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The Bucharest Shadow: NATO Enlargement, Russian Threat Perception and the Road to War in Ukraine, 2008–2022

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how NATO's Bucharest declarations of 2008 on Ukraine and Russian threat perception were linked to the series of crises which led to Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. It resists a "one cause" explanation. It is a qualitative documentary study and faces official records from NATO, OSCE and the UN and other realist, constructivist and diplomatic-history literature. The main analytical framework is that of Security Dilemma Theory. The analysis is guided by three propositions: First, the long-known "Ukraine would become a NATO member" commitment in the Bucharest speech was a factor that aggravated Russia's pre-existing perception of the Euro-Atlantic security order moving against Moscow; second, the unresolved 2014 conflict, combined with growing NATO-Ukraine cooperation, turned the enlargement debate from a distant institutional question into an immediate military-security dilemma; and third, the "Ukraine would eventually become a NATO member" commitment, the refusal of NATO to close its open door, and the failure of diplomacy interacted in this crisis, while Russia had retained agency and the responsibility to choose invasion. The results indicate that the city of Bucharest was an important structural turning point but it was neither a sufficient nor a determinant cause of war. In 2008, Ukraine was not issued a Membership Action Plan and was not a member of NATO in February 2022. The paper points out that contested security orders, incompatible threat perceptions and unresolved territorial conflict are part of a multi-layered, and interactive, causation that leads to war.

Keywords:

NATO enlargement; Russia; Ukraine; Bucharest Summit; security dilemma; threat perception

1. Introduction

The NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008 has an unusual role in the explanations of the war in Ukraine. Although NATO has not yet offered a MAP for either Ukraine or Georgia, in paragraph 23 of the Summit Declaration it clearly said that Ukraine and Georgia will both join the Alliance in the future and that MAP will be the next step on the road towards membership (NATO, 2008a). The formulation

led to strategic ambiguity. It provided a political commitment for the future, without accession timetable or article 5 protection. In an article for supporters of enlargement, the declaration stated that states have a "sovereign right to select their security structures. In Moscow, it was an indication that NATO had plans to eventually accept a strategic asset on the Russian border within the ranks of the alliance.

The ensuing conflict was interwoven in a wider conflict between NATO and Russia.

“Bucharest Shadow” is an apt description of the broken promise of that non-commitment. Ukraine has not joined right away and formally declared its non-alignment from 2010-2014, until after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in the east of Ukraine. In 2017 Ukraine again included the aspiration to join NATO in its strategic course, in 2019 it was enshrined in the Constitution of Ukraine, in 2020 Ukraine joined the group of Enhanced Opportunities Partners of NATO. NATO also stepped up its defence reform, training, interoperability and capacity-building support in the years following 2014 (NATO, 2026). There was no formal membership but there was increased political and military cooperation.

Interpretations of this sequence are highly controversial. According to Mearsheimer (2014), the deep causes of the Ukraine crisis were NATO enlargement, European Union expansion and democracy promotion by the West, where the incorporation of Ukraine into the West was an unacceptable strategic threat for Russian leaders. Wolff (2015) also highlights how Russia has remained hostile towards the enlargement process but without specifying that the crisis was caused by one single decision made by the West. Using historically based counterfactual analysis, Marten (2018) argues that the pivots to the West should not solely be blamed on NATO's geographical expansion and that Russian domestic politics and status are important factors. Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) offer a corrective from the constructivist perspective by emphasizing that threats do not only emerge from close geographical proximity, but from identities, norms and the relationships within security-community. Thus, there is a true causal controversy in the literature, not a definitive explanation.

The second issue is lack of differentiation between threat perception and legal/moral justification. NATO enlargement might be seen as threatening by Russian leaders, but not as a reason for military action or a military action as legal. NATO, on the other hand, might see expansion as defensive — which is what it appears to be — and consensual, and it may not

appreciate the security implications Russian sees. Security dilemmas occur because what one actor considers to be a defensive move may look like an offensive move to another actor. But the security dilemma does not negate the concept of agency – states still have options of coercion, negotiation, accommodation and force. The difference is crucial because the United Nations General Assembly, by a vote of 141 to five (35 abstaining), declared Russia's 2022 action to be aggression and called for its withdrawal (United Nations General Assembly, 2022).

This means that the timeframe from 2008 to 2022 needs to be analysed as a series of events rather than a single event. The Russo-Georgian war of 2008 proved NATO's eastern border to be a volatile region in the wake of Bucharest. In 2014 Russia annexed Crimea and conflict started in Donbas. The Minsk agreements tried to control the conflict, but were not successful in achieving a sustainable political solution. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) estimated that 14,200–14,400 people had died as a result of the conflict, including at least 3,404 civilians, by the end of 2021 (OHCHR, 2022). The war in 2022 was thus a result of a long-standing security atmosphere which was already militarised.

