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Threat Proximity and Defense Response: A Comparative Analysis of Military Spending Transformation in Seven Eastern European NATO States

Blízkost hrozeb a obranná reakce: komparativní analýza transformace vojenských výdajů v sedmi východoevropských státech NATO

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Abstract: This research examines post-2022 defence transformation among seven Eastern European NATO members, identifying patterns that nuance existing burden-sharing theories and refine understanding of regional security dynamics. Through a systematic comparative analysis incorporating quantitative spending data, procurement classifications, and geographic threat assessments (2021-2025), the study tests whether increased military expenditure translates into credible deterrence. The investigation analyzes spending-capability correlations and geographic proximity effects on response intensity, revealing that unprecedented defense budget expansion coexists with unresolved sustainability concerns. The Capacity-Capability-Credibility (CCC) framework serves as the primary analytical lens, with geography establishing baseline threat response intensity and political factors mediating response magnitude.

Abstrakt: Tento výzkum se zabývá transformací obrany v sedmi východoevropských členských zemích NATO po roce 2022 a identifikuje vzorce, které upřesňují stávající teorie o sdílení zátěže a prohlubují porozumění dynamice regionální bezpečnosti. Prostřednictvím systematické srovnávací analýzy zahrnující kvantitativní údaje o výdajích, klasifikaci veřejných zakázek a hodnocení geografických hrozeb (2021–2025) studie ověřuje, zda se zvýšené vojenské výdaje promítají do věrohodného odstrašení. Analyzuje korelace mezi výdaji a schopnostmi i vliv geografické blízkosti na intenzitu reakce a odhaluje, že bezprecedentní nárůst obranných rozpočtů je doprovázen nevyřešenými obavami týkajícími se udržitelnosti. Jako primární analytický rámec slouží model Capacity-Capability-Credibility

(CCC), v němž geografie určuje základní intenzitu reakce na hrozby a politické faktory utvářejí rozsah reakce.

Keywords: Deterrence Credibility; Defence Spending; Geographic Adjacency; Military Transformation; Threat Perception.

Klíčová slova: důvěryhodnost odstrašování; výdaje na obranu; geografická blízkost; transformace armády; vnímání hrozby.

INTRODUCTION

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine precipitated the most significant defence transformation across Eastern European NATO establishments since the Warsaw Pact's 1991 dissolution. Through a systematic comparative examination of seven member states (Poland, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Hungary), this investigation analyses how acute external threats drive defence policy convergence despite divergent geographic vulnerabilities, historical experiences, and orientations toward transatlantic cooperation.

The fundamental research objective (**RObj**) addresses a critical gap in contemporary defence studies: *Whether dramatic increases in military expenditure translate into genuine deterrence capabilities*.

This question relates directly to contemporary European security architecture, the credibility of NATO Article 5, and the viability of conventional deterrence amid the erosion of post-Cold War stability. The findings nuance and extend established analytical frameworks, reveal unexpected patterns of cooperation, and expose vulnerabilities that quantitative metrics cannot capture. The most consequential contribution concerns evidence of a significant repositioning of regional defence roles. The study employs the Capacity-Capability-Credibility (CCC) framework (Monaghan et al. 2024) as its primary analytical lens, with strategic shock theory (Götz & Staun 2022) as the explanatory mechanism for spending velocity, and the credibility-cohesion trade-off (Goldgeier & Shifrinson 2023) as the alliance-level implication framework.

1 METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research Hypotheses

This study tests two interconnected *hypotheses* (**H**) grounded in alliance theory, deterrence studies, and defence economics, each designed to capture distinct dimensions of the seven NATO member states' post-2022 transformation:

a. **H_1 - Spending-Capability transformation**: Defence expenditure increases (from baseline 1.3-2.4% to 3-5% of GDP) correlate positively with accelerated procurement of NATO-compatible systems and measurable improvements in collective deterrence; the strength and durability of this relationship remains empirically unproven.

b. **H_2 - Geographic proximity-Response intensity**: States sharing borders with Russia or Belarus (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland) exhibit significantly higher spending, faster modernisation timelines, and greater acquisition urgency than interior states (Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary); this tests whether geographic vulnerability constitutes a primary independent variable.

