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NATO's New Strategic Concept:

What Should We Expect?

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Summary

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A highlight of NATO's forthcoming summit in Madrid in June 2022 will be the publication of its new Strategic Concept, a mission statement of the role and purpose of the alliance over the next decade. These periodic exercises by international organisations are frequently derided by critics as bureaucratic documents that reflect painful compromises, the lowest common denominator of consensus among the member states and wish lists of ambitions that are rarely implemented. Another criticism is that in a fast-changing world, the tasks and priorities that feature in these concepts are soon out of date and that what is not mentioned tends to quickly become more significant than what is included. Yet in the case of NATO, this criticism would be misplaced. War has returned to Europe, and military threats to the alliance's security are now more real than they have been at any time since the height of the Cold War. If all of NATO's 30 member states are to remain secure (and the number will eventually reach 32 when Finland and Sweden join), the alliance has to get its strategy for deterrence and collective defence right. It also needs to reduce Russia's capability to inflict harm on its member states and partners over the long run, while managing crises and avoiding dangerous escalation. Thus, NATO's critical choices now and in the immediate future carry unusually large risks and strategic consequences. This is why we should all be paying close attention to the debates on its new Strategic Concept which are currently taking place inside NATO. What is still valid in the existing concept, which dates back to 2010? And where can we expect new orientations and policy objectives? Will Russia's invasion of Ukraine make it easier or harder for allies to reach consensus?

Keywords Deterrence – Defence – Russia – Ukraine – Burden sharing – Hybrid warfare – Resilience – Emerging challenges



Introduction

In an age of political transparency, most international organisations issue mission statements from time to time to remind the public of their *raison d'être*. After these organisations have been in existence for several decades, the reasons why they were founded in the first place fade in the public consciousness. At this juncture it becomes especially important to point out the benefits they produce for the average citizen, whether in security, economic well-being, health, education, science, or technology. Yet mission statements are not only tools of public diplomacy: the process of negotiating such a statement is itself a useful internal exercise for the member states. Plotting a future strategy makes the participants look beyond the immediate agenda issues or the crisis of the day. They are forced to consider whether the organisation's priorities and objectives are still ones they support, whether the organisation adds value to their own national efforts, whether they get more out of the organisation than they put in and whether the existing tasks must simply be continued, or new ones should be introduced or priorities reshuffled in light of changing circumstances. Accordingly, every 10 years or so the alliance has carried out a Strategic Concept exercise to assess its relevance and its effectiveness in meeting the security needs of its 30 member states (a number that will eventually increase to 32 when Sweden and Finland join). In NATO the process of drafting a Strategic Concept has served both to formulate the alliance's vision and to re-energise solidarity around the organisation's core tasks. Moreover, a Strategic Concept functions as a planning document from which NATO's civilian and military staffs determine resource allocations, force structures and capability targets. So although the outside observer may bemoan the repeated phrases and convoluted diplomatic language in which NATO Strategic Concepts are all too frequently couched, the primary role of these documents is internal: to enable the allies to debate what they want to keep and what they want to change, and to clarify the gap between existing commitments and new policy objectives. Resources still devoted to secondary or yesterday's priorities (a situation nearly always found in bureaucracies) can be realigned to new and more urgent ones. To be useful, a Strategic Concept cannot be merely an elegant description of the current state of affairs. It has to set forth an action plan and enable NATO to proactively shape the security environment according to its own goals and values, rather than having that environment shaped increasingly by the goals and values of its adversaries.



A concept that should write itself?

NATO is now embarking on its next Strategic Concept, the eighth since its founding in 1949 and the fourth since the end of the Cold War. It is doing this at a time when, for many observers, Russia's unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine would seem to make the exercise redundant. After all, having spent decades chasing new missions in the Balkans, Iraq, Libya, the Gulf of Aden and Afghanistan, with increasingly mixed results, NATO is now returning to more familiar territory. Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its mounting challenge to the legitimacy of the alliance itself have given NATO a new lease of life. Collective defence is now back at the forefront, and the reality of war in Europe has made the continent's leaders rally around the US and the alliance as the only show in town when it comes to facing down the Kremlin. In threatening Ukraine and demanding that NATO both halt its process of enlargement and remove its forces from the Eastern European countries that joined after 1997, President Putin may have hoped to divide the alliance. Perhaps he believed that when it came to his quest to overturn the post-Cold War European security order, transatlantic differences over the withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 would carry over into splits between resisters and appeasers within NATO. Yet the alliance has a long track record of facing up to Moscow's threats. It grasps the Russian challenge in its immediate neighbourhood better than the problems posed by faraway failed states in Afghanistan or the Middle East. Accordingly, and counter-intuitively, the alliance tends to pull together better under the stress of crisis situations than in normal peacetime circumstances. It has put on a good display of unity. It has brought its various factions together by rejecting Putin's maximalist demands but being willing to negotiate mutual restraint and even arms control agreements with Moscow to reassure the latter that NATO could never be a military threat to Moscow, even if that prospect were remotely thinkable. The irony of the Ukraine crisis is that Moscow wants NATO to withdraw its security guarantees to 14 of the alliance's member states in Eastern Europe (half the organisation membership) to give a single security guarantee to a non-member not even seeking membership: Russia.

