



NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept: Matching Ambition with Reality

JONNY HALL AND HUGH SANDEMAN



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Agreeing the Concept: how Russia made it easier

As an often disparate Alliance of 30 nations whose initial purpose lapsed when the Soviet Union dissolved itself three decades ago, NATO needs to tell a convincing story to politicians and the public in its member states - and to itself - about why it still plays a vital role. The Strategic Concept published by NATO in June 2022 does a reasonable job of fulfilling Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's aim of 'setting out the Alliance's priorities, core tasks and approaches for the next decade'.¹ Whether it will be a useful ongoing influence on the strategic practice of the Alliance in the years ahead depends on how NATO members deal with a number of challenges that are discussed, or partially glazed over, in the drafting of the Strategic Concept.

The 2022 Strategic Concept was certainly long in coming. Its predecessor, published in 2010 in a fundamentally different security environment, was overtaken by Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014. But there was an open question about whether a new Strategic Concept was strictly needed. After all, despite the outdated 2010 Strategic Concept, the innovations of 'forward defence' and 'total defence' were adopted by Allies in response to Crimea, along with significant changes to NATO's presence in Eastern Europe, implemented after the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit. From 2017, again without the cover of an updated Strategic Concept, NATO engaged in a fundamental rethink of its military strategy and approach to deterrence. This resulted in the first new Military Strategy for many years in 2019, and in the shift to conceptualising deterrence as a permanent,

multi-domain contestation against adversaries, as enshrined in the 2020 Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area.²

While NATO was updating its thinking on military strategy and on the requirements and practice of deterrence, the growing complexity of threats to European security also put increasing pressure on NATO to reinvigorate its political cohesion. The challenge to cohesion grew in the same measure as the complexity of these threats: from Russia's revisionism to China's adversarial economic statecraft and the effects of economic, political and climate instability on migration into Europe. Internal threats to cohesion were amplified by the Trump Administration's indifference to longstanding US commitments. NATO's exercise in looking ahead to 2030—reported on by the Reflection Group in November 2020—was an attempt to answer the question of whether and how political cohesion of the NATO member states could be enhanced in a more uncertain and fragmented security environment.³

As work on the new Strategic Concept got underway in late 2021, these military and political initiatives posed challenges for the drafting. To what extent would the Strategic Concept recognise and build on the new thinking on deterrence and defence? What would be the approach to China? How would differences of emphasis on the

central purpose of NATO between the more globally engaged NATO powers—such as the US—and the frontline NATO states—bordering Russia—be resolved? This was an argument between those states that believe that NATO can best function by returning to its original remit of providing collective defence (in practice, against Russia) and those who advocate the broader NATO 2030 agenda. A further underlying tension remained between the southern members of the Alliance, with their focus on the Mediterranean and North Africa, and the northern and eastern Allies bordering on Russia.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which occurred whilst work on drafting the Strategic Concept was still in progress, created an immediate degree of unity among NATO member states unprecedented since the end of the Cold War. This gave NATO new opportunities—and challenges—for outlining a coherent vision for the Alliance. The invasion was a measure of the extent to which a thriving, democratic Ukraine posed a threat to Russia and to Putin's rule. But it also followed the long-run failure of NATO's attempts to bring order to troubled areas outside Europe, and the global diplomatic failure to recognise both the perceived existential nature of the threat that a western-facing Ukraine posed to Russia and the consequent danger of Russian action.

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Now for the hard part

In the run-up to the Madrid Summit in June 2022, and against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, NATO's main concern was to demonstrate unity, solidarity and coherence at the political level (which had been defined as the NATO Centre of Gravity in the recently agreed NATO Military Strategy). The Alliance had to show that it could face the direct threat from Russia, ongoing instability in the Middle East and Africa, the continuing danger of terrorism, and the (still hard to define) consequences of systemic competition from China.

The stark assertion in the Strategic Concept that 'The Euro-Atlantic Area is not at peace' made the headlines and repudiated explicitly the view in the 2010 Strategic Concept that 'the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low'.⁴ Russia had convincingly re-established itself as the primary direct threat. Other elements of the security situation in Europe—the diminishing prospects of arms control, the priority of defence and deterrence—were clearly defined and incontestable. The Alliance had indeed demonstrated unity and consensus, in expressing the scale of the challenge faced by all its members.

At least for the moment. There are several reasons for concern that this consensus may soon fray, quite apart from potential differences among individual Alliance members over the growing economic and political cost of maintaining unity—outside the framework of NATO itself—against Russian aggression in Ukraine going into the winter of 2022/23. Among potentially corrosive factors underlying the objectives of the Strategic Concept, it is worth mentioning three: the extent of new NATO commitments; the difficulty of translating the Concept into practice; and the continuing need for powerful leadership by the US.

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New NATO commitments.

The Strategic Concept contains a large number of specific new commitments: the phrase ‘we will’ occurs 71 times.⁵ NATO’s new strategic statement begins, at birth, with major political, economic and social gaps between pronouncements and delivery. For example, the proposed increase in NATO forces held at readiness from 40,000 to 300,000, announced in connection with the publication of the Strategic Concept (but not in the document itself), is a number taken from NATO’s Defence Planning Capability Survey and is untethered to any prior political or economic commitment to a such a massive change in NATO’s military posture.⁶ The sizeable commitments to higher defence spending made by Allies at the Madrid Summit are already overshadowed by the inflation and cost-of-living crisis. The Strategic Concept does not set priorities or sequencing, nor does it adequately address implementation.

Translating the Concept into actionable ideas.

The Strategic Concept is written in code. Even experienced NATO practitioners differ over what is meant by ‘forward defence’, or the commitment to ‘defend every inch of Alliance territory’.⁷ It is not clear how defending ‘every inch’ relates to NATO’s Article 5, its Military Strategy, or the new approach to ‘a single, coherent framework to contest and deter and defend against the Alliance’s main threats in a multi-domain environment’.⁸ The Concept—particularly in paragraphs 20 to 22—does not explicitly address the degree to which NATO is committed to the warfighting and deterrence plans developed since 2017. This potential gap between the Strategic Concept and NATO’s new military and strategic thinking could leave open the potential for serious ambiguity.

In an Alliance governed by consensus, ambiguity can become a serious obstacle to progress. There are currently more than 20 (often complex) documents that senior NATO officials must master to enable a common dialogue among themselves. These include: the New Military Strategy; the Defence and Deterrence of the Euro-Atlantic Area; SACEUR's Area-Wide Strategic Plan; various Subordinate Strategic Plans; Readiness Action Plans; the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept; NATO New Force Model; and numerous others.

The need for leadership.

Leadership by the major powers within NATO, above all the US, remains indispensable to the Alliance. The objectives outlined in the Strategic Concept for coping with Europe's complex and deteriorating security environment can only be implemented if there exists strength and constancy of purpose on the part of the US. While the aggravated partisanship in US foreign policy puts this constantly at risk, so too does the continuing European tendency to rely too much on the US.

Did the Strategic Concept get China right?

The Strategic Concept's discussion of China—described by the US Ambassador to NATO as a 'big deal' - asserts that China's 'ambitions and coercive policies' provide 'systemic challenges ... to Euro-Atlantic security' in multiple domains, from control of globalised supply chains to disruptive cyber activities.⁹ Although China is characterised in the Strategic Concept as trying 'to subvert the rules-based international order', this presentation of the challenge from China largely follows Stoltenberg's claim from 2020 that NATO policy is 'not about moving ... into the South China Sea, but it is about taking into account that China is coming closer to us' through its coercive political and economic actions.¹⁰

Despite this cautious phrasing, the Strategic Concept does contain a geographic widening of the Alliance's concerns about China. The Concept states that 'The Indo-Pacific is important for NATO, given that developments in that region can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security', and it promises to cooperate more closely with new and existing partners in the Indo-Pacific 'to tackle cross-regional challenges and shared security interests'.¹¹

China reacted sharply to its inclusion in the Strategic Concept, with the Mission of the People's Republic of China to the EU declaring that the Concept was 'filled with Cold War thinking', and that it was 'maliciously attacking and smearing China'.¹² Given that China is widely perceived to be more preoccupied with other bilateral and multilateral engagements—such as US alliances in the Eastern Pacific, or the Quad—than with NATO, the hostility of China's reaction does raise a question about the approach taken in the Strategic Concept. China appears to see the Strategic Concept as justifying its view of NATO as a hostile actor in the Indo-Pacific.

With Chinese statecraft in Europe currently focused on technological competition, it is possible that the strong characterisation in the Strategic Concept of China as an overall systemic competitor may simply encourage China to accept the Russian narrative of NATO expansion and encourage the alignment of China with Russia. However, the predominant role of the US in NATO does mean that the Alliance is constrained from looking at China solely in a European context. For the US, China is the leading global threat, and the Strategic Concept's treatment of China reflects in part the requirement for European powers in NATO to show that they at least recognise those burdens that the US would like to share around.