1.2 Analytical Methods: A Multi-method Approach

Analyzing defense transformation across seven states with divergent political systems, threat perceptions, and institutional capacities requires methodological pluralism rather than reliance on any single analytical technique. This investigation employs a multi-method approach comprising three complementary methods, each addressing distinct dimensions of the research problem, balancing the generalizability of quantitative analysis with the contextual depth of qualitative interpretation to generate robust findings across methodological perspectives:

a. *Structured comparative case study analysis* constitutes the methodological foundation, enabling systematic cross-national comparison while preserving contextual nuance. The method employs Brommesson's framework for examining policy convergence (Brommesson et al. 2024b) through standardised variables: defence spending (% GDP), procurement timelines, and force expansion targets.

b. *Longitudinal quantitative analysis* captures temporal dynamics by tracking defence spending between 2021 and 2025 using European Defence Agency standardised frameworks (EDA 2023) (EDA 2024) (EDA 2025) to ensure cross-national comparability.

c. *Geographic threat classification* enables systematic analysis of how geographic vulnerability shapes policy responses through a three-tier system: frontline tier 1 (direct borders with Russia/Belarus), frontline tier 2 (indirect proximity), and interior states (no direct border exposure). This classification framework is based on Shalamanov's concept of deterrence (Shalamanov et al., 2019).

All quantitative data were verified using government sources, NATO reports, and independent organisations (IISS, SIPRI). Where discrepancies emerged, the most conservative estimates were applied.

Variable operationalisation and case selection: Three primary indicators constitute the composite measure of defence response intensity:

(1) defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP (NATO 2025) (EDA 2023) (EDA 2024) (EDA 2025), serving as a proxy for political commitment;

(2) major procurement timeline in years from contract to operational capability (IISS 2024), serving as a proxy for strategic urgency; and

(3) force expansion rate as percentage increase in authorised active personnel 2021-2030, serving as a proxy for long-term deterrence investment.

Defence spending % GDP and procurement timelines are valid proxies because they capture both budgetary decisions (reflecting political will) and operational decisions (reflecting threat assessment). Their combination into a composite measure of response intensity is consistent with structured-focused comparison methodology (George & Bennett 2005). The seven Eastern European states were selected over Nordic comparators because the Eastern European sample contains the interior-state versus frontline contrast absent in the all-frontline Nordic group; furthermore, all seven share a post-Soviet institutional baseline, providing a more controlled comparison set.

2 RESULTS

The systematic analysis of documentary evidence employs the multi-method approach previously described, organising findings thematically to address each hypothesis: budgetary trends reveal the depth of commitment, geographic correlations test vulnerability effects, and force developments indicate operational concepts. The following sections present these results comprehensively.

The findings challenge conventional expectations across multiple dimensions. While established scholarship anticipated gradual, contested increases resembling Western Europe's decades-long defence spending struggles, Eastern European states doubled defence budgets within three years, demonstrating unprecedented peacetime velocity. Where geographic determinism appeared inevitable given the proximity of borders to Russia, political choices proved decisive in shaping outcomes, with interior states occasionally responding more aggressively than exposed frontline nations.

2.1 Defence Expenditure Revolution - Key findings (addressing H_1)

Collective budgets doubled from €7.5 billion (2021) to €15 billion (2024), representing the most rapid peacetime defence mobilisation in post-Cold War Europe. This acceleration surpasses Germany's decades-long, politically contested effort to reach 2% of GDP spent on defence, a threshold Poland achieved within three years, suggesting that

materialised threats eliminate the political constraints that traditionally bind Western European defence policy.