As a consequence of the most destructive conflict in Europe since 1945, NATO would appear to have enough on its plate without spending thousands of hours debating, negotiating and writing a new Strategic Concept document. Every Ukraine crisis since 2014 has brought substantial Russian combat forces closer to NATO's borders. Given the spirited resistance that the Ukrainian army has put



up since the beginning of the invasion on 24 February 2022 and the large flow of Western weapons into Ukraine, Moscow may ultimately be forced to withdraw its troops back to their barracks inside Russia. But at the time of writing, Moscow has seized 170,000 square kilometres of Ukrainian territory,¹ an area over twice the size of Austria and equivalent to 20% of Ukraine itself. Russian forces have been driven back in the centre around Kyiv and in the north along the border with Belarus. But their priorities are clearly to gain control of eastern Ukraine and the Donbas region, as well as to seize Ukrainian ports on the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea coast and to create a land bridge between the Donbas and Russian-occupied Crimea. As Russia digs in and fortifies its positions in the east and south of Ukraine, it will be harder for the Ukrainian army to dislodge it. Thus, whatever the shape of a future ceasefire and political agreement between Kyiv and Moscow, substantial numbers of Russian troops and a great deal of equipment are likely to remain in Ukraine for many years to come. This would give Russia the option to restart its invasion of Ukraine at any moment. And being that much closer to the NATO countries, and stung by their support for Kyiv, Russia would pose a threat to the alliance itself.

Moreover, Russia has now gained a strategic foothold in Belarus. It has acquired bases and upgraded its inter-operability with Belarusian forces. In February it deployed 30,000 Russian troops, S-400 air defence systems and Sukhoi 35 fighter aircraft for joint exercises within 100 kilometres of Kyiv.² Putin's outreach to Beijing and the resolution of Russia's long-standing border disputes with China have helped here as they have enabled the Kremlin to transfer thousands of troops and a large amount of heavy equipment from eastern Russia to Belarus and subsequently into Ukraine. As NATO and Russian forces come into closer proximity, the risk increases of spillover from the invasion of Ukraine on to NATO territory. Even if Putin had chosen not to invade Ukraine in February, the constant build-up of Russian forces on Ukraine's borders and Moscow's repeated sabre rattling left the Alliance little choice but to strengthen its rather thin military posture on its easternmost borders in the Baltic and along the Black Sea. A debate on the balance between forces for territorial defence and those for expeditionary operations beyond Europe once looked likely in the context of NATO's new Strategic Concept. But it has been pre-empted in view of the urgency of responding to the biggest security crisis between Russia and the West since the early Cold War years. Unless NATO can actually fight and defend, deterrence will have little impact.

¹ *Reuters*, 'Explainer: Talks on Ukraine: Peace Deal or More Russian War?', 22 March 2022.

² *Euractiv*, 'NATO Says Russia to Have 30,000 Troops on Drills in Belarus, North of Ukraine', 3 February 2022.



Putting the muscle back into collective defence

Even at the beginning of February, NATO's reinforcements were taking shape. The US sent 2,000 troops from North Carolina to Germany and Poland, and 1,000 troops from Germany to Romania.³ France had pledged more troops for Romania; and the UK, 1,000 more troops to reinforce the British-led multinational battalion in Estonia.⁴ Denmark had deployed additional ships in the Baltic, and Spain dispatched Eurofighter aircraft and additional troops to Bulgaria.⁵ Once Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, the pace of the build-up quickened. In rapid succession NATO held two foreign ministers' meetings, two for defence ministers and a summit with President Biden. The alliance decided to create four new multinational battalions to be deployed in Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Hungary.⁶ The NATO Response Force was activated for the first time, placing 40,000 troops under the command of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe.⁷ Over 130 fighter aircraft and 100 ships were placed on higher alert and made ready to move. The US dispatched to Poland troops and equipment from its 82nd Airborne and 3rd Mechanised Infantry divisions, bringing the total of its forces present in Europe to 100,000, a level not seen since the early 1990s.⁸ Denmark announced that it was sending 800 troops to the Baltic states and would hold a referendum in June to seek to reverse its long-standing opt-out from the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy and related activities.⁹ Norway, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy also said that they would send additional units to NATO's eastern flank. Czechia announced the deployment of 650 soldiers to its neighbour Slovakia, with 250 to be sent immediately.¹⁰

However, more telling of the impact on NATO of Putin's war against Ukraine than even these military reinforcements were the increases in member state defence budgets. Belgium announced an extra €1 billion;¹¹ Norway, an immediate

³ U.S. Army, 'US to Deploy 3,000 Troops to Romania, Poland, Germany', 4 February 2022.

