Committee: NATO
Topic: Topic 2: Active Engagement Rules and Airspace Defense: Pre-Authorised Kinetic Interception, Escalation Thresholds, and Nuclear Deployment on NATO's Eastern Flank.
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TO GET A BETTER OVERALL UNDERSTANDING, READ ALL ABOUT THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY, ARTICLES 4 AND 5. (sources are in the last page)

OVERVIEW

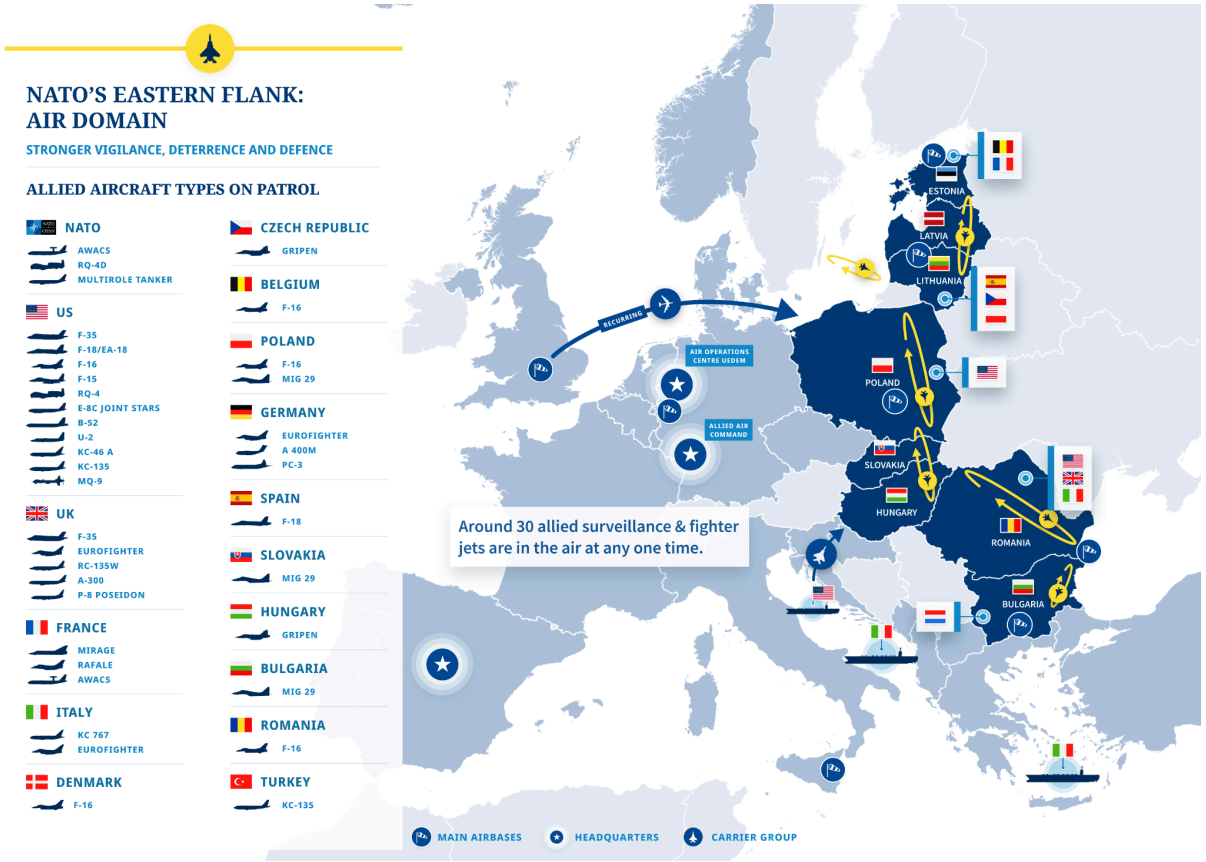
For decades, NATO's deterrence posture relied on clear geographic buffers, predictable crisis-management ladders, and consensus - driven political oversight in Brussels. Today, persistent Russian airspace violations-ranging from transponders-off fighter transits over the Baltic Sea to large-scale drone and cruise missile incursions into Polish and Romanian airspace - have eroded those buffers and exposed critical vulnerabilities along the Alliance's Eastern Flank.

This topic addresses an acute internal divide threatening Alliance cohesion across two interconnected domains: airspace Rules of Engagement (ROE) and nuclear deterrence posture. Frontline Eastern Allies argue that centralized political approval is dangerously slow in an era of hypersonic weapons and drone swarms, demanding pre-authorised, decentralised kinetic shoot-down rules and the forward deployment of nuclear weapons onto their soil to establish absolute deterrence. Conversely, Western and Southern Allies warn that delegating lethal engagement authority and moving tactical nuclear warheads directly onto Russia's borders risks catastrophic miscalculation, removes vital political circuit-breakers over escalation, and places high-value nuclear assets within range of preemptive strikes. Operating within the North Atlantic Council (NAC), where all decisions require consensus and every member holds an effective veto, delegates must forge a unified deterrence and defense architecture that secures Allied airspace without triggering an unintended conflict.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From Air-policing to integrated Air Defense:

Established in 1961, NATO Air-policing is a peacetime collective defense mission designed to preserve the integrity of Allied airspace. Under the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence System (NATINAMDS), The Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) exercises overall command through Allied Air Command (AIRCOM) in Ramstein, Germany, and regional Combined Air Operations Centres (CAOCs).



NATO's Eastern Flank Air Domain Posture. Source: Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) -NATO

Historically, Air policing relied on Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) fighter jets following a strict, gradual escalation ladder: radar tracking, visual identification, radio warnings, wing-rocking signals, and physical escort out of Allied airspace. Lethal force was restricted to immediate self-defense or explicit political authorization. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and a sharp surge in airspace incursions, NATO initiated a structural shift in 2026 from peacetimes "Air Policing" to a 360-degree, multi-layered NATO Air Defence posture incorporating surface-based air and missile defense (SBAMD) and counter-uncrewed aerial systems(C-UAS), alongside enhanced vigilance operations such as Eastern Sentry.

NATO's Nuclear Sharing Architecture:

NATO defines itself as a nuclear alliance, backed primarily by the strategic forces of the United States, alongside the independent nuclear deterrents of the United Kingdom and France. Under NATO's Nuclear Sharing Agreements, U.S. B61 tactical nuclear gravity bombs are forward-deployed in the select European host nations (currently Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkiye) under strict U.S. custody and positive control.

In wartime, designated Dual-Capable Aircraft (DCA) operated by participating Allies would deliver these weapons only after explicit political authorization from the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), the NAC, and the U.S. President. Under the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, NATO stated it had *"no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members."* While Allies declared the Founding Act nullified in practice following Russia's aggression in Ukraine and Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and Iskander missiles to Belarus and Kaliningrad, NATO has thus far refrained from physically basing nuclear warheads east of Germany.

Articles 4 & 5:

Article 5 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty establishes the principle of collective defense - an armed attack against one or more Allies in Europe or North America is considered an attack against them all, obligating each member to take *"such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed forces."*

Article 4 allows any Ally to call for urgent NAC consultations whenever its territorial integrity, political independence, or security is threatened- which is directly relevant when Russian drones or missiles violate Eastern Flank airspace just below the threshold of an all-out Article 5 war.

Core Issues & Policy Dilemmas

Issue A: Pre-Authorised Kinetic Interception vs. Centralised NAC Control

When a Russian cruise missile or drone enters Polish, Romanian or Baltic airspace, flight times to population centers or critical infrastructure can be measured in seconds or minutes. Requiring high-level political national clearance from Brussels - or relying on differing national Rules of Engagement (ROE) under classified NATO document MC 362/2 - creates a dangerous decision-making lag.

The dilemma: Should NATO grant SACEUR, CAOC commanders, and national air defense batteries pre-authorised, decentralised shoot-down clearance for uncrewed systems and and/or crewed combat aircraft violating Allied airspace? Or does automatic kinetic interception remove vital political circuit-breakers, turning an accidental navigational error or localised grey-zone probe into an immediate shooting war?

Issue B: Expanding Nuclear Sharing to the Eastern Flank

Frontline States - led most vocally by Poland, alongside the Baltic states and Finland- have increasingly pushed for inclusion in NATO's nuclear deterrence architecture, including hosting U.S. nuclear weapons or dual-capable infrastructure.

