a firmer response to Russian provocations⁸. The failure to meet such expectations risks fostering feelings of neglect, strategic isolation, and vulnerability to Russian interference. If such sentiments persist, they may, over time, contribute to the radicalisation of political attitudes and, consequently, to the erosion of confidence in allied guarantees.

Since NATO is not a monolithic entity, and as its communication strategy represents a composite of the positions of its individual member states, it is unrealistic to expect the articulation of a single, uniform stance on this matter. Nevertheless, efforts should be made to minimise the risks arising from sharply divergent approaches—for example, through greater restraint and nuance in the public statements of the NATO Secretary General.

Furthermore, individual member states, particularly those within the “hawkish” camp, face the additional challenge of communicating clearly to their domestic publics the precise nature and limits of their declared positions. This includes acknowledging that, despite their expressed willingness to shoot down systems of air assault, such actions cannot be universal or unconditional, and that interception is not always feasible or advisable⁹. Finally, attention must be drawn to the potential danger that Russia may seek to test the resolve of these states to act upon their declarations. Should such statements prove empty, this would have adverse implications not only for the credibility and agency of the states concerned but also for their overall security in the face of Russian coercive behaviour.

⁸ P. Malinowski, *Rosyjskie samoloty powinny być zestrzeliwane przez polskie wojsko? Są wyniki sondażu*, 25.09.2025, RP.pl, <https://www.rp.pl/wojsko/art43070551-rosyjskie-samoloty-powinny-byc-zestrzeliwane-przez-polskie-wojsko-sa-wyniki-sondazu> [3.11.2025].

⁹ For instance, due to the risks arising from the uncontrolled fall of debris from both offensive and defensive systems onto inhabited areas, and others. More in: [IEŚ Commentaries, no.1034](#).