NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept: One Year On

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NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept: One Year On

Contributors

This Strategic Update summarises a roundtable discussion held at LSE IDEAS in July 2023. Contributors to the discussion were: **General Sir James Everard, Stuart Austin**, **Professor Gordon Barrass**, **Professor Christopher Coker**, **Tom McKane**, **Hugh Sandeman**, **Susan Scholefield**, and **Peter Watkins**. None of the content of the Strategic Update is attributable to any one individual.

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Russia, Ukraine, and NATO allies are entangled in the one thing no-one wanted or was prepared for: a long war. Russia undoubtedly expected the war to be short, and the enduring nature of the fight has exposed serious flaws across the Russian military system. They are slowly overcoming these as they learn, adapt and re-set; Russia will build-back better. Ukraine will continue to fight with courage and creativity, but neither Russia nor Ukraine is capable of decisively winning this war, nor can they countenance losing. We could be heading for deadlock in what has become a war of attrition and consumption.

This is why the Russian narrative has now turned to defending the homeland, as the Russian government prepares its population for the long haul, to wait out the West. Russia believes that the West lacks strategic patience (evidenced by Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria), is economically fragile, and that war fatigue will eventually erode its support for Ukraine. As the West has already shown it can stay the distance for longer than is comfortable for Putin, this war is likely to continue until the political context changes, in Russia or in the West.

The NATO context

 The July 2023 Vilnius Summit succeeded in its main objective of sending a strong signal of transatlantic resolve on what NATO calls 'Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine'. There is a constant need to protect and to demonstrate what the alliance identifies as its centre of

gravity: Unity, Solidarity and Cohesion. Russia has, for the moment, made this task far simpler. One year on from the agreement of NATO's most recent Strategic Concept at the previous Madrid Summit in June 2022, the political cohesion of the alliance is more robust than it has been since the end of the Cold War. But the commitments made by allies in the Strategic Concept are far from assured, and the degree of US focus on European security, essential for NATO's cohesion, will remain an open question as the 2024 US presidential election approaches.

The way NATO works is simple, at least in theory: its credibility is measured by the security it produces, the solutions and advance plans it develops and the operations, missions, and activities (all different) it conducts. National capitals retain decision making authority within NATO, with established procedures for decision-making rooted in the North Atlantic Treaty, and a constant drumbeat of ministerial and summit meetings that demand deliverables. These in turn produce specific decisions— the things that the alliance is going to do, or not do—framed by the current Strategic Concept.

The Strategic Concept is therefore fundamentally important. It not only describes the security environment facing the alliance but publicly reiterates NATO's fundamental purpose, nature, and core security tasks. For NATO planners

it establishes clear freedoms and constraints. When the Strategic Concept no longer aligns with strategic reality, it is updated, lastly (and belatedly) in Madrid in 2022—making this the eighth Strategic Concept since 1950.

The Russian re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 jolted the Alliance into agreeing a Strategic Concept more in keeping with the current security environment than the long outdated 2010 Concept, with its proposal for a 'strong and constructive partnership' with Russia.[1] The full-scale invasion of Ukraine took place when the 2022 Strategic Concept was still being drafted, eliminating any doubt that Russia poses 'the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic Area'.[2] In the years following Crimea, NATO planners and commanders had done most of the groundwork needed for the updated Concept, including the overhaul of NATO's Military Strategy in 2019; following from that, the approval by allied defence ministers in 2020 of NATO's concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area.

The decisions reflected in the 2022 Strategic Concept opened what has been described within HQ NATO as a 'window of opportunity to drive the transformation of the Alliance strategy for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area'. Why transformation? Because since the end of the Cold War—to paraphrase

Robert Kagan—US power had made it possible for Europeans to believe that military strength was no longer important.[3] Despite the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the creation of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy pillar, European nations had rushed to secure a peace dividend.