⁴ NATO, 'NATO's Military Presence in the East of the Alliance', 28 March 2022.

⁵ Reuters, 'Spain Will Send Four Fighter Jets and 130 Troops to Bulgaria', Euronews, 10 February 2022.

⁶ NATO, 'NATO's Military Presence'.

⁷ NATO, 'NATO Response Force', 28 February 2022.

⁸ Associated Press, 'U.S. Airborne Troops Arrive in Poland', *Politico*, 6 February 2022.

⁹ J. Liboreiro, 'Explained: Denmark's Surprising U-Turn on the EU Common Defence Policy', *Euronews*, 7 March 2022.

¹⁰ Reuters, 'Czech Government Approves Sending up to 650 Soldiers to Slovakia', 9 March 2022.

¹¹ L. Klingert, 'Belgian Defence Gets €1 Billion Boost', *The Brussels Times*, 24 March 2022.



€300 million.¹² Poland said it would aim to raise its defence spending to 3% of GDP;¹³ Lithuania, to 2.5%;¹⁴ and Italy said that it would reach the NATO 2% target, if only by 2028.¹⁵ Yet all these welcome steps were overshadowed by the spectacular decision of the new German government to commit to meeting the 2% benchmark in the next two years, and to devote €100 billion to modernising the equipment of the Bundeswehr.¹⁶ If this commitment is met, Germany will have the third-highest military budget in the world, after the US and China. Before Russia invaded Ukraine, only eight allies were meeting the NATO spending and investment target. And this number had actually fallen back from 11 in 2020, before the Covid-19 pandemic hit public finances.¹⁷ In 2021 the 30 NATO allies spent €1,060 billion on defence, an increase of 5.8% over the year before.¹⁸ Yet 70% of this amount was spent by the US, which was spending \$2,167 per capita, compared to \$1,353 for Norway, \$1,026 for the UK and \$732 for France. At \$631, Germany came in fifth.¹⁹

That these additional forces were sent and universally welcomed by their recipient countries demonstrates that NATO's existing posture—known as Enhanced Forward Presence and put in place after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014—was no longer fit for purpose given the worsening Russian threat, both in rhetoric and in military escalation. Back in 2014 Moscow had committed a gross violation of international law and shown its readiness to use force to impose its will on its neighbours. Yet there was no sense then that it was seeking the destruction of the Ukrainian state or the complete revision of the post-Cold War European security order built around the enlargement of NATO and the EU. NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence consisted of three multinational battalions in the Baltic states and a slightly larger rotational presence of 4,500 US troops in Poland. It reflected a sense that there was little immediate threat to NATO territory itself.²⁰ This thin blue line also enabled the alliance to tell Moscow that, as the forces were 'persistent' rather than 'permanent', they were not a violation of the commitment that NATO had given Moscow in 1997 not to station in peacetime substantial combat forces, military infrastructure or nuclear weapons on the territory of its new member

¹² Norway, 'Norway to Increase Short Term Defence Spending in 2022', *Government.no*, 21 March 2022.

¹³ A.-R. Popescu, 'Poland to Increase Defence Spending to 3% of GDP From 2023', *Janes*, 4 March 2022.

¹⁴ *LRT*, 'Lithuania Raises Defence Spending to 2.52 Percent of GDP', 17 March 2022.

¹⁵ T. Kington, 'Italy Aims to Reach NATO Defense-Spending Target by 2028, Four Years Late', *Defense News*, 1 April 2022.

¹⁶ *Deutsche Welle*, 'Germany Commits €100 Billion to Defense Spending', 27 February 2022.

¹⁷ J. Knuckey, 'NATO: Which Countries Pay Their Share on Defence?', *Forces*, 27 April 2022.

¹⁸ NATO, 'Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2021)' (31 March 2022).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ NATO, 'NATO Battlegroups in Baltic Nations and Poland Fully Operational', 28 August 2017.



states (the ‘three Nos’). Instead of massing troops along borders as during the Cold War, NATO would rely on reinforcements arriving from Western Europe and across the Atlantic. This would be possible because a volatile but not immediately threatening Russia would give NATO ample warning time if the alliance had to locate a sizeable invasion force close to Poland, the Baltic states, or Bulgaria and Romania in the Black Sea region. As a result, the focus of discussion within NATO moved from how the multinational battalions would fight to how they would be reinforced. Military mobility became the new lodestar as military logisticians had to think about moving thousands of troops, trucks and tanks through ports on the North Sea and the Baltics, onto roads and railway lines, across bridges and over borders in time to join the fight—and before NATO had yielded too much territory to the invader. With transport networks needing to be upgraded and customs procedures and border controls streamlined, the alliance had to reach out to the EU for investment and financial support. So major was the challenge that NATO had to establish a dedicated command just to handle logistics: the Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm.

