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"Tit-for-Tat:" Understanding Russia – NATO Interactions in Eastern Europe

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Abstract

This article analyzes North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – Russia dynamics in Eastern Europe, focusing on the competition for influence in Georgia and Montenegro with comparisons to Moldova and Ukraine. Whereas all four countries have expressed a desire to join NATO – and Russia has consistently communicated its disapproval – Moscow has pursued divergent means to curb NATO expansion and escalated with tit-for-tat strategies. We argue that whether Russia deployed military strategies, economic levers, political tactics or covert actions has varied according to its relative power projection capacity along with the responses of NATO and the target countries. Where power projection capacity is greater due to its contiguous geography (Georgia, Ukraine), Russia staged military interventions, and where it was weaker, in non-contiguous countries (Montenegro, Moldova), it resorted to non-military means. Russia may be uniformly opposed to NATO expansion, but its strategies to keep its neighbours out of NATO and in Russia's orbit are contingent upon its relative power.

Keywords

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We view the appearance of a powerful military bloc on our borders, a bloc whose members are subject in part to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, as a direct threat to the security of our country. The claim that this process is not directed against Russia will not suffice. National security is not based on promises. And the statements made prior to the bloc's previous waves of expansion simply confirm this.

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN, NATO SUMMIT, BUCHAREST (*Kremlin.ru* 2008)

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1   Introduction

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) moved in to fill the military and political vacuum, adding 14 new members from Eastern Europe: three in 1997, seven in 2004, two in 2009, one in 2017, and one in 2020. Not only did NATO expand, it also intervened militarily in Eastern Europe – in Bosnia in 1995 and in Kosovo in 1999. Economically weakened, politically chaotic, and entangled in internal conflict, Russia yielded as its former allies joined a rival military organization. However, following "the restorative growth of the 2000s", Russia's protests became more strident and its international behaviour developed in a more assertive, interventionist direction (Allison 2008). This reassertion of Russia's privileged sphere of interest and influence set the stage for the clash between NATO and Russia that has since characterized European security.

"I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself," Putin noted in 2007, adding that "we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?" (Putin 2007). After the Bucharest summit in April 2008, where NATO indicated that Georgia and Ukraine could soon join the alliance, Russia responded with its first military intervention abroad. As Russia's military crossed into Georgia in August 2008, Putin stated, without irony, that Russia had played a positive, stabilizing role in the Caucasus for centuries as a guarantor of security and progress: "This is how it was in the past and this is how it is going to be in the future. Let there be no doubt about this" (*Civil Georgia* 2008). While Russia took control over a sizeable portion of Georgia's territory, NATO, although continuing to provide training and arms, backtracked. Also when Kremlin then dealt with Ukraine

in 2014, the West stayed on the sidelines. Putin took note and learned that the West would back down if Russia asserted itself with sufficient vigour. This was probably key to Putin's calculation regarding an invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Rather than causing NATO to back down as before, however, this time it unified the West against Russia, resulting in unprecedented sanctions and one of the largest great power proxy wars in recent history.

Russia's behaviour is not a constant, even under the tenure of a single ruler. Moscow has selected disparate strategies in its neighbourhood, sometimes pursuing more cooperative approaches and other times more conflictual ones, including the use of military force. Russia's interventions abroad have been the subject of numerous studies that recognize this change and continuity. Broadly speaking, one line of scholarship sees Russia's behaviour in the region through the prism of resistance to Western-led democratization. These studies focus on ideological incompatibility, and how Russia has sought to halt democratic diffusion by bolstering the legitimacy of autocratic political elites (Tolstrup 2013, Vanderhill 2013, Lebanidze 2020). Others emphasize how ideational factors are intertwined with security interests (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2021). A second school of thought seeks to explain Russian behaviour by drawing attention to the leader's (especially Putin's) values and ideas, often highlighting differences between Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev (McFaul 2020). Finally, a third stream of studies combines leaders' preferences with system-level analysis to account for Russia's recent interventions (Allison 2008, 2009, 2014). While acknowledging the contributing role of ideology, systemic forces, and leaders, we suggest that relative power projection in different theatres has played a decisive role in Russia's strategy to halt NATO in nearby states. Although nearly every NATO move toward the inclusion of new members was countered by Russia, especially after the mid-2000s, Moscow avoided escalation to military intervention in non-contiguous countries, where its power projection capacity remains circumscribed, and instead engaged in tit-for-tat strategies focused mostly on political, economic and cyber-warfare.

After the economic boost in the early 2000s, Russia regained confidence. At the same time, Putin realized that his post-9/11 "strategic Westernization" was not yielding the expected results regarding Russia's prestige. Kosovo's unilateral independence declaration in 2008 – and subsequent international recognition by around 100 states – was perhaps the ultimate blow. Later that year, Russia launched its first full-scale military intervention abroad since the Cold War, essentially saying "enough is enough". Nevertheless, Russia's limited capabilities to direct a large-scale war abroad were visible during its intervention in Georgia, and still more so a few years later in Ukraine. It was awareness of these limitations, we suggest, that led Russia to deploy non-military methods

(e.g., economic embargoes) in non-contiguous countries that aspire to join NATO. Our article develops this argument further, and evaluates to what extent it helps to account for Russia – NATO dynamics in Eastern Europe.

2   Theoretical Framework

International anarchy implies that rival powers must check each other's advances in the security realm. Consistent with this expectation, Russia has consistently countered NATO's moves to include new members. Indeed, a careful tracing of this process – through events and reactions, speeches and documents – reveals that the two sides are engaged in tit-for-tat strategies over time – a cycle of reciprocal cooperative and non-cooperative behaviour (Axelrod 1984, 20). In *Evolution of Cooperation*, Axelrod notes that tit-for-tat is "provocable" because any lessening of cooperation risks retaliation which "could then set off counter-retaliation," and thus set up a "pattern of mutual hostility that could be difficult to end" (ibid. 4, 186).