This paper investigates the interplay between the Bucharest commitment, Russian threat perception, post-2014 NATO-Ukraine cooperation and the inconclusive Donbas conflict in the context of the diplomacy of 2021–2022. It does not consider the expansion to be an excuse for the Russian actions, nor does it ignore Russian concerns, as NATO called itself defensive. Rather, structural conditions, perceived threats, proximate triggers, and political responsibility are separated, allowing for a more rigorous examination of the factors important in the decision to go to war in Bucharest without assuming war was inevitable.

2. Literature Review

2.1 NATO Enlargement and the European Security Order

NATO expansion has created divergent notions of stability and exclusion in the post-Cold War era. Enlargement supporters say that it strengthened democratic developments, broadened collective defence and honoured the sovereign decisions of Central and Eastern European countries. Critics argue that expansion undermined potential for inclusive European security order, and created Russian resentment. According to Marten (2018), there are pre-existing reasons why Russia withdrew from the West, and there are status and domestic political factors to consider. As soon as, however, NATO expansion was imminent to Ukraine and Georgia, Moscow's opposition to NATO's open-door policy grew more entrenched and intensified, as Wolff (2015) demonstrates. The issue, then, is not that opposition to enlargement is on the record by Russian leadership, but the degree of causation that should be attributed to such opposition in the cause of aggression.

2.2 Russian Threat Perception and Ukraine

Geography, access to the Black Sea, economic ties, military industrial heritage and narratives of contested nationhood make Ukraine very significant in Russian security thinking. Realist depictions stress the strategic implications of a Western military alliance on the eve of a great power's frontier. According to Mearsheimer (2014) the 2008 declaration was a violation of Russian red lines. The scholarship is more recent, and there is a discussion about whether Russian policy was more preventive, revisionist or imperial in nature (Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024) and about the significance of Bucharest. Constructivist approaches also argue that this proximity of material is insufficient to account for conflict, since it is identities and historical narratives that create what actors perceive as threatening. Thus, threat perception in Russia was not just strategic calculation, but also political notions of Ukraine's role in the regional order.

2.3 NATO–Ukraine Cooperation after 2014

The annexation of Crimea and the fighting in Donbas changed the face of the NATO–Ukraine relations. In 2016, NATO introduced a Comprehensive Assistance Package and various programs focused on defence reform, resilience, command structure and cyber defence and interoperability (NATO, 2026). In 2017, Ukraine, at the same time, stepped away from the course of non-alignment and returned to the objective of NATO membership. In Kyiv and in the capitals of NATO countries these policies were interpreted as a reaction to Russian aggression and as a measure of enhancing Ukraine's self-defence. The same events were seen by Moscow as proof of Ukraine's military integration into NATO without it being a member nation. This mutual reading lies at the heart of the security-dilemma argument: the more Russia coerced Ukraine, the more the West was needed for protection and the more it protected Ukraine, the more Russia was worried about its loss of strategic influence.

2.4 Empirical Review

There is no empirical scholarship that supports the idea that NATO enlargement is a sole cause of the Ukraine war. According to Mearsheimer's (2014) realist analysis, the Bucharest declaration of 2008 was a very important milestone in a broader approach of the Western powers of the policy shift of Ukraine's deviation from the Russian orbit. In part his argument is substantiated by evidence of a constant opposition by the Russians to Ukrainian membership, and of the depth of Russian opposition known to the western diplomats. However, it's been criticised for exaggerating the powerlessness of the Ukrainians, the Russian nationalism and Moscow's options other than military action. Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) offer a counterpoint to this material-balancing perspective, demonstrating that NATO's definition of threat in relation to Russia and Ukraine is not solely material in nature but is instead informed by the group's security-community identities and norms, which influence threat perceptions and the choice of response.

Wolff (2015) accounts for the more differentiated. He proves that Russian opposition to NATO's expansion was consistent and the Alliance did not manage to "socialize" Moscow to its liberal interpretation of an open order of European security. However, the article does not suggest that opposition from Russia gives an veto power to other countries over their own decisions. Marten's (2018) counterfactual analysis of the 1990s also undermines the causal narrative since she finds that the Russian experience of being sidelined by the West comes before the main enlargement agreements and was to a significant degree motivated by domestic politics and status concerns. This shows that, contrary to suggestions about a mechanically enforced Russian revisionism, the enlargement was not responsible for this revision. More likely is the idea that the enlargement worsened an already diminishing relationship.

In the case of enlargement, as Marten (2018) demonstrates, the history is more complicated than a story of a single betrayal by the West and more of a story of Russian status concerns and domestic political developments that are pre-dating much of NATO's geographical enlargement. This interpretation is significant as it distinguishes between grievance and entitlement. A state cannot consider another actor's policy a threat and in so doing create a legitimate right to interfere with another state's security options by force. The difference is highlighted by the 2022 resolution by the United Nations General Assembly on Russia's aggression (United Nations General Assembly, 2022).

