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Reassessing European Security: The drivers of NATO's response to hybrid threats since 2014

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Russia's actions against Ukraine in 2014 led to a reassessment of the European security environment by the West. NATO reinforced its military presence in Eastern Europe and developed measures to counter hybrid threats, which were strengthened after 2022. Although hybrid threats are not new per se, their use over the past decade has posed new strategic challenges to the West. This paper aims to identify the structural and normative drivers behind NATO's approach to hybrid threats through policy analysis and International Relations theory.

We first map early European responses to hybrid threats and trace NATO's evolving approach. The term 'hybrid threats' often refers to activities that undermine stability without escalating to direct military conflict. Its widespread use, however, tells us little about the underlying drivers of these responses, which remain under-explored.

From a structural standpoint, we assess whether changes in the balance of power and the unexpected use of hybrid threats to achieve political goals made them more central to European security concerns. Drawing on liberal and realist perspectives, we also explore how growing interdependence changes international conflict, increases vulnerability to hybrid threats, and reveals the limits of traditional military responses.

From a normative perspective, we analyze how the evolution of domestic and international norms drove responses to hybrid threats. Addressing conventional and hybrid threats in European states requires enhanced multinational coordination and society-wide security efforts. Hybrid threats, in particular, challenge the logic of proportionality in direct responses and deterrence strategies and prompt a reevaluation of norms such as non-interference or the balance between sovereignty and collective security. Finally, we examine how the erosion of democratic norms within European states has made them more susceptible to hybrid threats, and how NATO's strategies have evolved to prevent adversaries from exploiting internal divisions and undermining democratic processes without triggering direct military confrontation.

What discipline or branch of humanities or social sciences do you identify yourself with?

Political Science - International Relations

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Yes

Author: LISBOA, Laura

Presenter: LISBOA, Laura

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