Across-the-board defence spending increases mask substantial variation in scale and strategic intent. All seven states augmented defence budgets, yet patterns reveal distinct strategic choices reflecting divergent threat assessments, alliance burden-sharing philosophies, and domestic political economies (IISS 2024). Poland leads with $38 billion in absolute terms, a 214% increase in proportional terms, positioning it as Europe's third-largest defence spender after France and the United Kingdom. Lithuania announces the alliance's most ambitious target of 5-6% GDP from 2026, surpassing even the United States' proportional spending and signalling an existential-threat perception absent among most Western allies. Hungary, despite hosting NATO forces and occupying a strategically located position, achieves only a nominal 5% growth, barely exceeding inflation, reflecting a distinct strategic prioritisation divergent from that of its regional partners.

Table 1: Defence Expenditure Evolution across Eastern European NATO Members, 2021-2025

Country	2021 GDP %	2022 GDP %	2023 GDP %	2024 GDP %	2025 Target %	Proportional increase 2021-205	Absolute budget 2024 (billions)
Poland	2.2	2.4	3.9	4.2	4.7	+214%	$38
Estonia	2.3	2.6	2.9	3.43	3.5	+149%	$1.4
Lithuania	2.0	2.5	2.7	2.85	5-6 (2026)	+200-250%	$1.8
Latvia	2.0	2.3	2.8	3.15	3.8	+158%	$1.1
Romania	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.44	5.0 (2032)	+108%	$9.8
Czech Republic	1.3	1.5	1.8	2.09	3.0 (2030)	+161%	$6.2
Hungary	2.0	2.2	2.4	2.1	2.0+	+5%	$3.9

Source: Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025) (SIPRI 2024) (NATO 2025)

Analysis of the expanded data reveals several critical patterns:

1. Poland demonstrates dramatic acceleration through steady escalation (2.2% → 2.4% → 3.9% → 4.2%), with the sharpest increase occurring between 2022-2023, reflecting the immediate post-invasion response.
2. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania demonstrate consistent annual increases rather than abrupt shifts, suggesting planned scaling rather than reactive expenditure.
3. Romania exhibits relatively stable spending during 2022-2023 (2.5%) before a modest 2024 adjustment, indicating slower policy adaptation despite Black Sea proximity.

4. The Czech Republic demonstrates consistent annual growth (1.3% → 1.5% → 1.8% → 2.09%), reflecting sustained political commitment overcoming historical underspending patterns.

5. Hungary peaked in 2023 (2.4%) before declining to 2.1% in 2024, potentially revealing commitment inconsistency despite formal compliance.

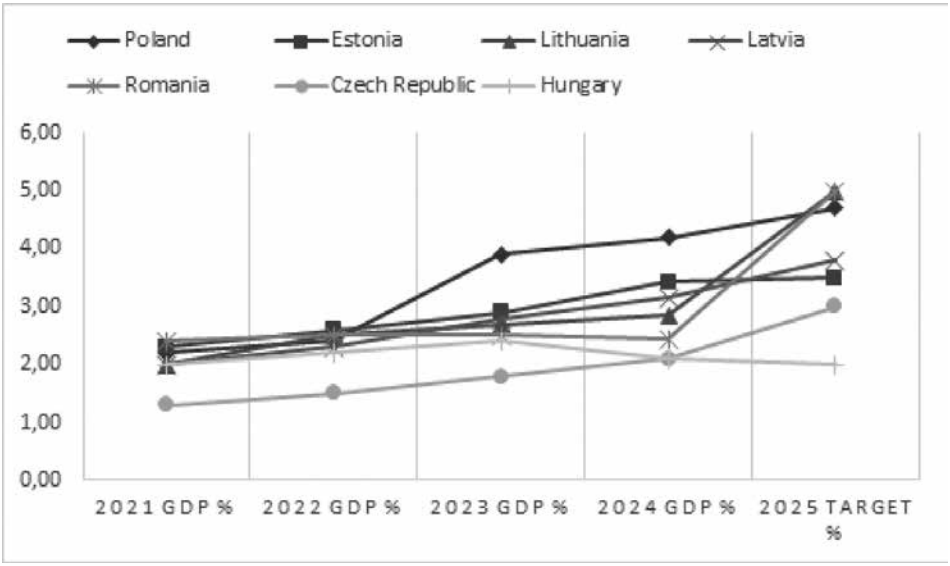

Figure 1: Defence Spending Trajectory 2021-2025

2.2 Border Proximity and Defence Response (addressing H_2)

The critical question is whether sharing a border with Russia automatically determines defence behaviour. Initial examination suggests a strong correlation (Table 2), implying that geographic determinism constrains political manoeuvrability, as frontline Tier 1 states (those directly bordering Russia or Belarus):

- expend 62% more than interior states;
- expand forces 45% on average, compared to 15% for geographically advantaged countries; and
- compress procurement timelines dramatically (2024-2028 for exposed states versus 2026-2035 for interior nations), reflecting operational urgency.