Moderate counter-responses can return the cycle to cooperation, but security dilemmas can spiral out of control. To understand the deployed NATO – Russia strategies and how they evolved into the conflictual equilibrium we find today, we explore NATO – Russia interactions over time in a select group of countries across Eastern Europe. Through a careful reading of events and documents, we note that Russia has made conciliatory moves – and pursued a cooperative strategy – when it perceives that other countries remain neutral. Similarly, Russia has tended to pursue a conflictual strategy when it perceives that the other country is moving away from neutrality. Precisely which conflictual strategy it chooses depends in large measure on its options, determined by its relative power projection capacity in the target country.

We suggest that Russia's use of military force has been circumscribed to cases where both its relative power was advantageous and its core security interests were at stake. Russia's security interests are derived from key strategic objectives: (1) ending the advancement and enlargement of NATO, and (2) strengthening Russia's position in former communist states. Its ability to achieve these goals is appreciably greater vis-à-vis contiguous neighbours. This is largely due not only to its ability to use the border regions to foster fifth columns, but also due to its logistical and power projection limits. In non-contiguous countries, Russia has not been able to utilize its military power in the same way, and has relied largely on applying other tools (political, economic, cyber, etc.).

Whereas offensive realism sees conflict as a result of irreconcilable conflicts of interest, defensive realism views conflicts instead as the result of the

perception of expansive, irreconcilable security interests. "When one or both sides intentionally define their interest in an expansive manner, thus intentionally creating the subjective irreconcilability. (...) actual conflict is highly likely" (Tang 2009, 602).[1] The dynamics between NATO and Russia in this region are the result of expansively defined, "subjectively irreconcilable" security interests. The Kremlin sees most of the region, including countries that were never part of the Soviet Union, as its "legitimate zone of interest," a region where it deserves to dominate, and to hold a veto over aspirations held by individual states. Likewise, for NATO, any rival that seeks to dominate this region is "subjectively irreconcilable". Both conflictual and cooperative relationships are possible.

As Tang (2009, 594) argues, interaction of defensive measures and countermeasures can also reinforce fears and uncertainties about each other's intentions, leading to a cycle in which each party accumulates more power without necessarily making itself more secure. Glaser shows that the security dilemma is often overlooked when the relative power of one actor increases, which is arguably what occurred when NATO admitted new members:

> [A] state that increased its relative power might nevertheless decrease its security because its increased relative power could make its adversary less secure, which could in turn increase the value its adversary places on expansion. War could become more likely, since any deterrent value of increased relative power might be outweighed by the increased benefits that a security-seeking adversary would see in expansion.
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> GLASER 1994, 71

Jervis (1978, 200) – one of the classic sources on the security dilemma – writes: "one state's increase in security has the effect (often unintended and sometimes unforeseen) of decreasing the security of others" and "one state's gain in security often inadvertently threatens others". Tang likewise notes that:

> many of the measures adopted by one side for its own security can often threaten, or be perceived as threatening, the security of the other side even if both sides merely want to defend their security. Consequently,

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1 Tang argues that "genuine conflict of interest between two states is neither necessary nor sufficient for a security dilemma to exist between them". However, "two states can end up in actual conflict even if there is no objective conflict of interest between them or the conflict of interest between them is only subjectively irreconcilable, but objectively (that is, genuinely) reconcilable" (Tang 2009, 603).

the other side is likely to take countermeasures against those defensive measures.

TANG 2009, 594[2]

Taken together, Jervis, Glaser, and Tang show us that security-motivated advances often provoke defensive countermeasures that can lead to spirals, which in turn can provoke threats of war or actual war. NATO's effort to implement containment in the shared region in response to what were perceived as Russia's expansionist aims was perceived by the Kremlin as hostile encirclement motivated by offensive aims. Major powers may be drawn into regional conflicts when competition is unregulated (George 1990, 108), but this typically only escalates to war where there is also an advantage in power projection capabilities.

Russia has clearly and consistently perceived NATO's activities in the region as threatening, requiring increasingly strong countermeasures to defend the status quo. Regardless of NATO's intentions, its expansion represents a military alliance on Russia's border. While Russia has not directly threatened NATO, it has repeatedly tested the limits, for instance, by provocative military manoeuvres, violating NATO members' airspace (Shaikh and Rosenbaum 2015, Lougheed 2022). Although some of Russia's neighbours have developed close relationships with NATO (and the EU), these actors have not been extended any tangible security guarantees prior to accession, creating a window of opportunity for the use of military force.

While NATO has been present in both Georgia and Ukraine for many years, neither are NATO members. This has enabled Russia to take pre-emptive action to ensure it maintains a buffer zone on its borders free of any external military alliance like NATO. Backed by extensive internal military mobilization, including upgrades to its weapons and external alliances, Russia's power and resolve in the region have continued to grow. However, relative to NATO, Russia's capabilities still remain limited. As a result, its policy in the "near abroad" has been mostly focused on less costly, non-military solutions to its security, up until the invasion of Georgia and now Ukraine. Russia's resurgence has produced a Cold War-esque clash with the West. While ideological incompatibility and leadership characteristics have clearly played a role, Allison (2008, 2009, 2014), Tolstrup (2013) and McFaul (2020) convincingly demonstrate that Russia's conflict with the West is particularly notable in places where the relative power of

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2 As Jervis noted (2017, xxvi) "international anarchy and the driving concern for security would lead decision makers to be highly sensitive to threats, and therefore likely to overperceive them".

