Deep Cuts Commission Issue Brief

A THREE-BODY PROBLEM: RUSSIA, NATO AND THE POLITICS OF AIR INCURSIONS

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In late 2025, as full-scale war in Ukraine dragged well into its third year, a very different contest took shape in Europe's airspace. That autumn, Poland recorded an unusually high number of Russian drones crossing into its territory, far beyond the routine airspace violations by Russian aircraft that NATO members had grown accustomed to for years. In response, Poland and allied forces shot several down, marking the first time NATO destroyed Russian drones over the territory of a member state. Soon after, Russian fighter jets violated Estonian airspace and a series of unexplained drone activities temporarily disrupted operations at airports across Central and Northern Europe. Reports of suspicious drone activity and related disruptions continued into November and December, although they received limited attention as media coverage shifted to renewed U.S. efforts to broker a peace deal in the Russo-Ukrainian war.

In their immediate aftermath, the fall 2025 incidents revived debates about the risks of direct military escalation, Russian intentions, and NATO's ability to respond. Since then policymakers have continued to deliberate on what steps they should take now and in the future. But escalation and other risks are heightened if they conflate different categories of issues and actions. Routine military incursions, deliberate signalling between Russia and NATO, and the rapid proliferation of civilian and commercial drones which can disrupt air traffic and other aspects of daily life all pose real dangers. But they each do so in different ways and thus require both clear differentiation and different responses if policymakers are to develop coherent, proportional, and sustainable approaches to European security that mitigate rather than amplify risks.

Incursions as the New Normal

Incidents and close military encounters between Russian and NATO forces are nothing new. For years, aircraft have operated in proximity across Europe's constrained geography, producing routine interactions that have long been part of daily military activity. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the frequency of such incidents increased markedly, reflecting Russia's expanded operations around NATO airspace and the

alliance's enhanced regional posture.[1] Some Russian sources, however, indicate a drop-off after the full-scale war began in February 2022.[2]

Nonetheless, the great majority of these encounters stem from technical or navigational errors, inexperience, or routine and well-understood military moves to communicate resolve. Understanding this baseline is essential: most incursions are examples of operational friction, not crisis events.[3] But Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 also added new categories of incidents—those more directly linked to the war. In addition to routine interactions with aircraft and apparent surveillance, NATO member states are now confronting Russian missiles and a growing number of uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) in their skies.

Some of these missiles or UAVs, launched by Russia against Ukrainian targets, have strayed off course or fallen on NATO territory after Ukrainian missile defences intercepted them. Other overflights appear deliberate: surveillance missions, intelligence-collection or demonstrations of capability intended to test NATO responses or remind individual member states of the risks associated with supporting Ukraine. These actions blur the line between operational friction and strategic signalling, complicating efforts to interpret them correctly and respond effectively.

NATO's Response Dilemmas

NATO members have traditionally responded to incursions in a straightforward manner. When crewed military aircraft or UAVs approached or briefly crossed allied airspace, member states scrambled jets to escort away the former, tracked the latter, and issued formal diplomatic protests in both cases. This pattern shifted last September, when at least nineteen Russian drones, most of them apparently of the Gerbera model and none, in the end, determined to have been armed, entered Polish airspace from Belarus. Poland and its allies shot down up to four of them.[4] Subsequently, Warsaw invoked NATO's Article IV, triggering allied consultations, and requested an emergency briefing of the UN Security Council.[5] In parallel, NATO launched the Eastern Sentry mission to deter or, if necessary, intercept further incursions.[6]

Ten days later, Estonia reported that three Russian aircraft had violated its airspace, entering 10 kilometers into it and remaining there for 12 minutes.[7] While such incursions are not unprecedented, NATO deemed this one intentionally provocative. Tallinn also invoked Article IV, perhaps in an effort to demonstrate to Russia, international observers, and domestic audiences that such actions will not be tolerated. Nerves were further rattled by a subsequent increase in drone activity sufficient to disrupt operations at several European airports, with widespread speculation that these too were somehow linked to Russia, although further investigations determined that this was not the case.[8] Among NATO members, a consensus appeared to emerge that Moscow's actions were intended as tests which, if unanswered, might signal tolerance and invite further probing and more frequent or more dangerous activity.[9]

