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THE SPACE BETWEEN ARTICLES 4 AND 5

NATO's Threshold Conditioning Problem

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Russia is exploiting the politically contested space between NATO recognition of hostile activity and collective action under Article 5.

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Executive Summary

This brief develops the Threshold Conditioning model introduced in SAGE Strategic Intelligence Brief No. 004. It argues that Russia can exploit the politically contested space between NATO recognition of hostile activity and collective action under Article 5. Repeated cyber operations, sabotage, electronic interference, political influence, infrastructure disruption and calibrated military provocations can condition Allied governments to absorb progressively greater levels of hostility without a correspondingly greater collective response.

The problem is intensified by rational escalation restraint. Russia is a nuclear-armed state, and NATO governments have compelling reasons to avoid transforming contained incidents into direct Alliance-Russia war. Yet the repeated management of individual incidents can itself create precedent: behaviour once regarded as exceptional becomes part of the normal security environment.

SAGE therefore proposes **Threshold Deterrence**: a standing NATO policy framework that aggregates attributable hostile actions across members and domains and connects their cumulative pattern to graduated collective consequences. It is not an 'Article 5-lite' mechanism and should not rely on automatic tripwires. Political control remains with the North Atlantic Council. The objective is to ensure that the Alliance counter does not reset to zero after every incident.

Central Assessment

Article 5 collectively deters armed attack. Threshold Deterrence would collectively deter cumulative coercive activity designed to avoid, manipulate or progressively redefine the conditions under which Article 5 might be invoked.

Key Judgements

- **Europe is neither simply at peace nor conventionally at war with Russia.** Persistent adversarial confrontation is the more useful strategic category.
- **Escalation restraint is rational but exploitable.** The possibility of direct NATO-Russia escalation, including nuclear escalation, creates powerful incentives to contain individual incidents.
- **Threshold Conditioning operates through repetition.** Repeated hostile acts can raise the political threshold at which governments consider collective retaliation justified.
- **The central NATO vulnerability lies between Article 4 and Article 5.** Consultation exists; collective defence exists; the intervening space lacks an equally coherent deterrent architecture.
- **NATO should assess hostile activity cumulatively across domains.** Tactical ambiguity should not be allowed to conceal campaign-level strategic intent.
- **Threshold Deterrence should impose graduated collective consequences.** Responses can span diplomatic, economic, intelligence, cyber, resilience and military instruments.
- **Automaticity should be avoided.** A numerical tripwire would be politically brittle, strategically escalatory and easy for Moscow to game.
- **Strategic ambiguity should be preserved.** Russia should know that repetition increases collective cost without knowing precisely which response will follow.
- **The Alliance counter must not reset to zero.** Hostile actions against individual Allies should accumulate at Alliance level.

From Threshold Conditioning to Threshold Deterrence

SIB No. 004 argued that an adversary can learn from the practical rather than declared boundaries of Western deterrence. Each unanswered or weakly answered provocation provides information about political tolerance. SIB No. 010 develops the next step: NATO must reverse that learning process.

Persistent hostile activity should teach Moscow that repetition does not normalise conduct. It increases the probability, breadth and cost of an Alliance-level response.

Europe Is Neither Simply at Peace nor Conventionally at War

The proposition that Europe is already in a form of war with Russia deserves serious treatment. Russian hostile activity is not hypothetical. NATO and European governments have described persistent Russian campaigns involving sabotage, cyber operations, critical-infrastructure disruption, electronic interference, information manipulation and political interference.

Yet describing this environment simply as interstate war can obscure an important distinction. Russia and NATO are not engaged in sustained conventional combat against one another, and Allied governments retain powerful incentives to prevent hostile interaction from becoming direct Alliance-Russia war.

The more useful category is **persistent adversarial confrontation**. Forms of warfare and coercion can occur without the parties entering the conventional politico-strategic condition normally associated with declared or recognised interstate war. The ambiguity between those conditions is not incidental. It creates strategic space that can be exploited.

Escalation Restraint Is Rational - and Exploitable

NATO caution should not be caricatured as weakness. Russia is a nuclear-armed state. Any decision that transforms a contained incident into acknowledged direct NATO-Russia conflict carries expectations of retaliation, counter-retaliation and potentially nuclear escalation. Governments therefore have rational reasons to preserve escalation control.