Russia and NATO is closer to parity and the security dilemma is particularly fraught with tension and prone to spiral.

Russia claims that Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, and Ukraine all belong not only in its sphere of interest, but also in its sphere of *influence*, and has reacted aggressively – but not uniformly – to NATO's advancement. Russia has sought to destabilize adjacent states (Ukraine and Georgia) by military (and other) means. However, to influence less proximate states (Montenegro and Moldova), it has deployed political and economic – but not military – means. This is partly because more distant states seeking to join NATO are perceived as less threatening, but perhaps more due to variation in Russia's power projection capacity and strategic options. We suggest that Russia's relative power remains much greater in contiguous states than in its broader neighbourhood.

Relative power entails not only resources, but also the instruments and policies to enhance security (Glaser 1994). Internal mobilization, external mobilization, and power projection operations are three key dimensions of relative power. Internal mobilization concerns the modernization of arms and military equipment, external mobilization either new alliance formation or enlargement of existing structures, and power projection refers to moving military operations across space. Russia's relative power is much greater in contiguous states (e.g., Georgia and Ukraine) than in non-contiguous ones (e.g., Moldova and Montenegro). Even though Russia's objective – to curb and prevent NATO expansion – is consistent, its ability to stem the tide through force thus varies.

While other direct neighbours have become members without Russia intervening militarily (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, each in 2004, and Poland in 1999), these countries all joined NATO *before* Russia's resurgence in the mid-2000s, when it had fewer options for military intervention abroad. By contrast, the four countries considered in this article all seek closer ties with NATO in a process taking place in parallel to Russia's military resurgence and increased capacity to intervene abroad.[3] Today, Russia is demonstrably less willing to tolerate NATO expansion than in the previous two decades, as exemplified by the threat of "retaliatory measures" and "serious military and political

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3 Russia's intervention in Syria, while an important event in Russia's recent foreign policy endeavours, falls outside our study's scope. Unlike the cases analyzed, Russia did not use (or threaten to use) its conventional army in Syria, relying on airpower to support Assad's regular ground army during the civil war. Moreover, Russia intervened in Syria at the request of its leader and (more or less) coordinated its involvement with other powers. By contrast, all cases considered here were one-sided, uninvited interventions aimed at toppling rather than propping up the central government.

consequences" in response to Sweden's and Finland's declarations of interest in joining NATO (Szumski 2022).[4]

Russia's relative power has increased, but NATO's abilities have too. After the Soviet Union dissolved, NATO began military cooperation with 28 former communist countries (NATO 2020), 14 of which since have become NATO members. NATO also engaged outside the alliance's territory in regional crisis situations (e.g., in the Balkans and Middle East). To counter NATO's efforts, Russia responded by seeking formal relations with former communist countries and other powers to form counter-alliances, most prominently, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), but also by modernizing its military.[5]

Russia's strategic documents make clear that NATO expansion in countries bordering Russia is considered a threat. Since 2000, all strategic documents discuss Russia's core security interest in the "near abroad", and how it sees itself as the centre and patron of the former communist space.[6] Strengthening the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and CSTO was needed to keep pace with the perceived threat from NATO's enhanced strategic positions in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. Russia clearly articulated its interest in an exclusive zone of dominance, and repeatedly warned NATO to limit its interests in this region to reduce the risk of confrontation, but NATO and Russia were already mired in a security dilemma.

In the following section we depict the emergence and consolidation of this security dilemma through analyzing the main developments in NATO – Russia interactions since the end of the Cold War. We identify 15 seminal events that shaped and shifted the balance of power between NATO and Russia in the

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4   Just as this article was going to press, Finland officially joined NATO, whereas Sweden's membership was still being blocked by Turkey and Hungary. Finland's accession is consistent with our main claims about the relevance and limitations of Russia's relative power. Russia's ability to open up a second front during the ongoing war in Ukraine is doubtful. This provided Finland with a window of opportunity to join NATO largely unopposed. As a result of the war, Russia's relative power has diminished even vis-à-vis bordering countries, leading Moscow to resort to other means of subversion rather than outright military force (e.g., just days after Finland announced it wanted to join NATO, Russia halted gas exports to Finland as a retaliatory move).

5   For details, see online Appendix 1.

6   See various iterations of the national security concept (*Kontseptsiya natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii* 2000, *Strategiya natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii* 2015, 2021), military doctrine (*Voennaya doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii* 2000, 2010, 2014), and foreign policy concept (*Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii* 2000, 2008, 2016). For more on Russia's standing in the international system, see also the Ministry of Defence's 2003 Defence White Paper (*Krasnaya zvezda* 2003).

region.[7] These events contributed to the consolidation of the emergent security dilemma. This set the stage for the subsequent spiralling – the action – reaction cycle of heightened distrust and tension. In the 1990s, Russia was open to Western cooperation, and agreed to participate in the Partnership for Peace and the NATO – Russia Permanent Joint Council. However, in the 2000s, during the period of Russia's resurgence, most NATO – Russia interactions display an adversarial tenor. At the same time, the nature and range of conflictual as opposed to cooperative strategies varied across the region, and it is through this more nuanced analysis that we seek to better understand Russia's behaviour in the "near abroad" retrospectively and with an eye toward future developments in the region.

3   Case Selection

To comparatively assess tit-for-tat dynamics between Russia and NATO, we focus on four countries – Georgia, Montenegro, Ukraine and Moldova – the first two in depth and compared with each other, and the latter two as "shadow cases" (Soifer 2020).