From this empirical evidence, it is clear that the years 2014-2021 were not a diplomatic interlude but rather a period of actual conflict. OHCHR estimated 51,000–54,000 conflict-related casualties between April 2014 and December 2021, including 14,200–14,400 deaths (OHCHR, 2022). Throughout the year, OSCE monitoring consistently reported ceasefire violations in the areas of Donetsk and Luhansk, with significant periods of fluctuation in 2021. In 8 September 2021 the Special Monitoring Mission documented 1090 ceasefire violations in Donetsk and 476 in Luhansk (OSCE, 2021). The security situation in the country before the invasion was already violent, contested and prone to escalation as illustrated in these observations.

These recent studies of the invasion in 2022 tend to merge the security-dilemma and preventive-war readings with some consideration of Russian agency. This would be a preventive-war reading of the rationale behind Moscow's decision, as it would indicate that Moscow believed that Ukraine's military was being strengthened incrementally and Ukraine's interoperability with NATO was increasing, so it was better to strike first before it would be "too late." However, only material balancing can explain the confrontation, as identities, norms and interpretations of the adversary also influenced the confrontation, as pointed out by Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024). Threat perception alone thus cannot explain the scope of Russia's decision, which was much more comprehensive than just Donbas. The empirical gap then is: linking the 'post-2014 militarisation' in Bucharest, the absence of a successful diplomatic negotiation process in 2021–2022 and without diminishing 14 years of interaction into a single cause. This study aims at filling this gap by the means of proposition led thematic analysis.

2.5 Theoretical framework: Security Dilemma Theory

The study uses as its foundation the Security Dilemma Theory that was first conceptualized by John Herz (1950) and was developed by Robert Jervis (1978). In an anarchic international system, Herz claimed, a state's efforts to become more secure can lead other states to feel less secure and take countermeasures, thereby reducing everyone's security. Jervis later showed that the severity of the dilemma is a function of perceptions, the offence-defence balance and the inability to differentiate the ability of an opponent to attack and defend. The theory is relevant because NATO's enlargement and cooperation with Ukraine were, as a principle of sovereign choice, defensive in nature and the Russians' view of NATO's expansion towards the East had become more threatening. Russia's reactions, especially since 2014, further convinced Ukraine to turn to the west for military aid, and consequently furthered the perception of threat felt by Moscow. Security Dilemma Theory can thus account for the recursive nature of the NATO enlargement and Russian insecurity and Ukrainian alignment. But the theory does not mean any moral equivalence or inevitability. It may be a threat perception that makes actors feel insecure, but does not justify acts of aggression. It is therefore applied here to examine the escalation mechanism without losing sight of political agency and considerations of international law and alternative options for Russia, Ukraine and NATO.

3. Research Gap and Propositions

3.1 Research Gap

The literature reviewed shows that NATO enlargement was significant in Russian security discourse, however, there is no consensus on whether it was a driver or a symptom of a more revisionist agenda. There are three gaps that are particularly important. First, it is often argued that Bucharest was either the cause of the war or that Ukraine had no need for security guarantees because it was already an NATO-member to become: too little notice is taken of the destabilising mixture of promises of future NATO-membership and lack of security guarantees. Second, research tends to

compartmentalise the issue of enlargement in 2008 with the militarised conflict in Donbas between 2014 and 2021, even though it altered the perception on both sides. Third, some reports on the crisis of 2021–2022 focus either on Russian demands or NATO principles, and fail to analyse the bargaining incompatibility, in conjunction with Russia's military mobilisation. The study fills the gaps by viewing the road to war as an interactive series of institutional commitments, threat perceptions, unresolved conflict and political decisions.

3.2 Propositions

Proposition 1: The Bucharest declaration of 2008 created the impression of increased threat perception felt by Russia, as it was a political pledge to Ukraine's future NATO membership, without spelling out the terms of that membership or its security implications.

Proposition 2: Russia's 2014 actions and the resulting expansion of NATO-Ukraine cooperation led to a self-reinforcing security dilemma: actions taken by each side on behalf of their security made the other side feel more threatened.

Proposition 3: Russia's decision to invade Ukraine in 2021-2022 was a result of the combination of the incompatible security demands, the unresolved Donbas conflict, and the Russian coercive escalation, even though there were other avenues for a peaceful solution.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Approach

The research used a qualitative approach to analyze the connection between NATO enlargement and the Russian threat perception, and how it escalated Ukraine crisis from 2008 to 2022. The method allows for the interpretation of the official decisions, security narratives and rival scholarly explanations without diminishing the conflict to a single quantitative variable.

4.2 Sources of Data: The study was based solely on secondary sources (NATO declarations and records, OSCE monitoring reports, and United Nations and OHCHR documents, diplomatic documents and peer-reviewed academic works). Sources were purposefully chosen to directly refer to

Bucharest, NATO-Ukraine relations, Russian security concerns, the Donbas conflict and/or the crisis of 2021–2022.

4.3 Pictorial Evidence: Pictorial evidences were created from verified official statistics and were directly put into the Results and discussions. The propositions are supported by three figures: a line graph of NATO membership growth around Bucharest, a line graph of the numbers of civilian deaths reported in the Donbas conflict from 2014 to 2021, and a bar graph of the vote in the United Nations General Assembly on Resolution ES-11/1. Each figure is descriptive and source labelled, and interpreted in the context of the proposition it supports, not as independent evidence of causation.