Threshold Conditioning exploits that rationality. After each hostile act, Allied governments must weigh attribution, severity, proportionality, Alliance unity and the consequences of escalation. The immediate preference will often be to contain the incident. Repeated often enough, however, containment can generate precedent: behaviour once treated as exceptional becomes part of the accepted security environment.

The resulting danger is a ratchet effect. Moscow does not need NATO to believe that Russia is peaceful. It needs individual acts to remain sufficiently bounded, deniable, dispersed or politically costly to answer that the Alliance repeatedly concludes that managing the latest incident is preferable to escalating the confrontation.

The Article 4-Article 5 Gap

Article 4 provides consultation when an Ally believes its territorial integrity, political independence or security is threatened. Article 5 establishes collective defence following an armed attack. Between them lies a broad political space in which hostile activity can be recognised without producing an agreed collective deterrent consequence.

Article 5 is not expressly confined to conventional invasion. NATO has stated that sufficiently serious cyber or hybrid activity may, case by case, amount to an armed attack. The problem for contemporary deterrence is therefore not simply defining the legal threshold. It is developing credible collective action before the Alliance reaches that determination.

NATO is not starting from zero. It already treats hybrid campaigns as patterns rather than wholly isolated events; it has response options that can be taken individually and collectively; and its cyber doctrine recognises cumulative effects. The conceptual gap is that this cumulative logic is not yet sufficiently developed into a cross-domain deterrence framework for persistent hostile activity.

The operational problem can be stated simply:

THE ALLIANCE COUNTER MUST NOT RESET TO ZERO AFTER EVERY INCIDENT.

Threshold Deterrence

SAGE proposes **Threshold Deterrence**: a standing NATO policy framework under which attributable hostile actions against individual Allies are assessed not only as discrete incidents but as components of a cumulative campaign against the Alliance.

The purpose is not to create an 'Article 5-lite', an automatic tripwire, or a numerical formula in which a fixed number of incidents mechanically produces military retaliation. Such a system would be strategically brittle, politically implausible and easily gamed. Decisions must remain under North Atlantic Council political control and be taken case by case.

Instead, NATO should institutionalise collective assessment of cumulative hostile behaviour across domains. Relevant indicators could include attribution confidence, frequency, severity, geographic spread, casualties, critical-infrastructure effects, repetition, evidence of central coordination, coercive intent and the relationship between apparently separate operations.

A Graduated Collective-Response Mechanism

1. Alliance Aggregation

A standing mechanism fuses national reporting and intelligence so that sabotage in one Ally, cyber activity in another, electronic interference elsewhere and political coercion are assessed for campaign-level relationships.

2. Collective Attribution and Assessment

Where evidence permits, the Alliance establishes shared attribution confidence and a common assessment of cumulative strategic effect.

3. Threshold Assessment

The North Atlantic Council assesses whether the campaign is changing in frequency, severity, coordination or effect and whether Allied tolerance is itself being tested.

4. Graduated Consequences

NATO selects progressively stronger lawful responses across diplomatic, economic, intelligence, cyber, resilience and military domains. The response need not mirror the domain of the provocation.

5. Preserved Ambiguity

NATO should not publish a mechanical schedule specifying which act produces which response. Moscow should understand that repetition increases collective cost without being given a formula it can optimise against.

6. Article 5 Remains Distinct

If cumulative or individual effects amount to an armed attack, the existing Article 5 process remains available. Threshold Deterrence strengthens the space before that determination rather than replacing it.

The strategic logic is straightforward:

IF RUSSIA SEEKS TO CONDITION NATO INTO TOLERATING PROGRESSIVELY GREATER HOSTILITY, NATO MUST CONDITION RUSSIA TO EXPECT PROGRESSIVELY GREATER COLLECTIVE COSTS FROM REPEATED HOSTILE ACTIVITY.

Reversing the Learning Process

Threshold Conditioning is fundamentally interactive. Repeated probes teach the aggressor about the defender's tolerance, political cohesion and escalation aversion. If each probe produces an isolated, temporary response, the aggressor can learn where additional room for manoeuvre exists.

Threshold Deterrence seeks to reverse that learning process. Persistent hostile activity should teach Moscow that repetition does not normalise the conduct; it increases the probability, breadth and cost of an Alliance-level response.

This creates a complementary deterrent proposition:

ARTICLE 5 COLLECTIVELY DETERS ARMED ATTACK.

