

## Integration Framework and Nato/ Us Involvement in Russian and Ukrainian Conflicts

<sup>1</sup>Nwaigwe, Hope

Chinenyenwa,

<sup>2</sup>Ayodeji Ojo Adedeji,

<sup>3</sup>Aro Gilbert Chukwu &

<sup>4</sup>Ngene Innocent Aja

<sup>1,2,3&4</sup>Department of Political

Science, Alex Ekwueme,

Federal University, Ndufu, Alike

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### Abstract

The study titled integration framework and NATO/ USA involvement in Russian and Ukrainian conflicts seeks to investigate the global implication of perceived expansion by Russia and how the tensions escalated? What role did NATO's response play in resolving hybrid warfare and strategic competition in regions like the Black Sea? The study utilized descriptive research design and integration theory as a theoretical framework to analyse the involvement of US and NATO in Russian and Ukraine conflict. The study discovered that integration fosters stability and also exacerbates security dilemmas when perceived as threat, leading to a complex interplay of deterrence, cooperation, and conflict. The study recommended policy considerations and emphasize the need for renewed dialogue, confidence building measures for a reassessment of NATO's expansion strategies to navigate the evolving security landscape.

Corresponding Author:

Nwaigwe, Hope Chinenyenwa

### **Background to the Study**

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea by Russia, has involved significant engagement from NATO and the United States. NATO, a collective security organization, has expanded its influence in Eastern Europe to support Ukraine against Russian aggression. This involvement includes military aid, economic sanctions against Russia, and diplomatic efforts to ensure Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The United States, as a leading NATO member, has provided significant military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, aiming to contain Russian influence and maintain the stability of the European region (Maulidina, 2023).

NATO's actions can be analyzed through the lens of Integration Theory, which provides a framework for understanding how international organizations evolve through increased cooperation among member states. Integration Theory explains how NATO's expansion and its cooperative security arrangements serve to counterbalance perceived threats, like that posed by Russia. According to Cross (2015), NATO's relationship with Russia has long shaped the security dynamics of the European region. The Ukrainian conflict has further complicated this relationship, posing new challenges and risks for NATO in managing the evolving security environment in regions like the Black Sea (Cross, 2015).

NATO's strategy to expand eastward has often been viewed by Russia as a threat to its security and sphere of influence, leading to a heightened state of conflict and tension in the region. The implications of this strategy, including the possibility of future NATO-Russia confrontations, highlight the significance of understanding NATO's involvement in Ukraine through the principles of Integration Theory. This theoretical perspective underscores how NATO's collective security measures and U.S. involvement aim to maintain regional stability and counter Russian influence while also navigating the complex dynamics of international relations (Krivopalov, 2018).

NATO's strategic objectives in Eastern Europe have primarily revolved around expanding its influence and ensuring regional security by incorporating former Soviet and Eastern Bloc countries into its alliance. This expansion is seen as a means to deter Russian aggression and promote stability within Europe. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO's enlargement has been a contentious topic, reflecting broader geopolitical struggles between the West and Russia.

### ***NATO's Expansion and Goals in Eastern Europe***

NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe began in the 1990s and early 2000s, driven by the desire to integrate former Warsaw Pact countries into Western political, economic, and security structures. This process aimed to ensure that these nations could maintain their sovereignty and independence from Russian influence while also bolstering NATO's defensive capabilities on its eastern flank. The expansion included several rounds of enlargement, such as the 1999 addition of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, followed by the accession of the Baltic states, Romania, and Bulgaria in 2004 (Wolff, 2015). The inclusion of these countries was aimed at creating a "Europe whole, free, and at peace" as part of NATO's strategic vision.

One significant aspect of NATO's expansion strategy is the enhancement of collective defense through the establishment of forward-operating bases and deployment of forces in member states close to Russia. NATO's Readiness Action Plan, developed during the 2014 Wales Summit, laid the groundwork for the creation of a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), designed to respond quickly to crises on NATO's eastern borders. This reflects NATO's shift from crisis management to a focus on defense and deterrence in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea and aggression in Eastern Ukraine (Simón, 2014).