4.4 Analytical Procedure: Content and thematic analysis was used. Evidence was arranged under the following three proposals: the Bucharest commitment and threat perception, the post-2014 security dilemma, and the diplomacy breakdown of 2021-2022. Conflicting interpretations were contrasted and the points of agreement, qualification and disagreement noted.

4.5 Trustworthiness of the Study: Triangulation was done using official NATO, OSCE and United Nations evidence and scholarship representing different theoretical positions to enhance trustworthiness. Russian perceptions were distinguished from fact, and legal responsibility from causal explanation.

Only when source definitions were identifiable was there evidence that was numerical.

4.6 Limitations of the Method: The study is based on documentary evidence, which is public and does not allow for a full reconstruction of the confidential decision-making. Secondly, it is hard to measure threat perception without considering political rhetoric. Qualitative design thus serves to suggest likely processes and pathways, not that one cause leads to a single effect.

5. Results and Discussions

5.1 Proposition 1: Bucharest Intensified Russian Threat Perception through Strategic Ambiguity

It is quite supported the first proposition. The Bucharest Declaration shifted the political nature of Ukraine's NATO ambition, but did not yield a quick admission; paragraph 23 read that Ukraine and Georgia would join NATO, but that MAP was a future step (NATO, 2008a). This mix resulted in a commitment without a protection since Ukraine got a political commitment but not an Article 5. Russian hostility towards NATO's eastward enlargement was already ingrained, and the open-ended commitment had strategic consequences, as Wolf (2015) demonstrates. Bucharest was therefore neither membership nor empty rhetoric, but an institutionalisation of a future, yet questionable, outcome without any conclusions regarding time frame or security risks.

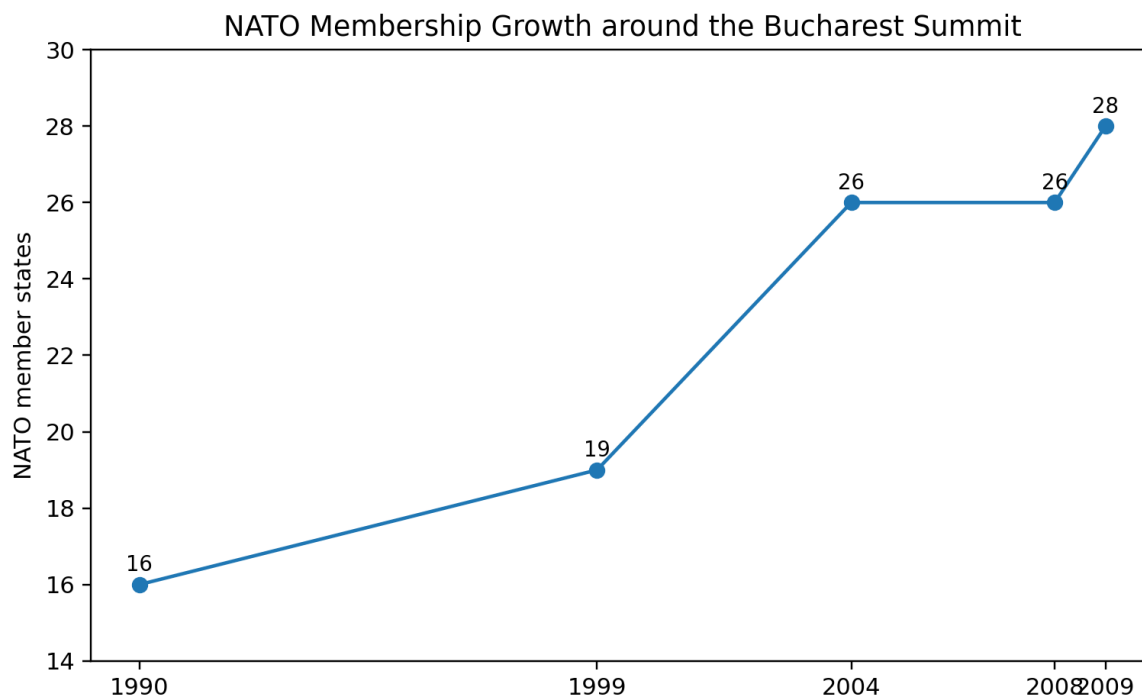


Figure 1. NATO Membership Growth around the Bucharest Summit, 1990–2009

Source: Author's visualisation based on NATO's official member-country and enlargement chronology (NATO, 2024).

Figure 1 situates Bucharest in the larger context of an 'enlargement sequence' after the Cold War. NATO expanded from 16 members in 1990 to 19 in 1999 and 26 in 2004, remained at 26 at Bucharest, and reached 28 when Albania and Croatia joined in 2009 (NATO, 2024). The graph does not prove that Russian aggression led to the enlargement. Instead, it depicts the institutional environment in which Moscow considered the Ukraine commitment, and according to Marten (2018) the Ukraine estrangement actually had more to do with domestic politics and status, meaning that geographical expansion was not enough.