Table 2: Geographic-strategic threat proximity classification and corresponding defence response indicators.

Tier classification	Constituent states	Mean GDP % 2024	Mean force expansion	Procurement timeline characteristics	Direct border length (km)
Frontline Tier 1	EST, LVA, LTU, POL	3.4%	+45%	Highly Accelerated (2024-2028)	530-1,300
Frontline Tier 2	ROU	2.4%	+30%	Standard (2025-2032)	650
Interior States	CZE, HUN	2.1%	+15%	Extended (2026-2035)	0

Despite strong correlations, significant variation emerges through comparative analysis of geographic tiers. The limited sample of seven cases precludes statistical analysis using Pearson correlation coefficients, as the results would lack statistical significance.

Frontline Tier 1 states average 3.4% of GDP in defence spending in 2024, compared to interior states at 2.1%, representing a 62% spending differential. Force structure expansion reveals similar patterns: Tier 1 states average 74% personnel increases (ranging from Poland's 46% to Latvia's 142%), while interior states average 41% expansion (Czech Republic 54%; Hungary 28%). These substantial inter-category differences suggest that territorial proximity to potential adversaries is a primary determinant of defence policy urgency and the intensity of resource allocation.

Procurement timeline acceleration reinforces geographic patterns. All four Frontline Tier 1 states target 2024-2028 operational capability for major systems, reflecting existential threat perception, while Romania selects a 2025-2032 timeline despite Black Sea exposure. Interior states extend procurement through 2026-2035, reflecting diminished perceived urgency despite formal alliance commitments. Geography profoundly shapes national defence responses.

Nevertheless, variance within tiers reveals greater complexity, challenging simple determinism.

a) Lithuania commits 5-6% GDP, while Estonia's comparable vulnerability requires only 3.43%, creating a 40% gap between neighbours facing virtually identical threats:

- both confront Kaliningrad's formidable A2/AD systems capable of targeting alliance reinforcements;
- potential Suwalki Gap severance would isolate Baltic states from NATO's main body; and
- significant Russian-speaking minorities (approximately 25% of the population).

The threat environment remains functionally identical, yet responses differ dramatically in magnitude. This divergence emerges through political leadership superseding geographic variables. Since Lithuania's GDP per capita approximates Estonia's, this suggests a political choice rather than economic determinism, translating identical threats into divergent levels of commitment.

b) Hungary provides the reverse dynamic with more dramatic implications for understanding defence policy formation. Without threats comparable to those facing the Baltic States, Hungary maintains a minimal 2.0% spending, in contrast to the Czech Republic's 2.09% trajectory toward 3.0%. If proximity to Russia constituted the decisive

variable, these countries should exhibit similar responses. Instead, they diverge substantially, suggesting that political calculations regarding threat severity, alliance reliability, and optimal security strategies vary independently of objective geographic vulnerability.

2.3 Force Structure Expansion (addressing H_1 and H_2)

Force structure expansion reveals the operational dimension of increased defence spending (H1) while confirming geographic proximity effects (H2). Frontline Tier 1 states pursue dramatically more ambitious personnel targets (Poland: 300,000, a 46% increase; Latvia: 142% expansion; Lithuania: 55% growth) than interior states, which average 41% expansion (Table 3). The reintroduction of conscription in Latvia (2023) and its maintenance in Estonia and Lithuania indicate fundamental doctrinal shifts toward total defence concepts that require mass mobilisation capacity (ICDS 2024).

