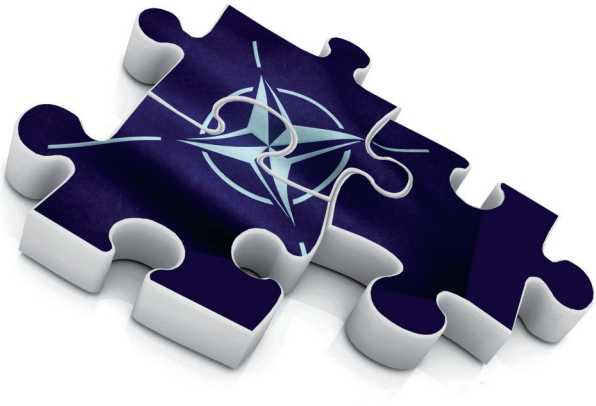

NATO and the Future Character of Warfare

JONNY HALL AND HUGH SANDEMAN

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NEW IDEAS, OLD REALITIES

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NATO has already done much of the theoretical work around the future character of warfare that will form part of its new Strategic Concept in 2022, the long overdue replacement for the 2010 Strategic Concept that was an immediate casualty of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. NATO is updating its policies for deterrence, elaborating new priorities for war fighting, and is working out how, in principle, the relatively new concept of multi-domain warfare should be integrated into NATO forces and operations.

As discussion within NATO and between its member states converges on the new 2022 Strategic Concept, it will be important to frame the debate in a way that communicates clearly with politicians and the public in member states. At this stage, the discourse about future warfare within NATO is rather abstract. There is also a temptation to focus too much on the technology of the battlefield when considering future warfare. While technology and new forms of contestation are changing the character of warfare, it would be misleading to over-emphasise this change. There is much that can be expected to stay the same, including the crucial role of the political will, the determination, and the resilience that enable the use of the new military tools that technology offers. It is these unchanging characteristics of warfare that will be essential to persuading the leaders and citizens of Allied powers, of the need for what NATO refers to as a 'genuinely strategic mindset' in response to multiple security threats.[1] At the same time, these multiple challenges to the security of the Alliance; from terrorism and human trafficking to climate

1 "NATO 2030: United for a New Era", 2020, 22.

change and China's rise; should not obscure the continuing primary threat to NATO arising from Russian national objectives.

This paper provides an initial update on NATO concepts of deterrence, future warfare and multi-domain operations, followed by comments on certain unchanging characteristics of warfare, and finally on the Russian way of warfare. Its principal recommendation, informed particularly by participants in the LSE IDEAS discussion who work on NATO's North West flank, is that discussion within NATO and among the Allies about political cohesion and national resilience needs to go significantly further than the renewed consensus about Alliance priorities urged by the NATO Reflection Group that was convened following the London Summit in December 2019. If NATO is serious about preparing for future warfare, it must certainly prepare for conflict with Russia. If there were to be such a conflict, Russia would seek to divide the Alliance through rapid offensive action, in which the political will, whole-of-society resilience and plain old-fashioned toughness of NATO member states would be decisive. This, and not just technology, is where thinking about future warfare needs to focus.

UPDATING NATO STRATEGY

As the NATO Reflection Group's November 2020 report pointed out, in underlining how outdated the Alliance's 2010 Strategic Concept had become, the 2010 Strategic Concept 'recommended cultivating a strategic partnership with Russia, made limited mention of terrorism, and no mention of China'.[2] After the Russian annexation of Crimea and incursions into Eastern Ukraine from 2014, however, the Alliance responded with what NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called 'the biggest reinforcement of collective defence' in a generation.[3] NATO members have subsequently increased defence spending for seven consecutive years. In 2017, NATO's North West flank was provided with an enhanced forward presence of four multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Multinational battlegroups were also deployed to the south-eastern part of the Alliance, with an increased air and sea presence in the Black Sea region. In 2018, the Allies committed to the NATO Readiness Initiative, putting in place by 2020 the capability to deploy 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons, and 30 naval combat vessels within 30 days' notice.[4]

2 Steven Keil, Heinrich Brauß, and Elisabeth Braw, "Next Steps in NATO Deterrence and Resilience", German Marshall Fund, June 2021; "NATO 2030: United for a New Era", NATO, November 2020, 16.

3 "Opening speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at NATO 2030 @ Brussels Forum", NATO, 2021.

4 Noticeably, these battlegroups include the four 'framework' members of NATO (Canada, Germany, UK, and US), meaning that any Russian attack in this region would almost certainly trigger a response from the entirety of NATO. Keil, Brauß, and Braw, "Next Steps in NATO Deterrence and R esilience", 5; "Opening speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg", 2021; "Brussels Summit Communiqué", 2021.

The task of re-engineering NATO's Strategic Concept lagged behind the military response. The Strategic Concept is the document that defines NATO's enduring purpose, nature and its fundamental tasks. Agreeing such a document in a large alliance is hard, and potentially divisive. It can also entail risks, with Russia working to open up disagreements between the US and Europe, and among European Allies, using a campaign of strategic intimidation (characterised by Julian Lindley-French as 5D continuous warfare: disinformation, destablisation, disruption, deception and (implied) destruction).[5] Other pressing priorities, combined with the US retreat from leadership during the Trump Administration, meant that the 2010 Strategic Concept was, for a number of years after 2014, left untouched. However, work continued within NATO to define an appropriate strategic response to Russian exploitation of 'unpeace'—harmful activity that falls short of legal and traditional conceptions of war, such as cyber attacks and disinformation campaigns.[6]

"The Strategic Concept is the document that defines NATO's enduring purpose, nature and its fundamental tasks. Agreeing such a document in a large alliance is hard, and potentially divisive"

NATO's new Military Strategy, signed by Allied Chiefs of Defence in May 2019, formalised a significant change in the Alliance's mindset. The Military Strategy recognised strategic competition and pervasive instability as characterising the strategic environment. The Military Strategy identified both Russia and terrorism as threats facing NATO, with its primary focus on the issue of deterrence against potential Russian aggression.[7] