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## Testing the Threshold

What the Russian drone incursion into Poland means for NATO



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During the night of Tuesday, September 9th to Wednesday, September 10th, over a dozen Russian drones violated Polish airspace. NATO fighter jets, among them Dutch F-35s, scrambled to intercept the incursion. Albeit relying on costly weaponry, NATO fighters swiftly shot down a couple of drones, while a dozen others managed to slip through.<sup>1</sup> One of the missiles of a Polish F-16 possibly misfired, hitting a house instead.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the initial reaction, the incursion poses NATO with a challenge. Debris and drone fragments were found across Polish territory. Some drones had penetrated deep into Poland, travelling several hundred kilometres.<sup>3</sup> Despite causing limited damage, the incursion was unprecedented in both scale and depth.

1 <https://apnews.com/article/poland-russia-drones-jamming-ukraine-incursion-nato-27b1aead542604c91386df1fbc4463c7>

2 <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/polish-missile-likely-hit-house-during-russian-drone-incursion-says-minister-2025-09-17/>

3 <https://tvn24.pl/lublin/znaleziono-16-dronow-miejscowosci-gdzie-odkryto-objekty-mapa-st8641044>

**Table 1** Possibilities of intent from a Russian perspective

Possible intent	Key uncertainty	Anticipated payoff
Probing and intelligence gathering	Ability to detect and assess NATO assets and capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gain insight into capabilities of NATO sensor networks, processes and reaction time.</li> <li>Posture, profile and mindset of NATO decision-makers can be assessed.</li> </ul>
Decision-making manipulation	Willingness and ability of NATO to react to the incursion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A possible punitive response from NATO may validate further Russian aggression.</li> <li>A NATO reaction might reveal a lack of unity within the Alliance which can be exploited at a later stage.</li> <li>A repetition of events can create a new norm. Over time, frequent incidents with dummy drones can erode vigilance, as a real attack could be considered a false negative.</li> <li>NATO could be forced to place extra assets into Poland and thereby increasing vulnerability of other regions.</li> <li>Intimidate and deter NATO by signalling that its air defence capabilities are vulnerable for saturation attacks.</li> </ul>

### A calculated move

Images of the crashed drones reveal that many of them did not carry an explosive load but additional fuel tanks to extend their range. Most were low-cost drones, made primarily from foam and plywood, used to saturate enemy air defences or for reconnaissance missions.

When confronted with the incursion days after, the Kremlin denied responsibility, claiming that no strikes or targets on Polish territory had been planned and that no evidence has been provided that the drones were Russian.<sup>4</sup>

Poland, for its part, invoked ‘Article 4’ of the NATO treaty, formally requesting consultations with other member states.<sup>5</sup> This action reflects growing concern in Warsaw that the drone incursion may signal a deliberate and calculated move by Russia, requiring a coordinated response from the Alliance. Meanwhile, the Alliance launched Operation Eastern Sentry, which involves a mix of air defence assets to defend and monitor its eastern border.<sup>6</sup>

### Unpacking potential Russian motives

The incursion appears to be a calculated move by Russia, one that reflects strategic intent. To unpack Russia’s possible motives, we need to shift perspective and consider the situation from Moscow’s point of view: what objectives might they have tried to achieve?

To start, military planners do not have the luxury of hindsight. As part of their planning, they evaluate the effects they aim to achieve and avoid in advance. Thereby, they take uncertainty into account and plan on possible positive and negative outcomes.

Given that the operation was approved, the Russian assessment must have yielded a net positive result. Moreover, an operation outside of common operational areas is likely to need approval at a high, if not the highest, level of command.

As displayed in table 1, there are two generic Russian intents which can be identified. It is important to note that these two intents and associated anticipated payoffs are not necessarily mutually exclusive: the incursion could have been designed to serve both.