National defence spending fell in Europe by an average of 31% between 1995 and 2015, with a disinvestment in those capabilities needed for collective defence (including mass). Even today, the NATO Defence Planning Process identifies sixteen critical major shortfall areas in the collective investment of Allies, including: ballistic missile defence; integrated missile and air defence; surface-based air and missile defence; joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; deep precision strike capability; chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence; and armaments and battle decisive munitions. In large part these are also the capabilities that are needed by Ukraine.

The decisions made by Alliance leaders in Madrid were the most significant since 1991—or even 1950. While not forgetting the persistent terrorist threat, Madrid re-focused the Alliance on collective defence, stressed the ironclad commitment to defend each other, and added a commitment to 'deter, defend, contest and deny across all domains and directions'[4]. The Strategic Concept also reiterated the importance of both national and collective resilience, as a first line of defence given a recognised vulnerability of Alliance members to hybrid attacks. It was also accepted these objectives required the modernising of defence, so that NATO has the means - especially the technological and military capabilities at readiness and in depth - to compete with Russia in the medium- to long-term, and to prepare for the broader systemic challenges posed by China.

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NATO's Plans are Ready,
Not Its Forces

Following on from the completion of NATO's new Military Strategy in 2019 and the related concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic the next year, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR)'s Area of Responsibility-Wide Strategic Plan was approved; the single, military strategic plan for the employment of Alliance forces, inside and outside of the NATO area and against both main threat: Russia, and terrorist groups. The underpinning detail for how to meet specific threats was then filled in with detailed regional and subordinate plans.

The three regional plans owned by the Joint Force Commands, and the seven strategic plans owned by the domain and functional commanders, were all approved at the Vilnius summit. The Joint Force Commands cover the totality of SACEUR's Area of Responsibility (AOR) from the High North and Atlantic (from Norfolk, Virginia), Central (the Baltic states to the Alps, from Brunssum in the Netherlands), and South East (including the Mediterranean and the Black Sea from Naples).

SACEUR now has the task of negotiating 'troops to task' at the tactical level with allies, helped in the long-term by an improved NATO Defence Planning Process. This is intended to produce the full range of capabilities needed to deliver the deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area as pledged by allied leaders at Madrid and Vilnius.

Allies are already offering their capabilities for assignment in these different commands, under the New Force Model (NFM), but it will take several years of sustained effort to close out capability gaps and deliver the forces required to meet the alliance's full

'level of ambition'—set out in NATO's Political Guidance 23. The concurrency set here includes the ability to conduct a large-scale, war-fighting collective defence campaign, while simultaneously dealing with a significant terrorist threat and a contingency operation outside SACEUR's AOR.

The reality remains that, while it has given back to NATO the sense of purpose and preparedness in its strategy, Russia's war on Ukraine has not yet pushed all of Europe's biggest powers to reach the alliance's defence spending targets. Only seven of 31 allies currently meet the target of two percent of GDP; now redefined by NATO's Secretary General as a baseline, not a ceiling. But at least with HQ NATO and SHAPE now speaking with one voice, allies will find they have less room for manoeuvre to avoid living up to the commitments they have made to NATO's collective defence.

The UK: a 'reliable and highly capable ally'?

This gap between public commitments and real capabilities is one that seems to be exemplified by the UK. The July 2023 Defence Command Paper Refresh, which was published in the week following the summit, repeats the mantra that NATO is 'the cornerstone of UK defence'[5]. It also notes that it is 'credible war-fighting capabilities that make the UK a reliable and highly capable ally within NATO',

asserting that 'We will be ready to play a key part in NATO's Regional and Operational and Strategic Plans'.[6]

The UK's 'substantial offer' to NATO's New Force Model is outlined in the white paper. The UK aims to lead on the integration of a revised command and control structure in Northern Europe, following the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. The Royal Navy will 'continue to provide the most comprehensive maritime contribution to NATO war-fighting capability of any European navy'.[7] The Royal Air Force will continue to contribute patrols in Northern and Southeastern Europe, and provide 'significant intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities', air-to-air refuelling and strategic transport as well as fourth and fifth generation combat aircraft. The Army commits to provide the land component of the NATO's high readiness joint task force in 2023, the land component of the inaugural Allied Reaction Force in 2024 and 'whilst maintaining our warfighting division…will also offer to strengthen, with Allies, the UK-led Allied Rapid Reaction Corps as a strategic reserve for NATO land forces'[8].