THRESHOLD DETERRENCE COLLECTIVELY DETERS THE CUMULATIVE COERCIVE ACTIVITY DESIGNED TO MANIPULATE THE THRESHOLD BENEATH IT.

Risks and Constraints

Threshold Deterrence cannot eliminate the underlying dilemmas. Attribution may remain uncertain. Allies will differ in threat perception and risk tolerance. A collective response can itself escalate a crisis. Russia may employ proxies, deliberately ambiguous incidents or other methods intended to fracture Alliance consensus. An overly rigid framework could also encourage Moscow to operate just beneath published criteria.

These are arguments for political discretion, not strategic passivity. The mechanism should emphasise common situational awareness, cumulative assessment and credible options rather than automaticity. The objective is to increase Moscow's uncertainty about the cost of continued coercion while reducing Allied uncertainty about how persistent hostile activity will be assessed.

Policy Recommendations

- Establish a standing Alliance-level mechanism for aggregating attributable hostile actions across NATO members and operational domains.
- Use Article 4 consultations more deliberately as a political gateway to collective intelligence sharing, campaign attribution and graduated response options.
- Develop pre-agreed families of lawful collective consequences without publishing automatic thresholds or fixed response schedules.
- Exercise the North Atlantic Council against cumulative, ambiguous and multi-domain scenarios, including cases involving incomplete attribution and explicit Russian escalation threats.
- Integrate resilience and rapid recovery into Threshold Deterrence as deterrence by denial.
- Communicate campaigns, not merely incidents, so Allied publics understand when apparently separate events form part of a larger coercive pattern.
- Preserve Article 5 as a distinct collective-defence mechanism while making clear that remaining below it does not mean remaining below meaningful collective response.

Assessment

The debate over whether Europe is already 'at war' with Russia is revealing, but the strategic problem does not depend on resolving that semantic question. Russia can conduct forms of warfare, coercion and destabilisation while NATO governments retain rational incentives to avoid direct interstate war. That is precisely the environment in which Threshold Conditioning can operate.

Article 5 remains the cornerstone of collective defence against armed attack. But deterrence cannot begin only when the Article 5 threshold is reached. NATO requires a credible collective mechanism for the hostile campaign that precedes, surrounds and seeks to manipulate that threshold.

Threshold Deterrence provides that logic: hostile actions against individual Allies accumulate at Alliance level; repetition raises rather than lowers the expected collective cost; political discretion and escalation control are retained; and Article 5 remains available for circumstances in which an armed attack has occurred.

THE COUNTER DOES NOT RESET TO ZERO.

Confidence Assessment (as of September 2026)

High Confidence
Russia will continue to employ hybrid, cyber, intelligence, information, economic and coercive instruments against NATO members while seeking to manage the risk of uncontrolled direct conflict.

Moderate-High Confidence
Repeated hostile activity can contribute to Threshold Conditioning where incidents are politically compartmentalised, normalised or treated as unrelated.

Moderate Confidence
A standing Alliance mechanism combining cumulative attribution, resilience and graduated collective consequences could improve deterrence, although effectiveness would depend on political cohesion and credible implementation.

Low Confidence
Any rigid or automatic threshold mechanism would remain stable under crisis conditions. Such a system would create incentives for adversarial gaming and could reduce Alliance political flexibility.

Selected Sources

North Atlantic Treaty Organization. *The North Atlantic Treaty*, Articles 3-5.
North Atlantic Council. *Statement on Recent Russian Hybrid Activities*, 2 May 2024.
NATO. *Vilnius Summit Communique*, 11 July 2023, including provisions concerning hybrid threats, cyber defence and cumulative malicious cyber activity.
NATO. *Washington Summit Declaration*, 10 July 2024, including the Alliance assessment of intensifying Russian hostile actions against Allies.
North Atlantic Council. *Statement concerning Russian malicious cyber activities*, 18 July 2025.

Relationship to SIB No. 004

SIB No. 004, *Threshold Conditioning - Winning Without Crossing the Threshold*, introduced the core problem: repeated low-level hostile actions can normalise behaviour, reveal the practical boundaries of Western tolerance and erode deterrence through successful non-response. It proposed cumulative deterrence, stronger use of Article 4, campaign attribution, resilience and graduated collective consequences.

SIB No. 010 develops that model into **Threshold Deterrence**: a more explicit Alliance-level doctrine for collective deterrence by accumulation in the political space between Article 4 and Article 5.

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