The dilemma: Does forward-deploying nuclear warheads onto the borders of Russia and Belarus reinforce deterrence by denial, convincing Moscow that any conventional spillover will immediately cross a nuclear threshold? Or does placing high-value nuclear storage sites within range of Russian short-range artillery, drones and tactical missiles create a vulnerable target while triggering a destabilizing regional arms race?

Key Stakeholders

Key actors	Stance on Airspace ROE	Stance on Eastern Nuclear deployment	Core Strategic Rationale
Frontline Eastern Allies *(Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Finland)*	Strongly support pre-authorised, decentralised shoot-down rules for drones, missiles and repeat crewed violations.	Support expanding Nuclear Sharing or permanent nuclear-capable infrastructure on Eastern soil.	Deterrence by punishment/denial; ambiguity invites Russian probing; physical nuclear presence guarantees U.S. and allied commitment
Western & Central European Allies *(Germany, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Italy)*	Favour tiered ROE (distinguishing unmanned drones/missiles from crewed aircraft) under strict SACEUR oversight.	Prefer strengthening conventional long-range strike (e.g. deployments in Germany) and existing DCA exercises over moving warheads east.	Escalation management; protecting political control over Article 5 triggers; avoiding vulnerable nuclear targets near active conflict zones.
Nuclear Guarantor & Maritime Allies *(United States, United Kingdom, Canada)*	Support modernized NATINAMDS and unified ROE, while preserving executive control over escalatory strikes.	Weighing allied reassurance against massive infrastructure costs, security protocols and global non-proliferation (NPT) scrutiny	Balancing credible extended deterrence with strategic stability and avoiding direct superpower confrontation
Southern & Consensus-Balancing Allies *(Turkiye, Hungary, Slovakia, Greece)*	Turkiye historically enforced strict national airspace defense (2015 Su-24 incident), while Hungary and Slovakia urge diplomatic restraint	Hungary and Slovakia oppose nuclear expansion as escalatory; Turkiye prioritizes Alliance consensus and existing basing arrangements.	Preventing spillover onto the Black Sea/Balkan flanks and maintaining diplomatic off-ramps with Moscow.

Operational, Legal & Technical Realities

The Multi-Layered Air Defense & Cost-Exchange Problem

Modern integrated air defense links ground-based radars and central command-and-contol (C2) nodes to diverse interceptors- from high-altitude Patriot and SAMP/T batteries to Close-in Weapon Systems (CIWS) and mobile laser directed-energy weapons (DEWs).

- Cross-Border Engagement & Debris: intercepting missiles over Ukrainian territory before they cross into NATO airspace, a proposal championed by Warsaw, raises complex legal and operational risks. Failing interceptor debris or radar lock-ons extending into non-NATO territory could be interpreted by Moscow as direct cobelligerency rather than territorial self defense.

Infrastructure, Legal & Treaty Constraints on Nuclear Expansion

Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT): Under Articles 1 and 2 of the NPT, nuclear-weapon states cannot transfer control of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear-weapon states. NATO's existing Nuclear Sharing survived cold War scrutiny because the U.S. retains physical custody and electronic Permissive Action Links (PALs) until war breaks out. Expanding basing into Eastern Europe will face intense diplomatic pushback from Russia, China, and non-aligned states alleging NPT circumvention.

SOURCES

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(NATO): NATO Integrated Air and Missile defence — Details on multi-layered 360-degree air and missile defense integration and rotational deployment models.
(NATO): NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements (Factsheet) — Official breakdown of B61 deployments, Dual-Capable Aircraft (DCA), Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) oversight, and NPT compliance.
(NATO): Founding Act on Mutual Relations (1997) — Primary text governing historical post-Cold War security commitments and nuclear basing declarations.
(NATO Watch): Avoiding and escalation Trap — Policy analysis of NATO MC 362/2 Rules of Engagement, national ROE disparities and airspace deconfliction mechanisms.
(NATO): 1949 North Atlantic Treaty — the founding legal text of the alliance containing Articles 4 & 5 (collective defense)