All four countries have sought closer ties with NATO. Moreover, all four belong to what the Kremlin sometimes calls "the Orthodox world", that is, they share a common religious heritage and cultural orientation. In addition, they share a communist past and are fragile democracies. We argue that we cannot fully understand the variation in Russia's approach if we only undertake the rather more obvious comparison between Georgia and Ukraine, which would risk "selecting on the dependent variable". To gain a better grasp of variation in Russia's behaviour, we thus compare Georgia and Montenegro, using the case selection logic of most different design. Whereas Georgia (and Ukraine) shares a border with Russia and was subject to an invasion by Russia's military forces, Montenegro (and Moldova) does not border Russia and was not subject to a full-scale military invasion. This provides us with the needed variation on both dependent and independent variables of interest.[8]

Russian security interests for all four countries are evident in official statements and key security documents. This is just as true for Montenegro and Moldova as it is for Ukraine and Georgia. On 17 June 2016, speaking at the

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7   See online Appendix 2 for further details.
8   Needless to say, all four countries share many other similarities, including historical, cultural, security, and economic ties to Russia, and thus some other more obvious and casual explanations can be controlled for as essentially constants by design.

St Petersburg Economic Forum, as NATO was about to add Montenegro to its ranks, Putin observed: "The Soviet Union has collapsed, and the Warsaw Pact no longer exists, but NATO is still approaching our borders" (Knezevic 2016). Five days later, on 22 June 2016, the Russian State Duma warned NATO about a new Cold War arising from NATO expansion (*Kommersant* 2016). A few months later, Russia was accused of orchestrating an attempt to assassinate Montenegro's pro-NATO Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic and staging a coup. In 2017, however, Montenegro formally joined NATO.

Just one year before Montenegro joined NATO, roughly 30% of its GDP came from Russian foreign direct investment (FDI), a much higher share than in Georgia, where Russian FDI had peaked at 12% ahead of the 2003 Rose Revolution. Similarly, before Moldova and Ukraine signed Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreements with the EU, Russian FDI had made up 28% of Moldovan GDP compared with only 5–6% in Ukraine (Walter, Luecke and Lupusor 2017, Liuhto 2020). Even if we assume that Georgia and Ukraine are more conventionally considered within Russia's privileged sphere of interest, both Moldova and Montenegro are much more closely economically tied to Russia.

Table 1 summarizes how these four cases align on some commonly cited factors behind Russia's behaviour. On all relevant variables, except X_1 and X_2, as well as the dependent variable, Y, the four countries are quite similar. However, as we demonstrate in the subsequent analysis, we only observe Y when we have both X_1 and X_2, whereas Y does not occur when either is absent. The next sections evaluate this conjecture systematically.

TABLE 1   Empirical cases with core explanations

	Georgia (Ukraine)	Montenegro (Moldova)
Potential causes = X1–X6		
(1) NATO advancement	Yes	Yes
(2) Direct border	Yes	No
(3) Communist legacy	Yes	Yes
(4) Economic dependence/ties to Russia	Yes (low)	Yes (high)
(5) Religious network	Yes (high)	Yes (high)
(6) Fragile security	Yes	Yes
Outcome = Y		
Russian military intervention	Yes	No

4   Empirical Analysis

This section analyzes each country through the lens of tit-for-tat dynamics of cooperation and conflict. Georgia and Montenegro are both cases of Russia – NATO tit-for-tat behaviour, yet reveal disparate outcomes. We leverage this variation to shed light on how Russia is likely to behave in different countries as NATO continues to expand, not only in Georgia and Ukraine. Utilizing process-tracing (Beach and Pederson 2013), we explore the "action – reaction cycle" between NATO and Russia regarding Georgia and Montenegro. By adding the two "shadow cases" – Moldova and Ukraine – we also aim to examine the external validity of our arguments about the security dilemma and relative power in the region.

4.1   *Russian Intervention in Georgia*

Conflict potential in a region is shaped by relative power and symmetry of interest (George 1990). When both actors have roughly symmetrical vital interests in a particular region or country, agreeing on rules to regulate conflict is more challenging, which makes security dilemmas more likely to spiral into violence. George described such situations as a "meta-game rivalry", with competition calibrated according to the magnitude of interests of the powers involved.

While both NATO and Russia have displayed a high degree of interest in Georgia, Russia's relative power has traditionally been – and arguably remains today – greater than NATO's in the region. In the early 1990s, Batashvili (2018, 4) argues, "Russian security agencies treated Georgia in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia in a manner similar to how they treated Ukraine in the Donbass region in 2014". NATO was largely absent. However, with NATO's gradual advancement in Georgia during the 2000s, particularly following the 2003 Rose Revolution, Russia immediately perceived this as hostile behaviour (Gvalia, Lebanidze and Siroky 2019). Russia accelerated the "action – reaction cycle" against Georgia and NATO. In the online appendix, we have mapped ninety-one tit-for-tat interactions between November 2002, when Georgia first asked to join NATO, and April 2008, when NATO at the Bucharest summit indicated that Georgia (and Ukraine) could join the alliance in the future but did not grant Membership Action Plan (MAP).[9] The data reveal a direct link between Georgia's integration efforts – sometimes only meetings with NATO – and Russia's retaliatory activities.

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9   See online Appendix 3.