A realist scholarship provides a solid account of what was destabilising the ambiguity. Mearsheimer (2014) maintains that great powers are acutely sensitive to military alignments on their borders, and sees Ukraine as strategically important to Russia, and Wolff (2015) reports on ongoing Russian hostility to the eastward expansion of NATO. The analytical debate is thus not so much about whether the Russians were concerned, as about whether there was a Russian veto on Ukrainian choice. NATO had the exact opposite concept of security arrangements; it argued that security

arrangements were left to the sovereign states (NATO 2022a).

One example of the hazardous situation in which Bucharest finds itself is the August 2008 Russo-Georgian War. NATO reiterated the conclusions of the summit and denounced Russian military operations and expressed support for the territorial integrity of Georgia (NATO, 2008b). The conflict was occurring amidst an overall deterioration of NATO-Russia relations over issues of NATO's enlargement, but also stemmed from historical disputes over South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Wolff 2015). So the episode cannot be used as evidence of the responsibility of Bucharest in causing war; rather it shows that enlargement had become enmeshed in the issue of unaddressed terrain and forceful power politics in the post-Soviet area.

A deterministic enlargement thesis is not accepted because of counterarguments. According to Marten (2018), Russia's pivoting from the West pre-dates much of NATO's geographic expansion, and is heavily driven by domestic political and status issues. Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) also demonstrate that threats are not just a function of material

proximity, but of identities and the relationships with the security community. Enlargement, as a potential threat, may thus become not only real but political for Russian leaders. Security Dilemma Theory captures reciprocal insecurity, but on its own can't determine the motivations behind greater claims of privileged influence.

The path to NATO is not smooth going in Ukraine, either. According to NATO records, during the period 2010–2014, Ukraine had been seeking non-alignment as a strategic position, but following the rupture of Ukraine with Crimea and Donbas, it returned to this position as a strategic goal (NATO, 2026). The results of Marten (2018) contribute to the argument that enlargement was not mechanistically determining because of the importance of intervening domestic and status dynamics. The 2008 declaration, in other words, cannot be the only explanation for the gap between Bucharest and full-scale invasion, which is now fourteen years.

Proposition 1 is thus accepted qualifiedly. The unresolved issue regarding the future direction of Ukraine's security policy in Bucharest and its reinforcement of the Russian threat perception with NATO expansion (Mearsheimer, 2014; Wolff, 2015). But the statement was not enough to trigger the 2022 war. Its causal relevance became apparent through subsequent contacts, particularly after 2014, when it became clear that Russian coercion had changed Ukrainian preferences and that NATO-Ukraine relations had tightened (NATO, 2026; Marten, 2018).

5.2 Proposition 2: The 2014 Crisis Produced a Self-Reinforcing Security Dilemma

This latter proposition is amply supported by the reciprocal changes that came after 2014. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in the East of Ukraine have changed Ukraine's sense of threat; in 2017, Ukraine reaffirm its entry into NATO as a strategic goal and in 2019 includes the Euro-Atlantic course into its Constitution (NATO, 2026). NATO also increased on-the-ground support, such as the Comprehensive Assistance Package of 2016.

Part of the explanation for the ensuing 'disconnect' is provided by Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024), a set of measures that Ukraine and NATO view as defensive may be interpreted differently as far as Russian threat is concerned, regardless of Ukrainian membership.

This is the recursive process that Herz (1950) and Jervis (1978) found: actions taken for security can lead to a decrease in the sense of security of the other and, thus, trigger countermeasures. Russian pressure further incentivised Ukrainians to seek closer ties to the West and NATO offered support to enhance Ukraine's own defence (Russian reading: a further penetration by the West). This series was not symmetrical from either a legal or political perspective, however. While Ukraine sought outside help after Russia's intrusion, the Russian military invaded Ukrainian territory.

Human and military losses illustrate that post-2014 was no deadlock. OHCHR estimated that there were some 51,000–54,000 conflict-related casualties, including 14,200–14,400 deaths, up to December 2021, and at least 3,404 civilian deaths (OHCHR, 2022). Minsk, without settling the political-security conflict, dialed back some of the fighting. In 2021, OSCE monitoring continued to document significant violations of the ceasefire, such as 1,090 violations in the Donetsk region, and 476 violations in Luhansk on 8 September alone (OSCE, 2021).