It is not clear how the UK is going to pay for all these commitments, especially the (somewhat carefully worded) final one. Declining purchasing power, some stark and inescapable capability shortfalls, and the UK's increasingly impoverished fiscal outlook suggest that the UK will be unable to finance its ambitions. The Army

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is in a particularly bad way, and unable to deploy its one warfighting division in accordance with its own tactical principles. As has happened repeatedly, the forward programme for defence, and the budget to pay for it, are not entirely compatible.

The impressive speed and extent of UK support to Ukraine has become synonymous with the idea that the UK is strong in its defence capabilities. Short of funds and with a defence procurement system that has been described as 'broken'[9], the UK's reputation as a reliable and capable ally in meeting its NATO commitments will be tested. Finland's accession to NATO—with its relatively powerful land forces and deep reserves—and the rapid and efficient rearmament of Poland add further contrast to the gap between the British Army's offer to NATO's new force model, and what it is likely to be able to deliver.

Resilience and Deterrence

As NATO has tried to persuade its members to give greater priority to resilience, it has insisted on a closer link between resilience and deterrence. Its 2021 Strengthened Resilience Commitment talked of national and collective resilience as 'an essential basis for credible deterrence and defence'[10]. Whereas resilience was barely mentioned in the 2010 document, the 2022 Strategic Concept stated that 'ensuring our national and collective resilience is critical to all our core tasks'[11], the first of which is deterrence and defence. Opening the April 2023 NATO Resilience Symposium, Deputy General Secretary Mircea Geoană made the same point, noting that 'resilience is fundamental to NATO's deterrence and defence'.[12] One year on from the Strategic Concept, the Vilnius summit communiqué repeated the mantra that 'National and collective resilience are an essential basis for credible deterrence and defence'.[13]

Defining resilience as a component of deterrence matters because it can help to set priorities for NATO's efforts to persuade Allies to take resilience more seriously. Since resilience remains a national responsibility, not a NATO one, and national priorities vary, NATO can only urge on the Allies from the sidelines; France is an outlier, believing that the European Union should lead on national and collective resilience.

NATO has gradually developed mechanisms for giving more prominence to the resilience agenda in its member states. It was only at the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw that allied leaders made a commitment to enhance NATO's resilience, based around the three core functions of civil preparedness: continuity of government, continuity of essential services to the population, and—implicit in Article 3 of NATO's 1949 founding treaty—civil support to military operations.

These core functions in turn were translated into seven baseline requirements for national resilience: continuity of government and critical services; resilient energy supplies; ability to cope with uncontrolled movement of people, and mass casualties; and resilient food and water supplies, civil communications, and transportation. The 2021 Strengthened Resilience Commitment then established the principle that NATO should review progress made by member states. The following year, NATO set up its Resilience Committee designed to set priorities, coordinate policy, and keep track of activities relating to resilience within the alliance.

The actual priorities being adopted are driven mainly by lessons from Russia's war in Ukraine, and by the transformation of competition with China from an economic to a national security concern. In June 2023, an EU-NATO Task Force on the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure published its Final Assessment Report.[14] The report concentrated on four sectors:

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energy, transport, digital infrastructure (including subsea assets), and space. The report was informed by a joint EU-NATO assessment of vulnerabilities and dependencies on actual and potentially hostile states, the main output of which is a resolution by the EU and NATO to work together on assessing threats, and on strengthening the ability of member states to be ready for and recover from—and therefore potentially deter - hostile acts by foreign states.

Beyond the 2022 Strategic Concept

The three NATO Strategic Concepts that spanned the post-Cold War years—published in 1991, 1999, and 2010—moved away from a strategy defined by a single dominant threat to one responding to the more subjective perception of multiple risks. As these perceived risks proliferated, the mismatch between resources and objectives grew, with Afghanistan delivering a knock-out blow to this conception of NATO strategy. The re-emergence of a clear and present threat from Russia was a powerful incentive to clarify and re-focus NATO's purpose. But the 2022 Strategic Concept has an apparent coherence that draws attention away from two unresolved long-term issues: the West's objectives for relations with Russia, and the impact of China's continuing rise on the US approach to NATO.