Russia interpreted the Bucharest summit as an escalation and departure from neutrality and initiated political and military countermeasures against Tbilisi. Putin sent a letter to the separatist leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in which he noted that Georgia's prospective integration into NATO posed a material threat to their (Abkhaz and Ossetian) security, and promised "not declarative but practical" support (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2008a). Putin then issued a decree instructing the Russian government to establish direct relations with the de facto authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (*Kavkazskii uzel* 2008). On 8 April, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov declared that Russia would "prevent Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO," and this statement was followed by deployment of additional soldiers to Abkhazia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2008b). Moreover, on 20 April, Russian fighter jets shot down a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle over Gali (UNOMIG 2008). Next, additional troops and railroad forces from a military base in Novorossiisk arrived, tasked with preparing railways for the transport of military equipment. One week prior to the Russian invasion, on 30 July, troops belonging to the regular Russian army finalized the restoration of the railroad between Sukhumi and Ochamchira. In parallel, Russia launched a large-scale military exercise, "Kavkaz-2008", close to Georgia's borders, including in the vicinity of the Roki Tunnel, the strategically important tunnel cutting through the Caucasus mountains between Russia and South Ossetia. While trying to avoid being dragged into war with Russia, NATO backed Georgia, and activated high-level dialogues with Russia and secessionist leaders to de-escalate tensions, but to no avail.

While the 2008 war is the most visible result of this spiral, a careful analysis can highlight the fuller interconnectivity of events among NATO, Georgia, and Russia and how they evolved over the course of years into a profoundly fragile security dilemma. Already in 2004, Russia's tit-for-tat behaviour was evident. For instance, after NATO Deputy Secretary General Gunter Altenburg went to Tbilisi in 2004 to discuss NATO – Georgia relations and further assistance programmes, the following day the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded by starting to distribute Russian passports to the residents of South Ossetia.

Another example is the 2004 NATO Istanbul summit. When the summit communiqué called on Russia to withdraw its military forces and hardware from Georgia – and simultaneously welcomed Georgia to develop closer relations – Russia responded by bombarding Georgian-controlled villages in South Ossetia. It also sent extra military personnel along with trucks, armaments, and ammunition to South Ossetia. On the political front, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Russia would protect its citizens'

interests and security in South Ossetia, and Putin made a series of statements stoking the flames between ethnic Ossetians and Georgians: "Ossetians believe that they have been subjected to exploitation by Georgia. And they believe that the nationality of Georgian was imposed on them" (*Civil Georgia* 2004a). At the same time, Russia banned Georgians from entering Russia, citing "visa irregularities".

NATO responded to Russia's pressure by approving an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with Georgia in October 2004. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer visited Georgia, where he called on Russia to pull out from its remaining military bases (*Civil Georgia* 2004b). In addition, he praised Georgia for its commitment to reforms and said "NATO has an open door for any nation, including Georgia" (ibid.).

While NATO supported domestic reforms in Georgia, in the military sector but equally in other areas, Russia applied economic, cultural, and political pressure as direct countermeasures for each advance in Georgia – NATO relations. According to the Kremlin's spokesperson, sanctions imposed on Georgia were intended to "punish the Georgian authorities for their anti-Russian policies" (Myers 2006). However, Russia also threatened to use force. In 2007, Russian military officials indicated that war along the Russian border to restore the balance of power and create a necessary buffer could not be ruled out (De Haas 2010). The security dilemma had not yet spiralled into war, but was on the brink.

During an intense period of pressure on Georgia, Russia's ambassador to Georgia defined the terms under which their bilateral relations could improve: "Moscow wants Georgia to be a neutral state", that is, outside of NATO (*Civil Georgia* 2007a). Russia warned NATO that it would react to "any attempt by NATO to expand further towards Russia's borders" (Harding 2008). NATO hoped to avert war precisely by *not* granting Georgia a MAP in 2008. The French Defence Minister, Hervé Morin, was perhaps most explicit in saying that his country would support Georgia's NATO membership bid only if it were not seen as a threat by Russia, effectively providing Russia with a veto over Georgia's alliance choices (*Civil Georgia* 2007b).

For Russia, the Bucharest decision was not viewed as a concession but rather just as a postponement of NATO encirclement. In August 2008 Russia forcefully attacked Georgia by land, sea and air, seizing and since occupying over 150 villages in Georgia (IDFI 2015). NATO's engagement in Georgia cooled down after the war, and with the change of government in 2012, Tbilisi became much more accommodating of Russia's interests (Kakachia 2022). Russia reciprocated cooperatively by relaxing various economic and political countermeasures that it had previously taken, by reducing the hostility of its

rhetoric, and by opening Russian markets to Georgia's agricultural products. Russia learned that NATO membership could be curbed by force – and the West would acquiesce.

4.2   *Russian Intervention in Montenegro*

Montenegro, with a population of only 650,000, is located 1,400 kilometres from the Russian border. Nonetheless, Russia's interests and ties to Montenegro (and the Balkans) have traditionally been much stronger than those of NATO. While not a perfect comparison, Montenegro shares some striking similarities with Georgia. Foremost among these is the dependence on and attachment to Russia, economically as well as culturally via the strong Orthodox network. As mentioned, economically, Montenegro is considerably more dependent on Russia than Georgia is. Like Georgia, however, its security situation and political institutions are fragile. What it does not share is a border with Russia, which has rendered Russia's relative power to influence political developments more circumscribed than in Georgia.

As in the Caucasus, NATO and Russia have had competing interests in the Western Balkans, where Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania all joined NATO in recent years, fostering a deep sense of encirclement. When Kosovo and Montenegro were still part of the federation with Serbia, during the 1998–98 Kosovo crisis, the head of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defence Policy at that time, Sergei Karaganov, explicitly stated: "We can expect nothing good from NATO (…) we will have to think about holding NATO in check (…) I believe the partnership with NATO within the nearest few years is, unfortunately, ruled out" (Vysotskaya 2001). Russia worked first to neutralize Western interests in Kosovo and then in Montenegro by depicting the Balkans as a violent, unstable place. Russia financed radical groups to propagate anti-NATO sentiments, while at the same time investing in strategic sectors, especially banking, real estate, and tourism (Tomovic 2016).[10] In 2016, just prior to Montenegro joining the alliance, a well-known pro-Russian Montenegrin archpriest, Momcilo Krivokapic, declared: "NATO is nothing but an occupying force" (Pancevski 2016).