#### *Application of Integration Theory to NATO's Actions*

Integration Theory helps explain NATO's expansion as a process of creating interdependence among member states to promote peace and stability. According to Integration Theory, regional organizations like NATO can help reduce conflicts by integrating member states through shared norms, rules, and collective security arrangements. NATO's expansion is viewed through this theoretical lens as an effort to prevent conflicts by fostering interdependence among Eastern European countries and providing them with security guarantees. NATO's integration approach has also emphasized democratic values, military interoperability, and political reforms as preconditions for membership. For instance, the inclusion of Eastern European countries like Poland and the Baltic States has required reforms that align these nations with Western standards. This strategy, rooted in integration theory, aims to stabilize the region by promoting democratic governance and reducing the likelihood of conflicts (Lašas, 2010).

However, this expansion has also brought about friction with Russia, which views NATO's enlargement as a direct threat to its sphere of influence and strategic interests. Russia's reactions to NATO's expansion have included a range of military and non-military tactics designed to undermine the alliance's influence in Eastern Europe. The “tit-for-tat” strategy adopted by Russia, characterized by actions such as the annexation of Crimea and hybrid warfare in Eastern Ukraine, can be seen as responses to NATO's continued enlargement and integration policies (Imedashvili & Siroky, 2023).

#### **US Involvement in the Conflicts: Policies and Military Aid in Ukraine**

##### *Overview of US Policies and Military Aid in Ukraine*

Since 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the escalation of conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the United States has played a pivotal role in supporting Ukraine through a combination of military aid, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic efforts. US involvement is aimed at bolstering Ukraine's defense capabilities, promoting democratic reforms, and deterring further Russian aggression. Between 2014 and 2020, the US provided Ukraine with extensive military aid, including non-lethal support such as medical supplies, radar systems, and training, as well as lethal aid like Javelin anti-tank missiles, which marked a significant policy shift in 2018 (Tsyhaniuk, 2021).

The US has also focused on strengthening Ukraine's Armed Forces to meet the military standards required for NATO membership, aiming to integrate Ukraine more closely

with Western defense structures. This strategic support was complemented by the provision of humanitarian aid to mitigate the impact of conflict on civilians and stabilize the political situation in Ukraine (Tsyhaniuk, 2021). Over the years, the US has remained steadfast in its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, providing over \$2 billion in security assistance from 2014 to 2020. A significant development occurred in 2022 with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The US responded with unprecedented military aid, including artillery systems, ammunition, drones, and training support to the Ukrainian military. President Biden's administration emphasized a long-term commitment to supporting Ukraine "for as long as it takes," reflecting a policy continuity aimed at ensuring the survival of Ukrainian democracy against Russian autocracy (Dudko&Faraponov, 2023).

### ***Integration Theory Perspective on US-NATO Cooperation***

Integration Theory provides a framework for understanding the collaborative efforts between the US and NATO in supporting Ukraine. Integration Theory posits that regional integration and cooperation among states can lead to stability and peace by fostering interdependence, shared norms, and collective security arrangements. The US-NATO cooperation regarding Ukraine exemplifies these principles, as both entities have coordinated their policies and actions to counter Russian aggression and support Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations (Popko, 2020). The United States has played a leading role in NATO's response to the Ukrainian crisis, working to ensure a unified approach among NATO members. The US has leveraged its leadership in the alliance to shape NATO's strategic priorities, including the implementation of the Readiness Action Plan, enhancing NATO's deterrence posture on its eastern flank, and increasing military presence and exercises in Eastern Europe (Popko, 2020).

From an Integration Theory perspective, US-NATO cooperation over Ukraine also highlights the concept of "spillover," where economic and political integration leads to deeper security cooperation. NATO's actions, driven by US leadership, demonstrate a spillover effect from economic sanctions and diplomatic efforts to comprehensive military support and strategic coordination. The integration efforts seek to integrate Ukraine further into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, thus reducing its vulnerabilities to Russian influence and promoting stability in Eastern Europe (Kyrychenko, 2021).