The Strategic Concept and the War in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine is not directly NATO's war. There has been no crisis response through the North Atlantic Council, nor is any route open to a consensus within NATO on drawing red lines over Russia's conduct of the war. Provided no NATO member is attacked, NATO will, as an organisation, ultimately stand on the sidelines—albeit awkwardly aware of the ambiguity created by the longstanding but inoperable offer to admit Ukraine to NATO at some point in the future. Individual NATO members have of course provided significant assistance to Ukraine. Reflecting this state of affairs, the war in Ukraine was referred to in only one paragraph of the Strategic Concept.

The conduct of the war, however, is of urgent concern to the Alliance's understanding of current and future warfare. While it is unclear whether Ukraine's effective resistance demonstrates the need for military mass in a Europe that long since discarded the idea, there are a number of clear pointers to the priorities that the Alliance will have to look at with renewed intensity. These include the importance of agile small units with joint fires—and the accelerating obsolescence of big platforms—with precision essential for effective attack

and defence. Areas that have been highlighted by the fighting so far include logistics, inter-operability, readiness, reserves and resilience. The ability of armed forces and the population to endure has come to the fore, demonstrating the critical role of the resilience of civil society, of military morale, and of well-trained and available reserves.

A further reminder from the front in Ukraine is the central importance of an effective defence industrial supply chain. For both sides, the consumption of weapons—particularly precision weapons—massively exceeds the capacity to supply. The cost of advanced weaponry, and the resources and skills that go into them, is high. In peacetime, defence ministries cannot afford to maintain large inventories and, if a crisis breaks out, scaling up production is difficult. When Russia invaded Ukraine, US producers had serious problems finding the qualified staff they needed.

Alliance unity over Ukraine, and the speed of response by Western powers, was a strategic shock to Putin. This makes it less likely that he will seek directly to attack NATO territory, though indirect attacks through sabotage are now a possibility. And NATO has continued to strengthen its deterrence and defence capabilities on the Alliance's Eastern flank since the start of the Russian invasion. Now the nations that comprise NATO need to sustain and enhance their support for Ukraine's ability to fight, resist and survive, as the country comes under growing economic and military strain.

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Drafting Concepts vs Practising Strategy

It is hard not to see Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the fate of the war as both a failure of diplomacy on the part of the larger powers that are members of the Alliance, and as crucial to the future of the Alliance. As the Strategic Concept states, 'a strong, independent Ukraine is vital for the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area'.¹³ But the new Strategic Concept was delivered to a world where resources are constrained by the after-effects of COVID-19 and the costs of resisting Russia's energy squeeze.

The apparent absence of strategic thinking by the US and European powers about the political endpoint of the war in Ukraine should be a major concern, especially for NATO's ability to strategise as a unified Alliance in pursuit of the objectives underlying the Strategic Concept. Political cohesion is essential to achieving any of the goals set out in it. As Ed Arnold of RUSI noted in his response to the Strategic Concept, 'the ability of governments to communicate the Russian threat to their populations clearly and transparently' will be 'critical' to ensuring that there are sufficient resources for the objectives for NATO that the Strategic Concept outlines.¹⁴

The Strategic Concept does communicate Allied seriousness about deterrence and defence, setting out the strategic realignment of NATO against the backdrop of a major war in Europe. It represents a much needed injection of Allied strategic realism. What matters now is that strategic momentum is maintained, and commitments delivered. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO members have had the luxury of only recognising the degree of threat that they were willing to pay to defend against. Even now, there are concerns about affordability being expressed by some Allies, which is perhaps why Secretary General Stoltenberg has stated that the 2% defence spending pledge is more a floor than a ceiling.¹⁵

Getting across to the public the full spectrum of threats that Russia poses, and the necessity of being able to respond, will be an essential component of the case for sustained increases in defence spending. But maintaining a consistent long-term effort to engage with western publics about the enduring nature of the Russian challenge to European security, even beyond the Ukraine conflict, will remain a perhaps insuperable challenge given the extent of volatility, and absence of long-term consensus, in democratic party politics across Europe and the US. ■

Endnotes

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This Strategic Update is based on a discussion hosted by LSE IDEAS in July 2022 on NATO's 2030 Strategic Concept. Participants in the discussion included: General Sir James Everard, Gordon Barrass, General Sir Richard Barrons, Lt Gen Giles Hill, Professor Christopher Coker, Dr Luca Tardelli, Marissa Kemp, Tom McKane, and Peter Watkins. This Strategic Update reflects points made during the discussion, but no participant is in any way committed to its specific content, and the views expressed here are attributable solely to the authors.

The Strategic Concept is the first since 2010 and was redrafted throughout a fundamentally different geopolitical and security context—following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This Update addresses the Concept's recognition of necessary strategic realignment, with NATO's widening in both its defence commitments and geographic focus on China, as well as its ambiguity in regards to practical military strategy, deterrence, and endpoint of the war in Ukraine.

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