But calibrating the correct response presents significant challenges. Military representatives of member states emphasize that shooting down drones or aircraft that pose no immediate threat may escalate tensions unnecessarily.[10] To be sure, some commentators have cited Türkiye's 2015 downing of a Russian Su-24 as evidence that responsive military action need not trigger wider conflict.[11] Yet, this example is not a clear-cut advertisement for kinetic responses. Türkiye's action did not prevent further Russian overflights (nor did Russia decrease its Syria operations) and came at significant political cost: Moscow imposed sanctions, bilateral relations deteriorated sharply, and Ankara later walked back its position.[12] Rather than unambiguously validating forceful responses, the episode thus illustrates their unpredictability and potentially limited deterrent value.[13]

Responding to incursions by low-cost systems creates additional dilemmas: intercepting small drones with advanced air-launched missiles may be tactically effective but is financially unsustainable and, as in the case of September's Russian UAVs in Poland, risks collateral damage.[14] NATO's challenge lies in balancing deterrence with restraint under conditions of uncertainty. Doing so requires not only clear attribution, but also distinguishing between incidents that warrant an immediate military reaction and those that demand a more calibrated response, based on a clear understanding of Russian objectives.

Interpreting Russian Objectives

Russia's own messaging regarding the autumn incursions was contradictory. The Kremlin initially denied sending drones into Poland and the aircraft to Estonia,

while expressing openness to a joint investigation of the drone incident.[15] Days later, however, Russian foreign ministry officials reportedly told British, French, and German counterparts that the incidents were a response to Ukrainian drone attacks inside Russia.[16] If accurate, such comments would not only undermine earlier denials but also suggest a Russian willingness to engage in more deliberate, direct escalation with NATO members, something, which NATO and Russian forces have so far avoided, even as Ukraine and Russia have long used drones and other weapons to attack targets on one another's territory.

Yet, even if drones and aircraft entered Polish and Estonian airspace deliberately, this does not necessarily mean that Russia's primary aim was to test NATO as a whole or prepare for larger kinetic action.[17] Moscow's longstanding view of the Alliance as a unified, US-led bloc appears to remain solid, despite current tensions within NATO. While it might be pleased to see alliance cohesion fracture, it seems unlikely that it expects minor airspace violations to accomplish such a goal. Instead, the Kremlin may hope to pressure individual member states by signalling that continued support for Ukraine carries security risks at home. Incursions also allow Russia to observe allied responses and offer a low-cost means of amplifying public unease. In Moscow's calculus, these combined effects may further drive Western states to divert attention or resources away from supporting Kyiv.

If this is indeed the Kremlin's logic, it rests on a significant misreading of Western threat perceptions and strategy. European supporters of Ukraine do not believe that reducing assistance will make them safer; on the contrary, they assume that a Russian success in the war would increase long-term risks to European security. Moscow may also assume that the escalatory risks associated with these incidents are limited, expecting NATO to avoid major responses to low-level violations. While this has been true to date, in today's volatile media environment, the public and internal political pressure to respond more and more forcefully could yet change the dynamic, especially if Moscow tries to ramp up pressure with larger, riskier, and/or more frequent incursions. The combination of misplaced expectations, flawed assumptions, and changing views among NATO members about how to respond will then make for a more volatile operating environment in which even minor incidents can carry disproportionate political consequences.

Drone Proliferation

This volatility is magnified by the rapid proliferation of drones, which has introduced a new level of ambiguity that traditional air-policing frameworks were never designed to manage. Drones can be operated by militaries, intelligence services, private companies, hobbyists, or individuals acting negligently or maliciously. As commercial UAVs have become widely accessible, reports about incidents near civilian airports have risen sharply: in the EU, they increased from a handful in 2014 to nearly 2,000 in 2019.[18] While most cause minimal disruption, some have had major operational consequences, most notably the 36-hour shutdown of London's Gatwick Airport in 2018.[19] The late 2025 incidents appeared to mark a further increase.[20]

Such technological diffusion creates opportunities for both state and non-state actors to generate public anxiety or disrupt transportation simply by flying drones over sensitive areas, often with plausible deniability. The core difficulty is that drones blur the line between civilian and military activity, and even an innocuous UAV near an airfield can trigger significant concern. Military drones, especially armed systems, pose different risks, but some of the required detection and response mechanisms in both cases do overlap. In order to develop effective responses, states, localities, and some private facilities must be able to detect and identify drones, assess the threat they pose, and, when necessary, jam, divert, or neutralise them.