The illustrative case is Ukraine's path from non-alignment towards Euro-Atlantic integration in the constitution. According to NATO records, between 2010 and 2014 it was the policy of non-alignment, and in 2017, NATO membership turned into a strategic goal again after being introduced in the country's constitution in 2019 (NATO, 2026). In this chapter, Wolff (2015) shows how enlargement and Russian hostility played out over time. The sequence thus calls into question the one-directional narrative: Russian actions made NATO alignment more attractive in Ukraine and NATO alignment, in turn, made Russia more fearful

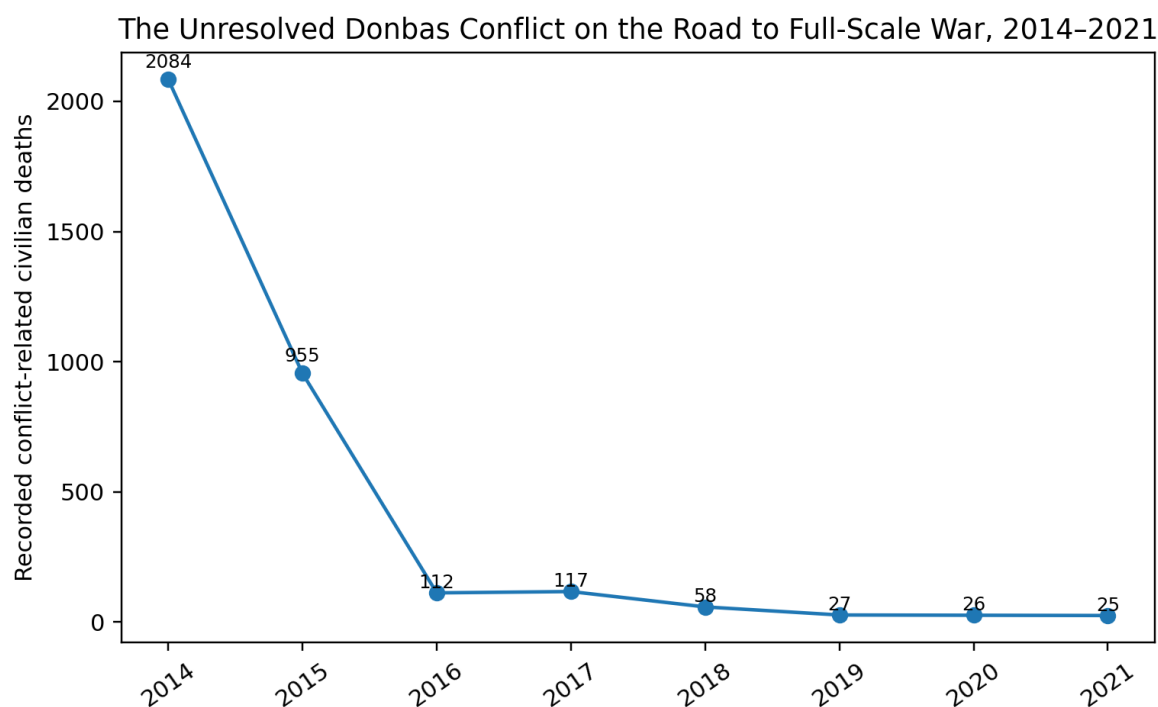


Figure 2. The Unresolved Donbas Conflict on the Road to Full-Scale War, 2014–2021

Source: Author's visualisation based on OHCHR (2022), Conflict-related civilian casualties in Ukraine, 14 April 2014–31 December 2021.

As can be seen in figure 2, the pre-2022 conflict was deadly, but there was a sharp drop in civilian deaths after 2015, with OHCHR reporting 2,084 deaths in 2014, 955 in 2015 and just 25 in 2021 (OHCHR, 2022). The decrease reflects a decrease in civilian casualties in the absence of a political resolution. Despite the decrease in the number of fatalities in a year, continued OSCE monitoring of ceasefire violations shows that the issue of security on the contact-line remained unresolved. As a consequence, there is evidence of reduced intensity and unresolved insecurity which supports Proposition 2.

In some ways, a pure security-dilemma reading is found wanting in that it unduly neglects the importance of identity, status and domestic politics. Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) demonstrate that neither material balancing alone is sufficient to explain the acquisition of threat meanings in security communities nor is Marten (2018) able to reduce Russian hostility towards the West to NATO's geographical movement. The critiques do not reject the framework as a whole, but refine it a bit: threat perceptions are socially and politically constructed and, therefore, the security

dilemma should be regarded not as a full-fledged theory of Russian foreign policy but as an interaction mechanism.

Proposition 2 is accepted. Following 2014, a vicious circle took hold, as Russian coercion led to greater Western alignment by Ukraine, only for the more intense NATO–Ukraine cooperation to fuel Russia's threats (NATO, 2026; Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024). Minsk helped to slow some violence, but did not resolve the territorial dispute or Ukraine's geopolitical direction; ongoing monitoring in 2021 indicated that the violence remained active (OHCHR, 2022; OSCE, 2021). By the end of 2021 the dilemma was more securitised and difficult to turn around.

5.3 Proposition 3: Incompatible Security Demands and Russian Coercive Escalation Turned Crisis into War

The diplomatic and military history of late 2021 and early 2022 is the strongest evidence for the third proposition. By 26 January, NATO estimated that over 100,000 Russian troops were deployed in and around Ukraine and noted further deployments in Belarus (NATO, 2022a). It has stated that the number of troops in

Belarus was "well over 100,000" on 2 February and that there were approximately 30,000 Russian combat troops there. At the same time, Russia called for legally binding restrictions on future NATO expansion and NATO proposed arms control and transparency and reduction of risks, but did not offer to negotiate away the right to sovereign choice of alliance (NATO, 2022a).