Moreover, the US's approach to the conflict underscores the importance of alliance politics and burden-sharing among NATO members. The integration of Ukrainian forces into NATO-led exercises and training programs reflects a deepening of military interoperability and alignment of defense strategies with NATO standards. This enhanced cooperation is indicative of NATO's Open-Door Policy, which seeks to integrate European countries into the alliance to promote collective security and deter aggression from adversarial states like Russia (Silaev, 2018). US involvement has also been shaped by strategic interests that align with Integration Theory's concept of 'functional spillover.' By integrating Ukraine more closely with NATO, the US aims to

create a network of alliances and partnerships that reinforce regional stability. This is evident in the continuous military aid and capacity-building measures that not only aim to bolster Ukraine's defense capabilities but also integrate it more comprehensively into Western defense frameworks (Dudko&Faraponov, 2023).

In a summary note, the US's involvement in Ukraine, through extensive military aid, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic support, aligns with the principles of Integration Theory by promoting collective security, regional stability, and closer integration of Ukraine into Western political and military structures. The US-NATO cooperation framework reflects a strategic commitment to deter Russian aggression and ensure the stability of Eastern Europe by deepening alliances and fostering interdependence.

### **Russian Response to NATO Expansion: Hybrid Warfare and Propaganda**

#### ***Russia's Perception of NATO Expansion***

Russia perceives NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and the Baltic states as a direct threat to its sphere of influence and national security. This perception is deeply rooted in historical contexts and geopolitical strategies, where NATO's eastward expansion is viewed as a violation of promises allegedly made at the end of the Cold War, threatening Russia's strategic depth. Russian officials have consistently framed NATO's presence near its borders as aggressive encirclement, prompting a range of counter-strategies, including hybrid warfare and propaganda campaigns. Hybrid warfare, in this context, is an integrated approach that combines military and non-military means to achieve strategic goals while remaining below the threshold of conventional conflict to avoid direct confrontation with NATO forces (Monaghan, 2015).

#### ***Counter-Strategies: Hybrid Warfare and Propaganda***

One of Russia's primary counter-strategies to NATO expansion has been the employment of hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare involves a mix of conventional military force, irregular tactics, cyber operations, economic coercion, and extensive information warfare to destabilize and influence target countries without triggering a direct military confrontation. This approach was prominently utilized in the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, where Russia successfully used a combination of "little green men" (unmarked soldiers), cyber-attacks, and propaganda to achieve its strategic objectives without crossing the threshold of full-scale war (Fox, 2021).

Information warfare forms a core component of Russia's hybrid tactics, seeking to manipulate public opinion both domestically and internationally. The Russian state employs media outlets such as RT and Sputnik, along with a network of online "troll farms," to spread disinformation and propaganda that undermines Western narratives, sows discord among NATO allies, and exploits societal divides within target countries. This strategy is designed to weaken NATO's cohesion and deter its further expansion by demonstrating the potential costs of aligning too closely with Western defense structures (Sashchyk & Rykhlik, 2022). Russia's use of hybrid tactics extends beyond the military



and informational domains to include political, economic, and social destabilization measures. For instance, Moscow has leveraged its energy supplies as a tool for coercion against European states dependent on Russian gas. By strategically manipulating gas prices and supplies, Russia exerts economic pressure that influences the political decisions of these states, thereby complicating NATO's unified response to Russian actions (Banasik, 2016).