Nevertheless, ambitious targets confront demographic realities. Poland must recruit 80,000 additional soldiers from a population projected to decline by 5 million through mid-century, while 2.5% unemployment suggests labour market constraints inadequately addressed in planning documents. Enhanced reserve-to-active ratios (Estonia's extraordinary 5.8:1) demonstrate Baltic recognition that regular forces alone cannot provide credible deterrence, requiring whole-of-society defence commitment.

Table 3: Active Personnel Targets

Country	2021 Personnel	2024 Personnel	2030 Target	2035 Target	% Increase
Poland	205,000	220,000	260,000	300,000	+46%
Romania	75,000	82,000	100,000	100,000	+33%
Lithuania	20,000	24,000	31,000	31,000	+55%
Estonia	6,500	7,100	9,000	10,000	+54%
Latvia	6,200	7,500	12,000	15,000	+142%
Czech Republic	26,000	28,000	35,000	40,000	+54%
Hungary	29,500	30,000	37,650	37,650	+28%

Reserve Force Development:

- Estonia: 41,200 reserves (highest reserve-to-active ratio in NATO: 5.8:1);
- Lithuania: 30,000 reserves (conscription-based model);

- Latvia: 49,000 crisis reserves (reinstituted mandatory service 2023);
- Poland: 200,000+ Territorial Defence Forces.

Conscription Status (2024).

- Maintained: Estonia, Lithuania;
- Reinstated: Latvia (2023);
- Abolished/Not Reinstated: Poland, Romania, Czech Republic, Hungary;
- Under Parliamentary Review: Czech Republic (2024-2025).

3 DISCUSSION

Based on a systematic analysis of documentary evidence from preceding sections, materialised through key findings organised thematically to address each research hypothesis, this discussion interprets empirical patterns within broader theoretical frameworks, contextualises findings relative to existing scholarly literature, and elucidates the causal mechanisms through which observable transformations emerged. While quantitative data reveal transformation magnitude (doubled budgets, $80 billion in contracts, 300,000 additional soldiers), understanding why these trajectories materialised, what they reveal about alliance dynamics, and whether they create genuine security or expensive symbolism requires moving beyond descriptive statistics to examine strategic logic, political will, and operational realities.

The most revealing insights emerge not only from the largest numbers but from divergence patterns: cases where expected relationships fail to materialise, revealing causal mechanisms more complex than theoretical frameworks typically accommodate, particularly regarding tensions between geographic imperatives and political agendas, and between quantitative capability metrics and qualitative commitment solidarity.

From a theoretical framework hierarchy point of view, this study applies the Capacity--Capability-Credibility (CCC) framework (Monaghan et al. 2024) as its primary analytical lens. Strategic shock theory (Götz & Staun 2022) functions as the explanatory mechanism for spending velocity (Section 3.1). The credibility-cohesion trade-off (Goldgeier & Shifrinson 2023) provides the alliance-level implication framework (Section 3.2). Security culture convergence (Brommesson et al. 2024a, 2024b) is employed as a contextual lens (not a competing theoretical framework) to situate the Eastern European cases within the broader Nordic-Baltic regional pattern.

The following sections structure the discussion across two analytical levels, progressing from macro to micro:

- 3.1 - Macro-level mechanisms (Explaining why transformation occurred);
- 3.2 - Micro-level mediating factors (Exploring geography/politics interactions).

3.1 The Spending Revolution: Velocity, Commitment, and Strategic Coherence

Based on the identified facts, this section explains the causal mechanisms driving the overall transformation predicted by H1, establishing that spending increases follow a causal logic rather than random patterns. Three overarching *questions* are addressed:

- Why did all seven countries double their spending rapidly?
- What mechanisms explain this unprecedented velocity?
- How does this differ from Western European patterns?

Three features distinguish Eastern European defence mobilisation from Western patterns, revealing fundamentally different threat perceptions and political economies of security provision that transcend burden-sharing formulas.

First, *mobilisation velocity defies peacetime norms*. Poland increased spending from 2.2% to 4.2% of GDP within three years, not through normal budgetary processes but through a strategic shock. Germany spent decades failing to reach this target, despite possessing substantially greater wealth, more developed defence industrial capacity, and freedom from immediate geographic threats.