Yet today NATO’s overwhelming problem is Russia, just as it was the Soviet Union during the Cold War days. Unlike Afghanistan, Libya or Iraq, this is not a challenge that NATO can withdraw from when it becomes tired or disillusioned. Nor can the Russian threat be conjured out of existence by a single arms control agreement or a major political concession, such as renouncing the prospect of Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO in the future. President Zelensky has already given up on NATO membership and pledged his country to neutrality, conditional on receiving security guarantees from Ukraine’s western partners.²¹ Yet this has not stopped Russia’s aggression. It is clear that before he will agree to a ceasefire, Putin is looking for many more concessions from Kyiv: particularly over territory, the status of Russian speakers and demilitarisation. He also seems determined to destroy so much of Ukraine’s transport infrastructure, industrial production and energy supplies that the country will take many years and the equivalent of a modern-day Marshall Plan to recover. Many commentators have long advocated neutrality for Ukraine and Georgia, buying into the Moscow narrative that Russia’s hostility to NATO and desire to subjugate its neighbours has been caused principally by the alliance’s decision to offer membership to both countries at its summit in Bucharest in 2008, albeit with no specified future date. Cancel this decision and all would be well. Yet Russia invaded Ukraine when there was no immediate prospect of the country joining NATO and at a time when Russia’s occupation of the Donbas and Crimea had already given it a major blocking influence on the future direction of its

²¹ BBC, ‘Zelensky Says Ukraine Prepared to Discuss Neutrality in Peace Talks’, 28 March 2022.



neighbour. The brutality of Putin's attacks suggest that he does not accept Ukraine's right to exist as an independent state. It was, moreover, Ukraine's quest to enter into a deeper trade relationship with the EU in 2014 that provoked both Putin's pressure on the government of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to reverse that decision and Moscow's subsequent annexation of Crimea.

In addition, Russia has always refused to accept the legitimacy of NATO or the idea that its mission is wholly defensive in character—despite concluding political agreements with the alliance in 1997 and 2002 (the NATO–Russia Founding Act and the NATO–Russia Declaration on the establishment of the NATO–Russia Council). Well before the annexation of Crimea, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had been castigating what he called ‘the NATO-centric Europe’ even though this outcome reflected the free choice of 14 countries in the central and eastern parts of the continent.²² Putin has demanded that NATO and the US agree to two treaties, both of which go well beyond the issue of Ukraine and Georgia by stipulating that the alliance remove its forces from Central and Eastern Europe and dismantle NATO's nuclear forces deployed in five European member states. Putin has spoken of Russia's right to regain lost Tsarist territories and reunite Slavic populations or Tsarist subjects that once lived together, albeit involuntarily.²³ Thus, after absorbing Ukraine and Belarus, his appetite would undoubtedly extend to the Baltic states, Poland, Finland and Bulgaria. These maximalist positions are based on the argument that Russia has the right to define its own security interests according to old borders and territories, and to threaten everyone else with military force if these interests are not respected. They leave little room for negotiation, let alone compromise. They reflect a regime's imperial ambitions, disguised in the narrative of ‘the indivisibility of security’ or ‘legitimate security interests’, or of permanent victimhood. They ignore that in its 73-year history NATO forces have never threatened Russia and that the idea of a collective NATO decision to do so is patently absurd. Settling the Cold War was never a matter of negotiations or compromise but rather of a fundamental change in the nature of the Soviet regime. Similarly, we have to hunker down once again for the long haul and await the end of the Putin era in Russian history, if we are not able to hasten its demise. In the meantime, the overriding objective of the alliance must be to preserve the gains of the 1990s and 2000s in the spread of liberal democracy in Eastern Europe, to contain Russia and to avoid a more general war.

²² TASS, ‘Union State to Neutralize Losses Related to NATO Approaching – Lavrov’, 31 December 2021.

²³ K. Giles, ‘Putin's Speech Harked Back to Russia's Empire – The Threat Doesn't Stop at Ukraine’, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2022.



From a multitude of challenges to one big threat

As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has put it, ‘... we are faced with a new reality’.²⁴ Consequently, the new Strategic Concept will need to be very different from its predecessor *Active Engagement, Modern Defence*, which was agreed at the Lisbon Summit in 2010.²⁵ In that document Russia was still described as ‘a strategic partner’ of the alliance: a country that would often be prickly and difficult in its relationship with NATO but would nonetheless be prepared to cooperate when it came to common challenges such as fighting terrorism or piracy, or reining in Iran’s nuclear weapons programme. Back in 2010 the alliance could still hope that its cooperation with Russia in the NATO–Russia Council, particularly on Afghanistan, could compensate for continuing differences over the shape of the European security order—in areas that included arms control; interventions in the Balkans and Libya; and, of course, NATO enlargement, which Russia tried to undermine in both Montenegro and North Macedonia through disinformation and influence campaigns. Over time, as Russia became more involved in NATO’s day-to-day affairs, its attitude would mellow—or so the assumption ran. Thus, NATO stuck firmly to its traditional policy vis-à-vis Russia, one of simultaneous deterrence and dialogue (originally enshrined in the Harmel Report of 1967²⁶), continuing with this even after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Periods when the NATO–Russia Council was suspended (such as during NATO’s operation in Kosovo in 1999 or after Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008) did not last long. However, after Russia marched into Crimea, the alliance did freeze practical cooperation with Moscow and the work of the NATO–Russia Council’s sub-groups.