### *Analysis Through the Lens of Integration Theory*

Integration Theory provides a useful framework to analyze Russia's response to NATO expansion. The theory suggests that increased integration among states through shared institutions and norms can lead to greater stability and peace. However, from Russia's perspective, NATO's expansion and integration of Eastern European countries represent a zero-sum game that diminishes its influence and security. This perception drives Russia to resist further integration efforts by NATO using hybrid warfare as a tool to maintain its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

Integration Theory posits that as NATO and the EU integrate more countries, particularly those historically under Russian influence, the regional security architecture shifts unfavourably for Russia. In response, Russia employs hybrid warfare to disrupt this process of integration. By exploiting ethnic tensions, historical grievances, and political vulnerabilities in neighbouring countries, Russia aims to create environments of instability that make NATO integration less appealing or feasible for these states (Lanoszka, 2016).

For example, in the Baltics, where there are significant Russian-speaking minorities, Russia uses a combination of propaganda, cyber operations, and political subversion to influence local politics and societal attitudes. These tactics are designed to deter these countries from fully embracing NATO integration by fostering internal divisions and weakening national cohesion. The overall objective is to undermine the perceived benefits of integration, making it a more contested process for states within Russia's perceived sphere of influence (Radin, 2017). Furthermore, Russia's actions in Ukraine demonstrate a strategic use of hybrid warfare to prevent Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. By fomenting conflict in Eastern Ukraine and annexing Crimea, Russia not only undermined Ukraine's sovereignty but also sent a clear message to other post-Soviet states about the potential consequences of aligning with NATO and the EU. These actions are part of a broader strategy to maintain a buffer zone of non-aligned or neutral states around its borders (Giegerich, 2016).

So, Russia's response to NATO expansion is characterized by a comprehensive hybrid warfare strategy that leverages a combination of military, informational, political, and economic tools to challenge NATO's integration efforts. Through the lens of Integration Theory, Russia's actions can be seen as attempts to counterbalance the shifting security architecture in Europe that results from NATO's eastward expansion. Hybrid warfare thus becomes a key instrument in Russia's broader geopolitical strategy to preserve its influence and deter further Western encroachment on its perceived sphere of interest.

## **Implications for Future Relations: Potential Scenarios for NATO-US-Russia Relations and Policy Considerations Based on Integration Theory**

### ***Potential Scenarios for NATO-US-Russia Relations***

The ongoing conflict between NATO and Russia, exacerbated by the Ukrainian crisis, has fundamentally altered the landscape of European security and international relations. Future relations between NATO, the US, and Russia will likely develop along several potential scenarios, each influenced by various geopolitical, military, and diplomatic factors. The primary scenarios can be categorized as normalization, escalation, or a prolonged "cold peace."

1. **Normalization Scenario:** This scenario assumes that diplomatic efforts and pragmatic policy adjustments will prevail, leading to a normalization of relations between NATO and Russia. The concept of "resetting" NATO-Russia relations has been proposed by various scholars as a pathway to reduce tensions and foster cooperation on shared security concerns such as counter-terrorism and non-proliferation (Antonenko & Yurgens, 2010). This approach would require both sides to agree on mutual security guarantees, potentially through a revised Euro-Atlantic security framework that includes Russia.
2. **Escalation Scenario:** In this scenario, tensions between NATO and Russia could escalate into direct or proxy military conflicts. The Black Sea region and the Baltic States are considered high-risk areas where such escalations could occur due to NATO's increased military presence and Russia's countermeasures, such as the deployment of advanced missile systems and naval forces (Cross, 2015). Any miscalculation or accidental confrontation in these areas could trigger a broader conflict involving NATO member states.
3. **Cold Peace Scenario:** The most probable outcome, considering current geopolitical trends, is a prolonged "cold peace," characterized by ongoing military buildups, economic sanctions, and sporadic diplomatic engagements without significant breakthroughs. In this scenario, both NATO and Russia continue to perceive each other as adversaries, but avoid full-scale war. This scenario reflects a balance of deterrence and containment, where both sides maintain a cautious posture to avoid escalation while not engaging in genuine reconciliation efforts (Ditrych, 2014).

### ***Policy Considerations Based on Integration Theory***

Integration Theory, which suggests that increased interdependence among states through shared norms and institutions can reduce conflict, offers valuable insights for shaping future NATO-US-Russia relations. However, the theory also highlights the complexities and dilemmas of integration, especially when one actor perceives integration as a threat to its sovereignty or sphere of influence.

1. **Reinforcing Multilateral Dialogue and Engagement:** To prevent further escalation, NATO and the US must explore new avenues for dialogue with Russia, emphasizing the benefits of cooperation over confrontation. One potential policy option is to develop a comprehensive NATO-Russia Strategic Concept that addresses mutual security concerns, sets clear boundaries for military activities,

and creates mechanisms for crisis management and conflict prevention (Antonenko & Yurgens, 2010). This could involve reviving formats like the NATO-Russia Council, which has previously been a platform for dialogue.

2. Reducing the Security Dilemma through Confidence-Building Measures: Integration Theory underscores the importance of trust-building measures to mitigate security dilemmas. NATO and Russia could adopt several confidence-building measures, such as increased transparency in military exercises, mutual notifications of troop deployments, and arms control agreements, to reduce the perceived threat from each other's military activities. A renewed focus on arms control, especially regarding nuclear and intermediate-range missiles, could serve as a starting point for de-escalation (Zolotov, 2016).
3. Addressing Peripheral Conflicts and Hybrid Threats: Future NATO-US-Russia relations will also depend on how peripheral conflicts, such as those in Ukraine and Syria, are managed. NATO must balance deterrence with diplomatic engagement to prevent these conflicts from spiraling into direct confrontations with Russia. Addressing hybrid threats, such as cyber warfare, disinformation campaigns, and electoral interference, requires establishing a framework for cyber norms and cooperation. Joint efforts to combat these threats could serve as a bridge to rebuilding trust and cooperation (Moncada & García, 2019).
4. Leveraging European Security Structures: Integration Theory also implies that regional security can be strengthened through cooperative security structures. The European Union (EU) could play a more prominent role in de-escalating NATO-Russia tensions by promoting a European security architecture that includes Russia. The EU could offer economic incentives and development assistance to Russia and other post-Soviet states, fostering interdependence and stability. This approach could mitigate some of the adversarial dynamics driven by NATO's military posture (Duke & Gebhard, 2017).
5. Reassessing NATO's Open-Door Policy: The ongoing debate around NATO's expansion and its implications for Russian security concerns must be carefully reassessed. While the integration of new member states like Finland and Sweden can enhance NATO's deterrence capabilities, it also risks escalating tensions with Russia if perceived as an encroachment on its strategic interests. Future NATO expansion should consider incorporating more flexible membership options that allow for varying degrees of military integration, thereby reducing the perceived threat to Russia while maintaining a commitment to collective defense (Chekov et al., 2023).

The future of NATO-US-Russia relations will be shaped by a complex interplay of geopolitical interests, military strategies, and diplomatic engagements. Integration Theory suggests that fostering interdependence, enhancing dialogue, and addressing mutual security concerns are crucial for reducing tensions and preventing conflict. However, the success of these approaches depends on the willingness of both NATO and Russia to move beyond adversarial postures and engage in genuine efforts to build a stable and cooperative security environment in Europe.



### **Summary of Key Points and Theoretical Insights**

The future of NATO-US-Russia relations is shaped by the evolving geopolitical context following the Ukrainian conflict, with potential scenarios including normalization, escalation, or a prolonged "cold peace." The normalization scenario hinges on diplomatic efforts and mutual security guarantees, while the escalation scenario involves heightened tensions that could lead to direct military confrontation in regions like the Black Sea and the Baltics. The "cold peace" scenario remains the most likely, characterized by continued military build-ups, economic sanctions, and limited dialogue, reflecting a balance of deterrence without active reconciliation (Cross, 2015).