4 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-dismisses-polish-statements-drones-its-airspace-nothing-new-2025-09-11/>

5 <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/09/11/europe/nato-article-four-poland-drones-intl>

6 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_237601.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_237601.htm)

## Challenges for NATO

Given the unlikelihood that dozens of drones entered Poland by accident, Russia has deliberately presented NATO with a strategic dilemma. Operating in the grey zone between provocation and open aggression, Moscow aims to test the Alliance's unity and resolve. This pattern is reinforced by other recent incidents, where NATO airspace has been violated by a Russian drone in Romania<sup>7</sup>, and a helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft in Estonia.<sup>8</sup>

### Tone of Voice

The first challenge for NATO's response is one of tone. NATO could choose to frame Russia's incursion as a deliberate act of aggression. In this case, it must be prepared to respond with a proportionate and potentially escalatory action. Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine have already issued a joint statement describing the incident as "a deliberate and coordinated strike," calling it an unprecedented provocation and escalation.<sup>9</sup> This framing puts pressure on NATO to adopt a similar stance.

In contrast, NATO currently employs more cautious language, calling the incursion "reckless", whilst refraining to state if the action was intentional.<sup>10</sup> This softer rhetoric signals a more conservative approach. President Trump opted for even more ambiguous wording, stating that "it could have been a mistake".<sup>11</sup>

### Need for a coordinated response

A second challenge for NATO is the need for a coordinated response, whatever tone of voice is chosen. The joint statement by Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine risks undermining NATO unity by

signalling division and bypassing Alliance channels. As Ukraine is not a NATO member, its inclusion in such statements is neither necessary nor aligned with NATO's internal decision-making processes.

### Limited means to engage aerial threats

Lastly, while NATO's initial military response has been swift, it is not sustainable. Using multi-million-dollar AMRAAM missiles<sup>12</sup> to counter drones costing between an estimated \$10,000 and \$70,000<sup>13</sup> is an expensive proposition.

The incursion underscores the need for a layered NATO air defence system that combines high-end assets like F-35s and Patriots with more affordable systems such as Self-Propelled Anti-Aircraft Guns, using cannons instead of costly missiles to counter lower tier threats. These systems are, however, in short supply and have limited range.

To be effective this layered air defence system should integrate electronic warfare capabilities (e.g. drone communication jamming), radar and detection systems, and emerging counter-drone technologies (e.g. interceptor drones, lasers).

## Conclusion

The drone incursion illustrates Russia's strategic calculus of pushing boundaries and probing allied defences. By doing so, Russia aims to test NATO's unity and resolve over time, deliberately eroding established international norms. At the same time, it leads to confusion over what happened and how the alliance should respond, which is a classic element of Russian strategy.

7 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c80g7g5rmlno>

8 <https://news.err.ee/1609793490/estonia-summons-russian-charge-d-affaires-over-airspace-violation>

9 <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/draft-joint-statement-foreign-ministers-lithuania-poland-and-ukraine-lublin-triangle>

10 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_237559.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_237559.htm)

11 <https://x.com/Marekwalkuski/status/1966244563305246771?t=MT9s3bf1KpcHv2cdD5RkxA&s=19>

12 <https://www.defensedaily.com/amraam-sales-to-netherlands-torpedoes-to-norway-okayed-by-state-department/international/>

13 <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/russian-decoy-drones-that-depend-on-western-parts-pose-a-great-challenge/>

NATO faces the difficult task of demonstrating credible deterrence while managing escalation dynamics, maintaining alliance solidarity, and preserving the principles that underpin collective defence. In facing the challenges surrounding Russia's recent incursion, NATO should:

**1. Carefully choose its tone of voice and back this with appropriate actions.**

The language NATO uses to characterize the incident, whether as “reckless” or “deliberate” or even “aggression”, shapes the strategic narrative and should be matched to the intended response – especially when a unified assessment is lacking, as was the case in Poland. Strong or alarmist language that is not backed up by an appropriate response erodes the credibility of deterrence, while a more sober tone of voice accompanied by a carefully calibrated and proportional response strengthens it.

**2. Provide a unified and coordinated response.**

Allied nations releasing immediate but uncoordinated statements (such as Lithuania and Poland with non-NATO member Ukraine) signals fragmentation and may invite further testing.

**3. Rapidly increase low-cost counter aerial threat capabilities.**

Engaging thousand-dollar threats with million-dollar platforms is unsustainable in the long run. Close cooperation with and learning from Ukraine, which has for years coped with waves of hundreds or even thousands of drones per month, is clearly in the alliance's interest in this regard.

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