One could find Georgian clergy saying much the same thing. Archbishop Spyridon declared:

> What should I say to such a priest who prefers [EU and NATO] and follows them and calls such a system a saviour. In my eyes he is not a priest!

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10   By 2016, roughly one-third of all foreign companies operating in Montenegro were Russian-owned.

> The Lord says such things, do not be afraid of those who kill your body, fear those who kill your soul and those who come to you in sin!
> TABULA.GE 2018

Another Georgia priest remarked, "NATO wants Georgia to join at the cost of giving up Abkhazia and South Ossetia. NATO has called on Georgians to 'legalize homosexuality' and 'abandon our regions'" (Kuntchulia 2021).

A key difference between Montenegro and Georgia is Russia's military base and border, and the lack of both in Montenegro. Russia's options in Montenegro were limited to "war by other means". This simple fact played an outsized role in shaping Russia's decision to pursue a military solution in one case but not the other, and arguably explains why one country eventually became a member of NATO while the other remains outside. In Montenegro, the Kremlin used a series of other tools – trade, investment, political parties, and religious groupings – to try to stem the tide of NATO accession. In the online appendix, we have identified more than thirty-five distinct actions undertaken by Russia to derail Montenegro's NATO aspirations from 3 June 2006, when Montenegro declared independence from Serbia in a peaceful referendum, until 5 June 2017, when Montenegro joined NATO.[11] Russia's hostile policy and rhetoric culminated in a failed coup plot in 2016 to assassinate the pro-NATO prime minister, and bring to power a pro-Russian government (BBC 2019).

Over this period, the data reveal a close link between Montenegro's advancement toward NATO and Russia's retaliatory activities. Often these activities operated though radical and pro-Russian groupings that fuelled polarization and anti-NATO sentiments. Russia also banned meat and wine imports from Montenegro, just as it did in the case of Georgia. In addition, Russian media discredited Montenegro as a tourist destination, filled with crime and gangs, where the water, meat, and vegetables were not safe for consumption (Naylor 2017). The Kremlin also launched a coordinated series of cyber-attacks on governmental websites during the elections in 2016–17. During a 2017 visit to Montenegro, US Vice President Mike Pence assessed Russian covert actions in Montenegro by noting that:

> Russia has worked to destabilize the region, undermine your democracies, and divide you from each other and from the rest of Europe. Russia's intentions were laid bare over the past year when Moscow-backed agents sought to disrupt Montenegro's elections, attack your parliament

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11   See online Appendix 4.

and even attempt to assassinate your Prime Minister to dissuade the Montenegrin people from entering our NATO Alliance.

<div align="right">STRONSKI AND HIMES (2019, 2)</div>

Russia's foreign ministry issued several statements condemning the US for approving Montenegro's bid to join NATO: "We consider the course towards including Montenegro in NATO as deeply erroneous, goes fundamentally against the interests of people in this country, and harms stability in the Balkans and in Europe as a whole" (*RFE/RL* 2017). It went on to warn the West that the latter bore responsibility for Russia's response (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2017). Moscow did not resort to overt military force in Montenegro, as it tried to do in neighbouring Kosovo, but instead relied on economic, political, and cultural levers and covert action. Geography and the lack of military bases in Montenegro reduced Russia's relative power projection capacity. Despite Montenegro ignoring its recurrent warnings, Russia decided that the cost of war would outweigh the benefit and backed down. Whereas one might argue that Russia called NATO's bluff in Georgia, NATO called Russia's in Montenegro.

Although Russia expended immense effort trying to destabilize Montenegro, unlike in Georgia, it stopped short of using more military force; not for lack of interest but for lack of capabilities. Russia followed a tit-for-tat strategy with NATO until the tipping point. It only backed down once it recognized its relative power was inadequate for the task of curbing NATO enlargement.

4.3 *Russia's Intervention in Ukraine*

To explore how these findings regarding relative power from the analysis of Georgia and Montenegro travel, we investigate the same dynamics in two additional cases that enable us to explore external validity, and potentially increase our confidence in this analysis of Russia's behaviour. Ukraine is selected as a case on Russia's border, like Georgia, whereas Moldova is compared with Montenegro. Each case thus shadows one of the core case studies and provides grounds for generalizing the argument. Contiguity is a rough proxy for relative power projection capacity. Russia's relative power is greater in Georgia and Ukraine than in Moldova and Montenegro, and Russia should thus be more likely to resort to the use of force in the former.[12]

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12   Syria and Libya demonstrate that Russia indeed can project power across great distances, especially with access to local military bases, which it possessed in Syria. Although the Kremlin did little during the Arab Spring, later it directly intervened in both Syria and Libya, using air power and logistical support to facilitate ground operations by national armies.

In the case of Ukraine, after the 2008 Bucharest summit, Russia sought to discredit the pro-Western political elite, headed by President Viktor Yushchenko, and to support the pro-Russian (anti-NATO) opposition, headed by Viktor Yanukovych. The Kremlin had already interfered in the 2006 parliamentary elections and now repeated this in the 2010 presidential elections (Lebanidze 2020), while at the same time pursuing gas and trade wars (Ambrosio 2009, 131–57). As a result, the pro-Russian Yanukovych in 2010 won the elections, bringing Ukraine's foreign policy in closer alignment with Russia's security requirements. The absence of any further movement toward NATO postponed more aggressive Russian countermeasures.