This represents *a strategic shock, driven by the psychological impact of a 'black swan' event: a major power demonstrates a* willingness to wage large-scale conventional war despite economic costs, diplomatic isolation, and reputational damage.

Götz and Staun identify this phenomenon theoretically (Götz & Staun 2022), proposing *'strategic shock'* as a concept explaining rapid security policy change, though quantifying its effects remains vague in their analysis. Their framework is theoretical, with no clear quantitative evidence: when threats remain theoretical, defence spending increases slowly, but when threats materialise, mobilisation accelerates beyond normal rates. This cannot be explained by gradual changes in threat assessment, which require categorical shifts from abstract possibility to concrete reality.

Current research results offer indicative empirical support for the strategic shock concept:

- empirical illustration consistent with the strategic shock concept, proposed theoretically but previously unmeasurable;
- explanation of the mechanism through Poland's accelerated mobilisation compared to Germany, demonstrating that materialised threats generate qualitatively different responses than abstract ones;
- establishment of spending velocity as a behavioural proxy for threat perception intensity, offering methodological innovation for future research measuring psychological responses to security threats.

Second, *sustainability institutionalisation through legal commitments*. Czech statutory requirements for 3% spending, Lithuanian constitutional provisions establishing 5% spending, and Polish legislative mandates creating permanent defence minimums represent not annual budget line items adjusted through normal appropriations processes but political commitments embedded in legal frameworks specifically designed to survive electoral cycles, partisan shifts, and inevitable urgency erosion as immediate crises recede.

Brommesson observes that Nordic-Baltic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) demonstrate increasingly similar security policies after 2014, attributing this to *'convergent security culture'* development (Brommesson et al. 2024a). Current research identifies a methodological issue in this framework: the concept risks tautology, as culture is inferred from the same policy convergence it supposedly explains.

Current discussion contributes to conceptual improvement, enhancing rigour by specifying that three factors combine: shared historical trauma (Soviet occupation creating elite consensus about Russian intentions), observable geographic exposure (border proximity making threats concrete rather than abstract), and recent capability gaps (Ukraine's near-defeat without Western assistance demonstrating unpreparedness consequences). This moves the explanation from descriptive labelling to genuine causal analysis.

Mention should be made that Brommesson's security culture convergence framework is employed here as a contextual lens (a descriptive backdrop situating Eastern European convergence within a broader Nordic-Baltic regional trend) rather than as a competing theoretical framework. The CCC model (Monaghan et al. 2024) remains the primary explanatory structure throughout this Discussion.

Hungary illustrates the exception confirming the pattern's causal logic through predicted deviation. While Poland, the Baltics, and the Czech Republic demonstrate that a convergent security culture drives high defence commitment, Hungary provides the logical counterpoint: when political leadership explicitly rejects this cultural convergence (maintaining Russian economic ties, blocking Ukraine assistance, delaying NATO expansion), defence commitment drops to minimal levels despite formal alliance membership. This represents not a random outlier but a theoretically predicted outcome, confirming the causal mechanism: NATO membership or Soviet history alone do not drive spending; rather, political consensus interprets those factors as requiring robust defence investment. Hungary's 94% shortfall in Ukraine assistance (compared to regional norms) precisely demonstrates that cultural/political convergence, not structural factors alone, determines the depth of commitment.

3.2 Geography Versus Political Choices

Research results investigate the relationship between border proximity and defence response, demonstrating that sharing a border with Russia does not automatically determine defence behaviour.

Monaghan provides a three-dimensional analytical framework essential for understanding these dynamics (Monaghan et al. 2024), distinguishing between conceptually distinct dimensions:

- **capacity** (forces formally existing on organisational charts: quantitative inventory of forces, equipment, and personnel; what formally exists within military establishments; measurable through organisational charts and equipment lists);

- **capability** (missions forces can actually perform under operational conditions: qualitative effectiveness with which forces execute assigned missions; whether equipment is operational, maintainable, and interoperable; whether personnel are trained to use systems effectively); and
- **credibility** (whether allies believe forces will actually deploy: confidence allies possess regarding whether forces will actually deploy when emergencies materialise, rather than remaining withheld for political reasons).

