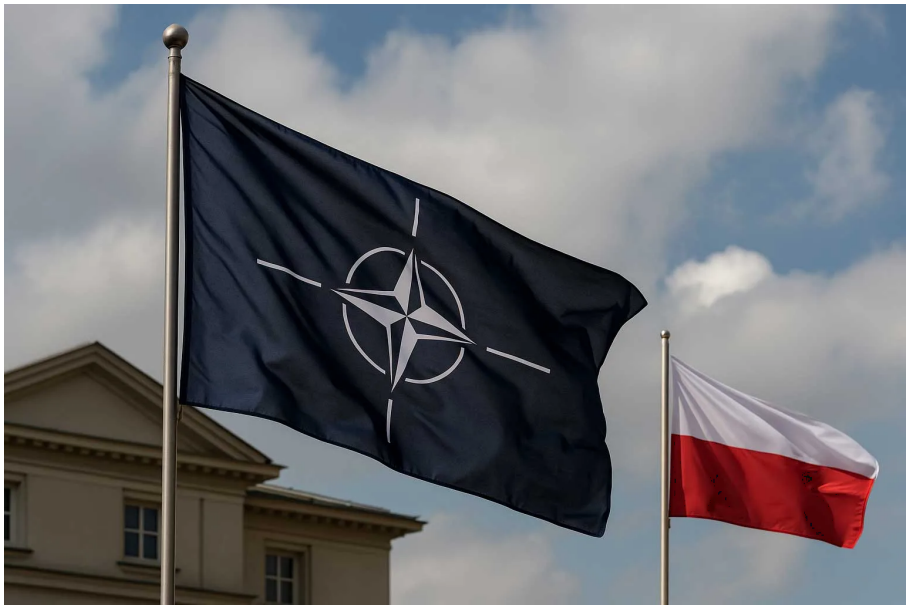

NATO Article 4, Poland invokes it: when it has been used and how it differs from Article 5

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On **September 10, 2025**, Poland formally invoked **Article 4** of the North Atlantic Treaty, after numerous Russian drones crossed its airspace. This is a step of great political significance, as it allows the issue to be brought directly to the **North Atlantic Council**, NATO's main decision-making body, and to open immediate consultations among the 32 member countries. Warsaw's choice is set against a backdrop of high tension on the Alliance's eastern borders and represents a reminder of the principle that the security of one ally is an issue that concerns all.

What Article 4 provides

Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty is one of the most important diplomatic tools available to allies. It states that: *"The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened."* This means that the perception of a threat by a single member state is enough to convene a

formal NATO meeting. It does not automatically imply a military response, but initiates a process of dialogue that can lead to joint statements, strengthening of defensive measures, or deployment of forces on the ground. It is a preventive mechanism aimed at containing crises before they escalate into open conflicts.

Invocations of Article 4 in NATO history

Since 1949, Article 4 has been invoked **8 times**. Here is the list with dates:

- **February 10, 2003 – Turkey**: following the Iraq war, Ankara feared reprisals from Saddam Hussein's regime. NATO launched *Display Deterrence* operation.
- **June 26, 2012 – Turkey**: after a Turkish plane was shot down by Syria.
- **October 3, 2012 – Turkey**: Syrian artillery fire killed 5 civilians in Akçakale. NATO deployed Patriot missile batteries along the border.
- **March 3, 2014 – Poland**: after Russia's annexation of Crimea, Warsaw requested urgent consultations.
- **July 29, 2015 – Turkey**: new threats from Syria and jihadist terrorism led to another request for consultations.
- **February 28, 2020 – Turkey**: the death of 33 Turkish soldiers in an airstrike in Idlib (Syria) prompted Ankara to invoke the article.
- **February 24, 2022 – Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia**: in response to Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- **September 10, 2025 – Poland**: after the violation of its airspace by Russian drones.

These precedents show how Article 4 is mainly used by countries on the front line of regional conflicts. It is a strong political signal, aimed at involving the entire Alliance in crisis management.

Article 5 and the principle of collective defense

While Article 4 represents the dimension of consultation, **Article 5** of the NATO Treaty is the heart of the collective defense system. It states: *“The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.”*

This principle of military solidarity means that an aggression against one ally obliges all others to consider it as an aggression against themselves, committing to assist it. Assistance does not necessarily have to translate into direct armed intervention, but can include logistical support, intelligence, cybersecurity, and other forms of cooperation. However, its strength lies in the political message: attacking a NATO member is equivalent to declaring war on the entire Alliance.

How many times Article 5 has been invoked

In NATO history, Article 5 has been invoked **only once**:

- **September 12, 2001 – United States**: the day after the terrorist attacks against New York and Washington, the North Atlantic Council determined it was an armed attack under Article 5. The Alliance launched collective missions such as *Operation Eagle Assist* (AWACS aircraft surveillance in the USA, started on October 8, 2001) and *Operation Active Endeavour* (naval patrols in the Mediterranean starting on October 26, 2001).

The fact that it has been activated only once in over seventy years of history demonstrates its extraordinary nature: Article 5 is considered the last resort, to be used only in case of direct aggression.

Difference between Article 4 and Article 5

The main difference between the two instruments lies in their nature and consequences:

- **Article 4** → initiates consultations without military obligations. It is a wake-up call that draws allies' attention.
- **Article 5** → establishes collective defense and commits all member states to act in aid of the affected country.

In other words, the first represents political and preventive dialogue, the second concrete and binding action.

Conclusion

Poland's invocation of Article 4 reminds us of how fragile the balance is on NATO's eastern borders and how central the Alliance's role is in managing contemporary threats, ranging from

conventional warfare to drones, from cybersecurity to terrorism. History shows how Article 4 has been used eight times to address regional crises, while Article 5 remains an exceptional clause, invoked only once after September 11. In both cases, the underlying logic is one of solidarity: no NATO country is alone in the face of threats, and any attack or danger involving a member state concerns the entire Atlantic community.