But resuming the NATO–Russia dialogue now seems unthinkable, as does rekindling a relationship that is restricted to certain issues and ignores others. The new Strategic Concept will have to come up with new language that sets out the gravity and the nature of the threat that Russia poses to liberal democracies. This cannot be described exclusively in terms of a military threat. For the threat has taken on multiple dimensions, including disinformation; diplomatic and verbal aggression; economic and energy blackmail; and influence campaigns to

²⁴ NATO, ‘Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Ottawa Conference on Security and Defence’ (speech made on 9 March 2022), 12 March 2022.

²⁵ NATO, *Strategic Concept 2010* (19 November 2010).

²⁶ NATO, ‘Harmel Report’, 16 November 2017.



undermine the West's position in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. NATO will also need to map out its long-term strategy to contain Russia, push back against its influence in Europe and the periphery, and undermine its capacity for further aggression. More specifically, the alliance will have to actively support those countries that are the direct victims of Russia's aggression. The new Strategic Concept will undoubtedly state that the alliance's open-door policy on enlargement will be maintained. Kyiv is free to decide to return to its neutrality policy, but NATO will not take from it the now long-term prospect of one day being integrated in the transatlantic order. Reaffirming the open-door policy is key at a time when support for NATO membership has risen sharply in Sweden and Finland, and Moscow is putting pressure on both countries not to take this step. The same signal is needed vis-à-vis Bosnia and Herzegovina. This official candidate country was recently brought into NATO's Membership Action Plan, but it faces opposition from its Serb entity.

The allies will reaffirm their readiness to help the Ukrainian army to defend its territory through the long-term commitment to supply weapons such as anti-tank and air-defence missiles. Kyiv will be seeking signals from Brussels that the weapons will become progressively more powerful. It is looking for, among others, longer-range laser-guided artillery pieces, armed drones, rocket launchers, anti-ship missiles, aircraft and armoured vehicles. It has proposed lend-lease arrangements to buy now and pay later as the allies will not be able to deplete their weapons stocks and supply the weapons for free indefinitely. One idea is for NATO to take on the role of a clearing house or supply agency. It would coordinate these weapons procurements, possibly using its supply and procurement agency in Luxembourg. This agency has long experience in bulk-buy purchasing; quality control; and contracting for spare parts, maintenance and training. The UK has already held a meeting aimed at initiating a coordination mechanism for weapons deliveries. The US has followed up by organising a Ukraine support group of 40 countries, which met recently at the Ramstein air base in Germany. This function could usefully be handed over to NATO and then be developed at the Madrid Summit and endorsed in the Concept. It would also need to incorporate a system of backfill, identifying military equipment in allied nations that could be used to compensate those allies which send their Soviet-era weapons to Ukraine (for instance, F-16s to replace MIG-29s and Patriots to replace S-300s).



Reviving the ghost of George Kennan and containment

Beyond the immediate objective of raising the price that Russia must pay for its invasion of Ukraine, the Concept needs to define ways of reducing Moscow's capacity to harm the West. Since holding a referendum to change Russia's constitution, Putin has extended his term in power until 2035. He may emerge weakened from the conflict in Ukraine. But he has crushed all opposition in Russia, closed the media space and moved the country in the direction of a totalitarian state. Thus, for the alliance hope is not an option. Russia's military campaign in Ukraine has been far from impressive, but it will learn from its mistakes and failures and launch a new modernisation programme for the military similar to the one it embarked upon after invading Georgia in 2008. The alliance must try to counter this by depriving Russia of sensitive military technologies and key materials. Over the long run export controls may become even more important than sanctions in this regard. During the Cold War the Coordinating Committee or COCOM, operating out of Paris, kept a blacklist of civil–military technologies and equipment that required special export licences before they could be transferred to the Soviet Union or its satellites. The successor to COCOM, the Wassenaar Agreement, currently brings together 42 countries. It could be the basis of a new mechanism for NATO and like-minded Western states to deprive Moscow of the best technologies and to force it to rely on sub-standard alternatives. Already Russia's new tank, the T14, has performed poorly in Ukraine because the Kremlin could not get access to Western command and control, and fire-direction software. In an age of globalisation and of military capabilities based on civilian technologies and know-how, blocking Russia's access to critical weapons components and systems will not be easy. But to be effective, NATO will have to make the effort and create a network of intelligence, customs and law enforcement agencies, as well as the shipping and private sectors.