After the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the 2008 presidential elections in the US, NATO limited its advances in Ukraine (as in Georgia). The US launched its "reset policy" with Russia, while Russian political and economic clout in Ukraine increased. In parallel Russia launched a military modernization campaign to increase its relative power projection capacity in the region. During this period Russia did not perceive any imminent threat from NATO expansion in Ukraine, and it thus became more cooperative towards both Ukraine and NATO/the US. The previously hostile tone changed to a more welcoming one, as Russia opened its market to Ukraine's products and proposed preferential gas pricing. Russia also cooperated with the US on nuclear supply policy and provided the NATO-led effort in Afghanistan access to Russian routes. But tit-for-tat implies that a conflictual move can quickly change the mood.

The first round of coordinated economic and political pressure from Russia started in June 2013. President Putin visited Ukraine to urge President Yanukovych to join Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and abandon the idea of an Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA) with the EU (Lebanidze 2020, 222–40). When Ukraine failed to fall in line, Russia imposed new time-consuming checks on all Ukrainian exports to Russia for several weeks, without explanation (VOA 2013). Ukraine's political elite were made to understand the cost of their Western-oriented actions.

After the Euromaidan protests in February 2014 forced President Yanukovych to flee from Ukraine, Russia quickly stepped up the economic and political pressure. On 21 March 2014, the same day as Ukraine signed an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, Russia responded by officially annexing Crimea, and then, later in the spring, it launched a thinly veiled invasion, masked as "humanitarian aid", in eastern Ukraine.

That same autumn, Lavrov in his speech at the UN General Assembly, called on all countries to "adopt a declaration on the unacceptability of interference into the domestic affairs of sovereign states and non-recognition of a coup as a method for changing power" (Lavrov 2014). In this same speech, he discussed

Ukraine as a buffer state with neutral non-bloc status. Likewise, Putin in a series of speeches defending Russia's action, claiming that NATO troops in Crimea would have meant that "Russia would be practically ousted from the Black Sea area. We'd be left with just a small coastline of 450 or 600km", and that "we could not allow a historical part of the Russian territory with a predominantly ethnic Russian population to be incorporated into an international military alliance" (Allison 2014, 1274).

Russia's military intervention and destabilization efforts in Ukraine was meant to deter NATO (and the EU) from pursuing further integration, and fundamentally shifting focus away from democratization and integration efforts towards state building and stabilization (Lebanidze 2020, 162–82). Western states responded by keeping the new government in power, and retaliated against Russia with economic sanctions. NATO and Russia both possessed strong interests, and engaged in an intense tit-for-tat cycle. Russia's use of force in Donbas, and NATO's tepid response, seemed to return Ukraine to the pre-2014 status quo that Russia preferred.

However, in 2019, the election of Volodymyr Zelensky as new president of Ukraine brought new change to the dynamics. The situation quickly escalated to a level few had anticipated. Throughout the bargaining process, Russia threatened to use force. War is costly for all sides, but as a result of the relative power balance vis-à-vis Ukraine, the threat was credible. Like in Georgia, the armed phase of the conflict began with Russia's forces deployed *en masse* along the border, allegedly to take part in a military exercise, and then escalated to war. On 24 February 2022, Russia pulled the plug and launched a full-scale invasion that is still unfolding today.

To sum up, in Ukraine, Russia and NATO found themselves in a serious security dilemma. Russia responded with conflictual moves in the pre-2008 period (e.g., economic embargoes, energy sanctions, and intervention in elections), but responded cooperatively when the new government in Ukraine kept its distance to NATO. The US reset policy led to renewed cooperation. After political and economic pressure on Ukraine in 2014 failed to change the course (just like in Montenegro), Russia intervened militarily. Favourable geography and relative power balance made the use of military force credible. What Russia – and perhaps most others – did not anticipate was how much support Ukraine would receive from the West. There was certainly no reason to expect it from its previous interactions. Many were also taken by surprise by the fact that the Ukrainian army would prove to be such a formidable fighting force.

4.4   *Russia's Intervention in Moldova*
Just as Ukraine shadowed Georgia, so Moldova provides a shadow case for Montenegro. To be sure, unlike the three other cases, as a constitutionally

neutral nation, Moldova is not publicly seeking full NATO membership, just closer cooperation with NATO structures. Still, NATO has in recent years increased its activity level vis-à-vis Moldova, and Moldova vice versa. In the case of Moldova, the EU has more "skin in the game" (since 2022, Moldova has official candidate status), but for Russia, the EU's growing influence is seen as a stepping-stone toward joining NATO. As then Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin noted in 2014:

> an [AA] with the EU is a change in the neutral status of Moldova. There is a certain rule that all NATO members know: in order to enter the EU, you are required to join NATO. This rule will not change for Moldova. All countries go through this. Therefore, association with the EU will be the moment when Moldova turns the doorknob of NATO.
>
> ALEKSASHENKO 2014

When the moment emerged for Moldova to sign the AA with the EU, the vicious "action – reaction cycle" began to spiral.

Russia has long supported separatism in Moldova – particularly in the breakaway republic of Transnistria, but also in the autonomous region of Gagauzia – much as it does in Georgia's and Ukraine's border regions. For example, in order to discourage the initialling of the AA/DCFTA at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in 2013, the pro-Russian Transnistrian parliament adopted a law on the "state border" that incorporated several villages formally under Moldovan jurisdiction (Calus 2013). At the same time, Russia imposed trade restrictions and used aggressive rhetoric against Moldova. It banned Moldovan wine and spirit imports (*The Economist* 2013), and issued new restrictions on agricultural products (meat, fruit, and vegetables) (Cenusa et al. 2014, 5–7). Transnistria and Gagauzia were naturally exempt from these export bans (Mirovalev 2015).