This meant that the bargaining issue was particularly acute. However, while NATO made sovereign choice a fundamental principle and offered Russian leaders talks on risk reduction, transparency and arms control (NATO, 2022a), Russia put NATO's open-door principle and Ukraine's alignment closer to the heart of its demands. Herz (1950) and Jervis (1978) offer two explanations for why technical confidence-building mechanisms prove inadequate when actors state their central security needs in incompatible ways. Russia wanted to restrict the future geography of NATO; NATO didn't want to accept restrictions on its future geography under military pressure, because it would then be institutionalising spheres of influence.

One of the best examples of the interplay between diplomacy and coercion is the NATO–Russia exchange that took place in January and February 2022. NATO has provided additional meetings and written proposals on arms control, reciprocal transparency, risk reduction and European security (NATO, 2022a) and further reported on 2 February that it is "assessing a buildup well over 100,000 troops and an expected 30,000 Russian combat troops in Belarus" (NATO, 2022b). The negotiations

thus took place in an atmosphere of increasing military pressure, and even concessions of necessity might seem to them strategically unsafe and resistance might be regarded by Moscow as proof that accommodation was not even acceptable.

A realist timing perspective might argue that Moscow was concerned with the costs of trying to coerce Ukraine later, as Ukraine's ties with the west and its defence posture strengthened, in line with Mearsheimer's (2014) focus on strategic competition over Ukraine. But this pressure was not a cause of necessity. NATO's risk reduction, transparency and arms control proposals from January 2022 proved areas for ongoing diplomacy, while the ongoing military deployment demonstrated that Russia continued to have coercive options simultaneously (NATO, 2022a, b). In other words, structural pressure cannot replace an analysis of the decision to invade.

The magnitude of the invasion also calls into question arguments that are limited to Donbas or NATO membership. In February 2022, Ukraine was still a partner, not a member of NATO, and did not have any Article 5 protection (NATO, 2026). Russia nevertheless opened a multitude of fronts, including towards Kyiv. The U.N. General Assembly then, by 141 votes to five, adopted Resolution ES-11/1, declaring the action to be aggression and calling for withdrawal (United Nations General Assembly, 2022). Explanation of the background is thus still analytically separable from the responsibility for the selection of large-scale force.

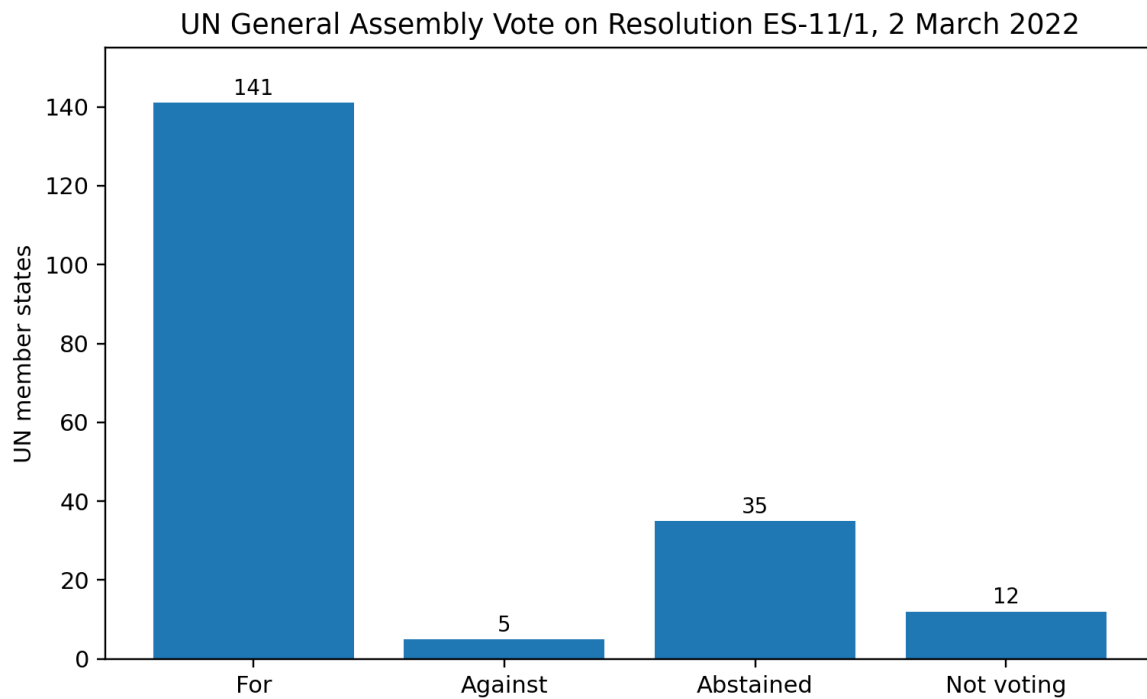


Figure 3. United Nations General Assembly Vote on Resolution ES-11/1, 2 March 2022

Source: Author's visualisation based on United Nations General Assembly voting records for A/RES/ES-11/1 (2022).