The simplifying assumption underlying the latest Strategic Concept is the need to contain Russia. There is no suggestion of how and under what circumstances, and to what purpose, NATO might seek a way of co-existing with Russia after the war with Ukraine; if and when the conflict ends or freezes, and after the requisite arrangements to underpin Ukraine's security are in place. It is understandable that there is no long-term objective for NATO-Russian relations written into the text of the Strategic Concept, but it needs to be thought through. Following the US presidential election in November 2024, US support for Ukraine could be lower than it is now. Apart from the domestic politics of supporting Ukraine, there are also concerns in US military circles that the US is already approaching the limit of what it can prudently do with its available resources.

NATO allies will not be able to thread their way through the complexities of post-war Ukraine, including the colossal costs of reconstruction, without a clearer view of what the end-state of NATO-Russia relations should be. The Strategic Concept proposes an apparently modest objective for Western relations with Russia of 'predictability and stability'.[15] But this would require a fundamental realignment of politics within Russia.

As the rivalry between the US and China deepens, the undertaking by NATO allies to work together 'to address the systemic

challenges posed by the PRC to Euro-Atlantic security'[16] will carry an increasingly heavy load. The US will expect its NATO allies to respond to its needs in the event of conflict in the Indo-Pacific, and they will have no option but to cooperate in full or risk jeopardising the underlying US commitment to the defence of Europe.

For NATO, the debate about the Indo-Pacific is primarily about the implications for burden-sharing in Europe. This debate will intensify, since US-China competition means that nothing is effectively now 'out of area' for NATO. This does not imply any commitment to NATO operations in the Indo-Pacific. The undertaking in the Strategic Concept to 'strengthen dialogue and cooperation with new and existing partners in the Indo-Pacific'[17] is regarded by NATO allies as part of the normal course of NATO's political business, as is the presence of Indo-Pacific powers at NATO summits. But it does imply the long-term imperative of Europe investing more in its own defence before the issue is forced upon it by another major conflict. ■

Endnotes

1   NATO, *2010 Strategic Concept*, paragraph 34.

2   NATO, *2022 Strategic Concept,* June 2022, paragraph 8.

3   Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America, Europe and the New World Order*, Knopf, New York, 2003.

4   *2022 Strategic Concept*, June 2022, paragraph 20.

5   Ministry of Defence, *Defence's Response to a More Contested and Volatile World*, CP 901, July 2023, p 61

6   Ministry of Defence, *Defence's Response to a More Contested and Volatile World,* CP 901, July 2023, p 57, 61.

7   CP 901, p 62.

8   CP 901, p 62

9   House of Commons Defence Committee, *It Is Broke and It's Time to Fix It: The UK's Defence Procurement System*, July 2023.

10 NATO, *Strengthened Resilience Commitment*, 14 June 2021, paragraph 4.

11 *2022 Strategic Concept,* Preface.

12 NATO News, *Deputy Secretary General: resilience is fundamental to NATO's deterrence and defence*, 26 April 2023.

13 NATO, *Vilnius Summit Communiqué,* July 2023, paragraph 61.

14 European Commission, EU-NATO Task Force on the Resilience of Critical Infrastructure, *Final Assessment Report*, June 2023.

15 *2022 Strategic Concept*, paragraph 9.

16 *2022 Strategic Concept*, paragraph 14.

17 *2022 Strategic Concept*, paragraph 45.

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One year on from NATO's Madrid 2022 summit, this Strategic Update address the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept and its implications for the future, especially regarding Russia's war on Ukraine. The paper addresses the misalignment between preparations for defence and the real state of its armed forces, the UK's symbolic support for Ukraine versus its capability, the concepts of resilience and deterrence, and finally the future of NATO's relationship with Russia.