Russia also openly supported Gagauzia's call for more autonomy. In February 2014 Gagauzia held a referendum on joining the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union, and declared its aspiration to seek independence "should Moldova lose or surrender its own independence" (*RFE/RL* 2014). Likewise, in Transnistria, where the population had already voted in favour of a future unification with Russia in a 2006 referendum, lawmakers now adopted legislation turning Russian legislation into Transnistrian law, while appealing to the Russian parliament to adopt legislation that could facilitate Transnistria's unification with Russia (Bancroft-Hinchey 2014). The pro-Russian Moldovan Communist Party tried to use the results of the referendum in Gagauzia and the developments in Transnistria to dissuade Moldova from signing the EU agreement (Calus 2014, 4–5). Rogozin openly warned Moldova that the situation in Transnistria could

deteriorate if Moldova signed the agreement (EURACTIV 2013). In June 2014, however, Moldova and the EU signed the AA.

These tit-for-tat dynamics did not escalate to war, which has more than anything to do with Russia's relative power being insufficient. Russia did escalate with regard to supporting separatism, just as in Georgia and Ukraine, and utilized hostile political rhetoric and economic sanctions to pressure the central government. However, when these Russian levers failed to produce the desired outcome, Russia did not deploy its military like it did in the two contiguous countries we examined.

5   Conclusion

This article has discussed Russia's behaviour and interactions with NATO over time in four post-communist countries: Georgia, Montenegro, Ukraine, and Moldova. All four cases have been characterized by security dilemmas between NATO and Russia, but only in two countries did Russia deploy military forces to intervene, whereas in the two others it stopped short. How can we best understand Russia's variable behaviour vis-à-vis its neighbours and NATO?

Complementing approaches that focus on leadership and ideological incompatibility, we have emphasized the key role of relative power and tit-for-tat strategies as factors explaining Russia's behaviour towards its neighbours and NATO. Russia and NATO have competed for influence and jockeyed for positions through tit-for-tat strategies. Although Russia has had a similar objective in all four countries – to prevent NATO membership – it has not behaved uniformly, and has escalated with the West in a calculated manner, using military force only after political, economic, and other levers have proven ineffectual. Similarly, Russia has "rewarded" countries with cooperative behaviour when these have behaved in line with Russia's interests. Through this approach, Russia (partially) managed to dampen enthusiasm among Western countries for further engagement and discourage publics within aspiring countries.

Since the mid-2000s, Putin has clearly expressed his dissatisfaction with the existing balance of power, which he has characterized as "one single centre of power, one single centre of force and one single master" (Reuters 2007). Outside Russia, Moscow's retaliatory measures against countries aspiring to join NATO's ranks are widely seen as offensive actions. The specific measures have varied over time and across countries, and can be understood as an intense tit-for-tat dynamic embedded in a security dilemma.

Our analysis demonstrates that the intensity and direction of Russia's reaction tracks closely to each country's movement toward and away from NATO.

The strategies these neighbouring countries adopt can shift the balance of power between Russia and NATO, worsening the security dilemma. It is therefore crucial, we hold, to incorporate the specific actions of aspiring NATO countries vis-à-vis Russia and the West into the analysis, and grant them more agency than what is usual in conventional international relations scholarship. It is equally important, we argue, to conceive of Russia's behaviour as self-interested rather than irrational: as we have demonstrated, when Russia gets its way, pressures on its neighbours ease, but when countries continue to push west, Russia applies more political and economic levers.

Both NATO and Russia have pursued alliances – NATO to establish itself and Russia to restore its previous dominance. They have largely followed a tit-for-tat strategy: NATO moves to include new members are countered by Russia, and Russia's efforts to claim a sphere of influence in the region generate NATO responses to strengthen local allies. However, our analysis shows that Russia's use of military force has been limited to contiguous states, that is, to Georgia and Ukraine, where the balance of power more clearly favoured Russia, whereas it has had to rely on covert actions and economic sanctions in the non-contiguous states, that is, Moldova and Montenegro, where its power was relatively weaker.

Russia's recent interventions are buttressed by elite ideas and identities, but as we have shown, a more structural approach that calls attention to relative power, tit-for-tat dynamics, and the security dilemma can contribute to our understanding. This approach reveals discernible interaction patterns in Russia's responses. The most fundamental pattern that emerges from our analysis is the tit-for-tat logic: Russia and NATO responded disproportionately (Russia aggressively, NATO with concession or restraint) to each other's actions, escalating only when lesser responses prove ineffectual and the relative power balance is auspicious.

This explains why Russia resorted to force solely in countries directly bordering Russia (Ukraine and Georgia), and limited itself to covert actions (e.g., cyber-attacks and attempted coups), political means (e.g., backing anti-Western groups and media), and economic levers (e.g., trade barriers, energy price hikes, and export bans) in more remote countries (Montenegro and Moldova). Even where it intervened militarily, these forays were – until the 2022 war – relatively limited in scope and reflected the limits of Russia's power.

Analyzing the dynamics of competition and cooperation between Russia and NATO in Europe's periphery, the article has identified evident tit-for-tat interaction patterns. Although Russia and NATO find themselves in a security dilemma, militarized conflict is far from inevitable. Russia has demonstrated repeatedly that it is a self-interested actor and recognizes that war is costly. Russian power has emphatically grown in recent years, but it remains

inadequate relative to its ambitions. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has reinforced this point in a piercing manner.

Appendices

The appendices A–D of this article have been made available online at: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.23178113.

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