Figure 3 documents the international institutional response to the invasion that followed full-scale invasion; 141 states voted in favor of Resolution ES-11/1, five voted against it, 35 abstained and 12 were absent (United Nations General Assembly, 2022). The graph does not answer questions about the fundamental causes. The UN vote helps to illustrate the threat interpretation legally and politically, as it does not cancel out causal explanation and the legal/political culpability of the decision for invasion, as shown by Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024).

There are several propositions that have to be held true for a balanced interpretation. NATO's decision in 2008 was both strategically important and Russian opposition to Ukrainian membership had been entrenched for a long time (NATO, 2008a; Wolff, 2015). Russia's actions in 2014, however, have raised Ukraine's expectations of western protection, and led to greater cooperation between NATO and Ukraine (NATO, 2026; Gheciu & von Hlatky, 2024). By 2021 these dynamics were all enshrined in an unresolved issue, but none of them made the invasion of February 2022 automatic.

A multi-causal conclusion is supported by the literature. Mearsheimer (2014) explains the strategic implications of great-power threat perception, while Marten (2018) reveals that the estrangement between Russia and the West was not only geographical but had deeper domestic and status-based roots as well. The enlargement dispute is not a matter of the past, as Wolff (2015) illustrates, and identities and norms affect the meaning that threats take on, as Gheciu and von Hlatky (2024) depict. Each of these works individually and in combination points to the fact that structural realism and constructivism are not sufficient explanations of the path to war.

So, Proposition 3 is accepted. War was — and continues to be — a result of incompatible security demands, territorial disputes and coercive escalation, but the path from crisis to invasion is a political one. Enlargement and Bucharest were part of the causal environment and helped to shape Russian threat perception, but did not give rise to a legal right to decide Ukraine's alliances by force (Wolff, 2015; United Nations General Assembly, 2022). True, the Bucharest shadow was real, but one step on a long conditional path to war.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The study finds the Bucharest Summit of 2008 to have been a significant structural inflection point to the European security order, yet not a direct cause of the 2022 invasion. But NATO's pledge to Ukraine that it would one day join the alliance gave rise to the strategic ambiguity: it angered Moscow, yet did not immediately grant collective-defence guarantees to Kyiv. But it grew more important following 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and the war in Donbas led Ukraine to want to further integrate with the West and NATO to increase its practical support. These responses in turn led to a further strengthening of Russian strategic perceptions of encroachment. By 2021-2022 the enlargement issue had become entangled with a yet unresolved armed conflict, with military mobilisation and with incompatible demands regarding the principles of European security. Security Dilemma Theory can help to account for this spiraling, and yet it doesn't remove political agency. Russia decided for an invasion, because diplomacy was not an option. It is, therefore, important to see the road to war as an incremental process of contested security orders, threat perceptions, territorial conflict, national decisions and broken bargains, rather than as the necessary result of one summit statement.

6.2 Research Limitations

The study is based on documentary sources made public, and is not able to fully reconstruct secret deliberations in Moscow, Kyiv or in NATO capitals. Threat perception is the product of statements, behaviour and scholarship and can include strategic rhetoric. The qualitative method also is unable to give statistical causal weight to NATO enlargement, Russian revisionism, Ukrainian domestic change or the Donbas conflict. Conclusions of this nature thus refer to mechanisms and sequences and do not constitute monocausal proof.

6.3 Suggestions and Directions for Future Study

Future studies need to analyze internal archival records of Russia, Ukraine and NATO as they surface and the changes in public opinion in Ukraine before and after 2014. Process-tracing studies have the potential to evaluate the preventive-war explanation against rival imperial, regime-security and identity based explanations. Another study would also be desirable to examine if other security arrangements between 2008 and 2021 were at all politically feasible, or if they were just a thought in hindsight.

6.4 Acknowledgement

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6.5 Recommendations

1. Sovereign alignment should be coupled with more robust tools for managing the security externalities generated by alliance choices, at the European security institutional level. Hence, when considering future enlargement, military transparency arrangements, which have proven to be effective in the past, should be included, along with exercise notification, incident prevention measures and arms-control discussions. This should not amount to a veto for neighbouring powers, but such measures can decrease misperception and the potential for defensive measures to be interpreted as preparations for offensive strategic change.

2. NATO and European states must not be committed to security for the sake of the political content of the commitments being more significant than their immediate deterrent effect. As the experience of Bucharest shows, there are dangers of offering eventual membership without a clear timetable or interim security arrangement. When accession is not an option, policy makers should be explicit about the kind of partnership and protection that can be achieved, and avoid strategic ambiguity that could be seen as creating both aspirations and negative preventive calculations.

3. Diplomatic commentary on the Ukraine war should make a difference between explanation and exculpation. Policymakers and scholars should not lightly dismiss adversaries' threat perceptions, as perceptions drive actions, and uphold the tenets of sovereignty and non-aggression. Future crisis diplomacy should seek to include explicit security issues early on, to explore them against the backdrop of concrete interests, and to preserve political room for maneuver before coercive military deployments become the only game in town.

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