This research transforms Monaghan's three-dimensional framework (capacity/capability/credibility) from an analytical tool into an empirically validated model for understanding European security dynamics.

By applying the framework across seven Eastern European nations, the paper demonstrates that while geography explains much of the variation in defence spending, the remaining variation is explained by Monaghan's three-dimensional lens, particularly the credibility dimension. Systematic hypothesis testing quantifies what Monaghan described theoretically: Hungary's 94% deficit in Ukraine assistance (despite meeting capacity metrics) is consistent with the conclusion that the three dimensions are non-substitutable, and credibility failures cannot be remedied through equipment purchases.

The paper adds critical temporal and operational dimensions that the original framework did not fully address. It quantifies the *'adaptation deficit'* by contrasting Poland's six-year F-35 procurement cycle with Ukraine's three-month drone iteration cycle, revealing that procurement speed is a capability dimension in its own right. The research identifies three distinct pathways to military effectiveness (Poland's high-capacity approach, the Baltic States' coordination-enabled model that overcomes resource constraints, and Hungary's capacity-without-credibility), demonstrating that different combinations of Monaghan's dimensions produce qualitatively different alliance roles. Most importantly, the paper extends sustainability analysis across all three dimensions over operational timelines, showing that Poland's impressive 2024-2028 capacity buildup faces uncertain post-2030 sustainability due to demographic decline and projected ammunition consumption rates (detailed in subsequent sections), adding an essential temporal lens to static assessments.

Furthermore, the research validates Goldgeier and Shifrinson's theoretical framework (Goldgeier & Shifrinson 2023) of *'credibility-cohesion tradeoff*,' which identified a paradoxical relationship in NATO expansion: as NATO expands geographically (adding more members, more territory, more borders), alliance credibility may increase (broader coverage, more capabilities, larger coalition), but political cohesion may simultaneously decrease (more diverse interests, harder to achieve consensus). Most significantly, the paper extends the framework, demonstrating that *political cohesion may inversely correlate with geographic expansion*, showing how one country's credibility deficit creates systemic vulnerabilities affecting collective defence for all members. In other words, greater does not necessarily mean stronger; consequently, consensus-based governance structures create single-point failure vulnerabilities through which individual member states' political orientations can effectively paralyse collective alliance responses, regardless of documented aggregate military capability improvements.

CONCLUSION

This research examined seven NATO members undergoing the most rapid peacetime defence transformation in post-Cold War European history. Through *systematic analysis of spending patterns* (revealing the depth of political commitment), procurement decisions (exposing strategic priorities and institutional capabilities), and force developments (indicating operational concepts), two hypotheses were tested: how external threats reshape national priorities and whether geography determines responses with proportional regularity.

Evidence reveals the following regarding hypothesis validation:

- **H_1** - Spending-Capability transformation: ***validated*** with critical qualifications; sustainability remains fundamentally unproven and perhaps unprovable, suggesting the transformation's ultimate success depends on variables beyond defence planners' control.
- **H_2** - Geographic proximity-Response intensity: ***validated*** with recognition of political mediation; geography establishes baseline threat assessment and creates strong statistical tendencies, but politics ultimately determines whether nations respond maximally, adequately, or minimally to those threats, suggesting that threat perception itself constitutes political construction.

Beyond hypothesis testing through conventional social science methods, this investigation identifies significant shifts consistent with an extension and refinement of established analytical frameworks and policy assumptions structuring European defense debates since 1991: Eastern European NATO members have substantially increased their defensive capacity and capability, repositioning their alliance contribution relative to the immediate post-Cold War period.

What this study provides strong evidence for is that Eastern Europe made deliberate, substantial, and historically unprecedented strategic choices during 2022-2024: investing comprehensively in territorial defence capabilities despite significant economic opportunity costs, though sustainability uncertainties remain inadequately addressed in planning documents.

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