When it comes to constraining Russia, NATO's role is not the most important one. The US, the EU and the G7 will need to lead on maintaining sanctions against Moscow. Sanctions take time to bite. But many of the raft of measures imposed since 24 February on the Russian banking system, financial sector and economy are linked to Moscow's military operations in Ukraine. If Russia withdraws, many will be lifted. Yet that would also weaken the deterrent effect on future Russian actions in Georgia, Moldova, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Africa or the Middle East. Therefore, NATO's Concept could initiate work on a long-term set of sanctions linked



to Russia's hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns, as well as to its violation of international law and norms. The way in which the EU has imposed sanctions on companies and individuals linked to Russia's Wagner mercenary group is an example of targeting those elements of the Russian state that, in addition to the military, are behind Moscow's foreign destabilisation operations. The Concept could also establish a unit at NATO to monitor the allies' dependency on Russia in areas such as finance, consumer markets, energy, rare earth minerals, space exploration and fertilisers. One of the few positive aspects of the Ukraine conflict is that the allies are finally acting on their dependencies, especially on oil and gas, and seeking alternative supplies. The European Commission has devised a strategy to reduce dependency on Russian gas by two-thirds in 12 months, and Lithuania has just announced that it has now freed itself from Gazprom, proving that this can be done. Yet as with the sanctions, this effort must be pursued to its logical conclusion, despite the painful short-term effects. If not, there is a risk that the West will relapse into the old familiar dependencies, thereby reducing its freedom of manoeuvre and decision in future crises with Russia.

Lawfare is another option to constrain Russia which the allies need to support. As the evidence mounts of massacres and other war crimes committed by Russian forces, indictments by the International Criminal Court seem almost inevitable. These will also extend to the Russian leadership in the decision-making chain responsible for unleashing an illegal war of aggression. Two former UK prime ministers, John Major and Gordon Brown, are campaigning for a special Ukraine Criminal Tribunal. The UN Human Rights Council is launching an investigation, and the International Court of Justice has ruled in favour of Ukraine and required Russia to withdraw its forces. Like imposing sanctions and reducing dependencies, lawfare works progressively. Some may be sceptical that Putin and his acolytes will ever face their day in court. Yet the same was said about former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, former Bosnian Serb military commander Ratko Mladić, former Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir and the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide. The advantage of lawfare is that it ties up the Putin regime in so many lawsuits, indictments and prosecutions that its foreign operations (such as travel, raising finance or investments) are increasingly hampered as others fear the reputation loss linked to dealing with a pariah regime. Therefore, NATO's Concept should commit the allies to gathering evidence and pledging support, funding and resources to international institutions able to pursue Russia for war crimes, crimes against humanity and criminal behaviour. Dialogue and cooperation with the Putin regime no longer seem possible. But should NATO abrogate its cooperative mechanisms with Russia, such as the NATO–Russia Founding Act of 1997 and the NATO–Russia Council? Or should the alliance simply suspend



them, leaving the door open for a future, more moderate Russian government to come back to the NATO table? Given the current level of feelings in the alliance, this could prove a difficult debate. Yet the Concept should not be about merely preventing a further deterioration in the status quo. It should set forth a vision of how to progress to a more hopeful future.

As much as NATO needs to have a forward-leaning and proactive strategy to contain Russia, the Ukraine crisis has underscored that its posture is primarily defensive. Priority has been given to bolstering the alliance's defences to emphasise its determination to defend 'every inch of NATO territory' and the alliance's borders as a credible red line between a limited war in Ukraine and a general war in Europe. Yet many of the reinforcements sent to Eastern Europe have been deployed on an ad hoc and temporary basis. They do not fit into a single coherent battle plan drawn up by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe and the alliance's Military Committee. Poland and the Baltic states are pressing for large armoured units to be deployed permanently on their territories, together with all the air defence, command and control, and pre-stored equipment needed not simply for simple deterrence but to fight a war effectively.

Defence ministers have tasked NATO's military authorities with presenting to the Madrid Summit options for the alliance's future military posture. These cannot include permanent deployments along all NATO borders. Norway has a long-standing policy of not allowing foreign troops to be based on its territory in peacetime; and Sweden and Finland will most probably follow the same approach if they join the alliance. In the Balkans the absence of Russian combat forces makes resilience to the Kremlin's influence operations the major form of collective defence rather than additional NATO troops or bases. Permanent stationings would be expensive and would reopen old debates on transatlantic burden sharing as the US cannot afford to relocate a large bulk of its army, air force and navy to Europe if it is to pursue its Indo-Pacific strategy and deal with other contingencies, such as those in the Middle East. Now that Germany is re-equipping the Bundeswehr, the US will probably expect Berlin to provide the backbone of NATO's armoured brigades as it did in the Cold War. A related issue is the proportion of permanent forces versus rotational forces that have no pre-assigned piece of territory to defend. The latter forces could be used as a strategic reserve, switching from one sector of the front to another along a north-south axis as a Russian assault unfolded.