Integration Theory provides a framework for analyzing these scenarios by highlighting the importance of interdependence, shared norms, and collective security arrangements to reduce conflicts. However, the theory also acknowledges the challenges when integration is perceived as a threat, as seen in Russia's reaction to NATO's eastward expansion. For Russia, NATO's expansion poses a zero-sum game that undermines its regional influence and strategic depth, prompting a range of countermeasures, including hybrid warfare and strategic competition (Antonenko&Yurgens, 2010).

Key policy considerations for NATO and the US involve reinforcing multilateral dialogue to reduce tensions, such as developing a new NATO-Russia Strategic Concept that addresses mutual security concerns and establishes crisis management mechanisms. Confidence-building measures like transparency in military exercises and renewed arms control agreements could help mitigate security dilemmas and foster stability (Zolotov, 2016). Additionally, leveraging European security structures and reassessing NATO's Open-Door Policy to offer more flexible membership options could further ease tensions.

Finally, future NATO-US-Russia relations require a balanced approach that integrates deterrence with dialogue and cooperation. Integration Theory suggests that reducing adversarial perceptions through confidence-building, shared security frameworks and addressing peripheral conflicts can prevent escalation and foster a stable security environment. The success of these strategies, however, will depend on the willingness of both NATO and Russia to engage in genuine, constructive dialogue and move beyond their current confrontational postures (Duke & Gebhard, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

This study interrogated NATO's expansion strategies to navigate the evolving security landscape and prevent further escalation and for Russia to allow Ukraine to exercise her sovereign powers. The study argued that the future trajectory of NATO-US-Russia and Ukraine relations remains highly uncertain and is influenced by a complex interplay of geopolitical strategies, military postures, and diplomatic engagements, despite the renewed relationship between US and Moscow in 2025 and the decline of support between US and Ukraine in February 2025. The potential scenarios normalization, escalation, and 'cold peace' reflect different pathways for managing the intricate dynamics between these major powers. While the normalization scenario would involve

diplomatic rapprochement and mutual security agreements, this path requires a significant shift in both NATO's and Russia's current strategic orientations. The escalation scenario, driven by miscalculations or deliberate provocations, poses the greatest risk of direct conflict, particularly in contested regions like the Black Sea and the Baltics. Meanwhile, the "cold peace" scenario, characterized by a balance of deterrence and sporadic engagement, appears most probable given current trends. This scenario would see ongoing military build-ups and a guarded approach to dialogue, ensuring ceasefire and genuine reconciliation occurrences.

Integration Theory provides a critical lens for understanding these scenarios and offers a pathway to reducing the risk of conflict. It emphasizes that fostering interdependence through shared institutions and norms can stabilize regional dynamics and mitigate security dilemmas. However, this theory also acknowledges the limitations when one state perceives such integration as a direct threat to its sovereignty and influence. Russia's response to NATO's expansion demonstrates the challenges of applying Integration Theory in a context where security and influence are viewed as zero-sum games (Antonenko & Yurgens, 2010).

Moving forward, the most effective strategy for NATO and the US involves balancing deterrence with proactive diplomatic engagement. A key component of this strategy would be to reinforce multilateral dialogue through a renewed NATO-Russia Strategic Concept that addresses mutual concerns and clearly defines red lines and engagement protocols. Confidence building measures, such as transparency in military activities and new arms control agreements, could further alleviate tensions and reduce the likelihood of accidental escalation (Zolotov, 2016).

Additionally, leveraging European security institutions like the EU to complement NATO's efforts could help create a more inclusive security framework that accounts for Russia's concerns without compromising NATO's foundational principles. Reassessing NATO's Open-Door Policy to offer more flexible and non-threatening integration options could also reduce the perceived threat from NATO expansion while maintaining the alliance's credibility (Duke & Gebhard, 2017).

In all, while the path to normalized NATO-US, Russia and Ukraine relations is fraught with challenges, it is not unattainable. The successful management of future relations will depend on a nuanced approach that integrates deterrence with dialogue, builds mutual trust through confidence-building measures, and seeks pragmatic cooperation where interests align. Only through such balanced efforts can a stable and peaceful European security environment be achieved.

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