This means that effective defence against drones requires more than technical solutions. It also depends on close coordination and a clear division of labour among national and local authorities, as well as between military, police, and private actors. Airports can install detection systems, but their ability to neutralise drones remains limited, particularly given the risks of collateral damage in populated areas. Responsibility for responding to drone incursions is not always obvious: if police forces are to act in some cases and militaries in others, governments need clear legal and operational frameworks for incidents of uncertain origin.[21]

Further, misidentification can inadvertently feed escalation dynamics. In late 2025, as described above, assumptions that Moscow was behind drone-related airport disruptions helped feed overall tension among NATO members in the wake of military airspace incursions by Russia. Later investigation, however, failed to clearly

link Russia to these events.[22] Indeed, in some cases, the objects sighted turned out not to have been drones at all.[23] Meanwhile, a different investigation, focused on drone activity over military airfields in Europe, did indeed identify apparent relationships to Russian-crewed freighters.[24] But these different experiences only highlight the dangers: if a state incorrectly assesses a UAV incident, particularly a damaging one, as having been caused by another state and responds forcefully, the result could create a particularly dangerous cycle in which both parties see the other as the instigator. Conversely, if a state fails to correctly attribute adversary activity, it may indeed open the door for more, and more escalatory, actions later.

Developing effective drone-defence capabilities is also costly. Systems capable of reliably detecting and intercepting small UAVs require substantial upfront investment even as they must be complemented by broader air and missile defence capabilities. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has proposed significant EU-level funding for new radar and interceptor systems. While some member states question whether this is the best use of resources, the initiative has gained broad political support, reflecting the recognition that drone proliferation is now a core element of Europe's evolving security landscape.[25]

Managing the Problems

As tensions between Russia and NATO members will almost certainly persist even if the war in Ukraine winds down, airspace incursions will remain a potential source of friction and risk. While both Russia and NATO may view certain actions as necessary elements of deterrence, stability would benefit from clearer and more predictable parameters governing how military forces interact in proximity. A better understanding of mutual decision-making is one part of this: clearer insights into Moscow's motives can help NATO members calibrate responses, while a more accurate Russian reading of Western strategic logic could reduce the risk of escalation driven by false expectations.

Communication channels, even if limited or politically constrained, can serve such purposes. Practical military-to-military contacts can clarify intent, deconflict airspace, and prevent routine incidents from spiralling into crises. Yet, such channels only function when both sides are willing to use them; ambiguity cannot be eliminated unilaterally. Nevertheless, recent incidents have shown that unexpected openings for risk reduction can emerge even in a largely adversarial environment. In the case of Russian UAV incursions into Poland, Belarus decided to warn Poland ahead of time.[26] Whatever Minsk's motivation, its action illustrates that crisis moments can create incentives for restraint or at least communication, even among actors otherwise in conflict.

At the same time, NATO and EU members retain significant scope to manage some of the risks created by routine friction, deliberate signalling, and drone proliferation unilaterally. Strengthening internal coordination, harmonising rules of engagement, and improving information-sharing can help ensure that allied responses are coherent and predictable. Because drone proliferation adds additional demands, clearer civil–military frameworks and better detection and attribution capabilities across both police and military forces will be essential to ensure that responses are calibrated to the risks posed by low-cost and difficult to attribute systems. It is unlikely that NATO members and Russia will cooperate formally in this sphere any time soon, but even absent that, the better their information, the clearer will be their communication with one another.

Overall, as NATO and Russian drones and crewed aircraft will continue to coexist in an increasingly crowded European airspace, ambiguity will remain a structural feature throughout the contact zone. What makes this environment especially volatile, however, is not simply the presence of separate dynamics, but the frequency with which one can be mistaken for another: routine friction for deliberate signalling, signalling for escalation, civilian drone activity for hostile activities by foreign states. In a tense political environment with high levels of media attention, the pressure to act, and with it the risk of premature action based on faulty assessments, is magnified. Effective risk management therefore hinges on reducing these potential misreadings. Policies must help distinguish which incidents matter, why they matter, and what responses are appropriate.

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About Deep Cuts

For years, more and more arms control treaties have been eroding and nuclear disarmament is in a deep crisis. The goal of this research and transfer project is to analyze obstacles to U.S.-Russian nuclear and conventional disarmament, to strengthen European security and to develop concrete risk-reduction measures that limit the potential for military escalation in the short term and aim to cut nuclear stockpiles in the long term.
The Deep Cuts Commission was established in 2013 and is coordinated by IFSH. The project partner is the independent Arms Control Association in Washington, D.C.

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