NATO's future posture will have to take account of Russia's way of warfare, as witnessed in Ukraine. Russia has not hesitated to create environmental hazards by attacking nuclear facilities, fuel depots and power stations. It has shelled urban areas and targeted hospitals, Ukraine's transport and energy infrastructure, food supply



chains and health services and Russian forces have confiscated large quantities of Ukrainian grain and tried to sell this grain illegally to a few selected clients, unleashing a humanitarian crisis. The risk for NATO is that it would be sucked into dealing with these second-order effects of a Russian attack and be diverted from its primary task of engaging the enemy. Therefore, the alliance's new Concept should ramp up its contingency planning for civil emergencies. To take pressure off the troops, it could propose the creation of a NATO civilian response force to address these rear challenges. In designing its new posture, NATO will face some difficult trade-offs between mass and dispersion. It would need to concentrate fire to drive back Russian forces, but large military formations would be highly vulnerable to Russia's long-range precision weapons, artillery, drones and missiles. Russia has used this tactic in Ukraine to cause maximum havoc and impede the flow of reinforcements and weapons to the battlefield. Thus, NATO will have to learn to fight in small, mobile and stealthy units with excellent situational awareness and firepower. Another important issue is nuclear deterrence and nuclear signalling. Putin has shown his readiness to threaten nuclear strikes early on in a crisis or conflict, and to 'escalate to de-escalate', as NATO officials describe it. Therefore, the Concept should initiate a review of the alliance's nuclear posture to see which nuclear capabilities and declaratory policy NATO needs to deter Russia from using its nuclear weapons as a means of intimidation. The alliance should promptly take a decision on modernising its sub-strategic weapons to replace the US B61 tactical nuclear warheads stationed in five European NATO member states. Settling this matter will be facilitated by Germany's decision to procure the F-35 dual capable aircraft.

Meanwhile, back in the rest of the world

Russia is increasingly meshing with other authoritarian states, and together they are working to counter Western policy goals in the wider world. In this context NATO will need to sort out which security challenges are merely an extension of Kremlin activities (e.g. cyber-attacks, energy security or disinformation campaigns) and can come under the alliance's general strategy for Russia, and which security challenges exist in their own right and require an independent strategy. In this respect, China may be one of the most difficult issues to be resolved in the new Concept. In recent years meeting the challenge of China as a rival global power has risen to the top of the NATO agenda. At their first summit with Biden, in June 2021, the allies agreed their most extensive language on China thus far.



Beijing was described as a strategic competitor, but NATO also expressed its interest in dialogue and practical cooperation on issues such as climate change, proliferation and maritime security.²⁷ Subsequently the NATO Secretary General had a follow-up call with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi.²⁸ Yet Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed the situation. China has sided with Russia at least in rhetoric and the information sphere. It has blamed NATO and its policy of enlargement for causing the crisis and has repeated many of Russia's talking points. President Xi and Chinese officials have declared that there 'are no limits' to China's cooperation with Russia.²⁹ The focus of Western policy has turned to trying to keep China out of the Ukraine conflict, putting pressure on Beijing not to supply arms to Moscow (a whole range of capabilities has been requested by the Putin regime) and stopping China from helping Russia to circumvent the sanctions by giving Moscow access to its financial and payments systems. China's behaviour will largely determine how NATO portrays it in the forthcoming Concept. If Moscow and Beijing draw closer together and conclude a formal alliance, can NATO have a structured dialogue with Beijing on the basis that China is not Russia? Will it come to see China increasingly through the prism of the Russian military threat and vice versa? Can the alliance develop a dual-track approach towards China, on the basis of mutual security interests, with Russia featuring in certain categories but not in others?

Those inside the 'Brussels Bubble' and in EU policy circles more widely will no doubt gravitate to what the new Strategic Concept says about NATO–EU relations. At the end of March, EU leaders approved the EU *Strategic Compass*, a document long in the making but which had to be substantially revised to take account of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.³⁰ This last-minute revision has been to the advantage of future NATO–EU cooperation as it brings the EU's common threat assessment and its refocusing on collective defence much more into harmony with the NATO order of priority. To the extent that the EU and NATO are prioritising the same capabilities and force structures, they will have a stronger incentive to cooperate. The large amounts of additional money that the return to territorial defence in Europe is generating among EU member states (21 of which belong to NATO) is a golden opportunity for the EU to demonstrate the utility of its multinational research and capabilities development programmes (such

²⁷ NATO, 'Brussels Summit Communiqué' (issued on 14 June 2021), 8 April 2022.

²⁸ NATO, 'NATO Secretary General Meets Virtually With China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi', 27 September 2021.

²⁹ C. Buckley and S. L. Myers. "'No Wavering": After Turning to Putin, Xi Faces Hard Wartime Choices for China', *The New York Times*, 7 March 2022.

³⁰ European External Action Service, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (24 March 2022).



as Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund) to get optimal ‘bang for the euro’ by fostering more pooling, sharing and multinational procurement. Factoring in NATO’s key military requirements (such as in air defence, drones, long-range artillery and electronic warfare) could help during the remainder of this decade to achieve the target that 50% of NATO’s core weapons systems and enablers should come from Europe. Currently over 70% of these items are manufactured in the US. As Germany is taking steps to return to its historical norm of being the leading military power in Europe, the EU and NATO have a common challenge to prevent Germany from going it alone and to embed German military units into larger EU frameworks (perhaps joint German–Benelux, German–Nordic and German–Polish divisions) in a way that has not been possible since the demise of the European Defence Community in 1954. As more European forces are committed to NATO’s new permanent posture in the east, there will be fewer available for Common Security and Defence Policy missions in Africa, the Balkans or elsewhere. Perhaps NATO and the EU need to move towards a more explicit division of labour, with France focusing on expeditionary capabilities for use beyond EU territory and Germany focusing on territorial defence inside the Union. Flexibility in formats could help countries outside the EU, such as the UK, to engage indirectly in EU defence activities through frameworks such as the Northern Group; the European Intervention Initiative; the Anglo-French Lancaster House treaty; and the UK’s commitment to the Arctic region through its rotations of a marine strike group in Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Beyond immediate defence needs, and taking account of the EU’s wish to conclude a third EU–NATO Joint Declaration on institutional cooperation (it will probably be concluded after the Madrid Summit), there are other important areas too where the two Brussels-based organisations could enhance their interaction. Resilience against hybrid warfare and systemic shocks is one, combating climate change and future pandemics another. Higher priority should be given to developing cyber and space defence capabilities and to assessing the impact of emerging and disruptive technologies on military operations. The same holds for providing support and assistance to countries in Europe’s neighbourhood facing Russian pressures or aggression, including Georgia, Moldova and countries in the Western Balkans. NATO and the EU now need to take their daily interaction to the next level, moving from information sharing to a leader–supporter relationship (depending on the issue) and a pragmatic case-by-case division of labour. The intellectual convergence between the Strategic Compass and the Strategic Concept provides the political opening to take a major step forward. The Madrid Summit needs to give full and explicit recognition to the EU goal of Strategic Autonomy as being in



NATO's security interest and to the major contribution that all EU operations and capabilities programmes make to the alliance's political and security objectives.

Finally, the enormity of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created the understandable impression that the existing 2010 Concept needs to be torn up and replaced by a wholly new one. Yet this is not correct. It is true that the 2010 document did not accurately predict Russia's move towards militarism or the rapid rise of China as a global security actor, and nor did it mention space, pandemics or climate change as potential security threats. All the same, it did get a number of key things right. These include making Cooperative Security and Partnerships the third core task of the alliance; stressing that NATO needed to improve its situational awareness, strategic forecasting, and intelligence gathering and analysis; putting emerging security challenges, such as cybersecurity, energy security and terrorism, on the NATO agenda in a much more structured and politically visible way; and proposing that the alliance needed to form new partnerships with other government agencies, other international organisations, civil society and the private sector to counter more complex and grey zone threats. As the mantra ran at the time, 'it takes a network to defeat a network.' After 2010 two NATOs emerged, one focused on traditional military structures to handle collective defence and the other plugged in to a whole host of partner countries and different government departments beyond foreign and defence ministries to deal with multidimensional challenges such as piracy, terrorism, explosive devices in Afghanistan and cybersecurity. Even as NATO reasserts the primacy of collective defence, this network of partnerships and a strong civil–military interface will be vital if the alliance is to remain a player on the non-conventional side of the defence spectrum. After all, since 2010 NATO has expanded its portfolio to include climate change, space as a domain of operations, a higher level of ambition in cybersecurity and innovation in civilian technologies relevant to defence. Its Secretary General has also repeatedly stressed that the alliance needs to step up its training and defence capacity building activities in the Middle East, Africa and the European neighbourhood. These challenges will not disappear magically because of Russia's latest moves in Ukraine. Working with willing and able partners will still be key to meeting most of them.



Conclusion

To use an American expression, NATO is big enough to ‘walk and chew gum at the same time’. Developments in the south will continue to preoccupy the allies in the Mediterranean even as they turn their focus towards the Baltic and Black Sea regions. Thus, the broad approach and 360-degree spectrum of concern and engagement ushered in by the 2010 Concept have stood the test of time. Moreover, this is certainly not the moment for NATO to send the message to its partners across the globe that it is henceforth only interested in Russia and is no longer available to partner on common global challenges: China, climate change and proliferation now being the foremost. As the allies tackle all the complex issues involved in the new NATO Strategic Concept, the good news is that they do not have to go back to the drawing board. The focus is on evolution rather than revolution. The handiwork of the late former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and those who drafted the 2010 Concept with her still provides a solid basis on which the allies can build.



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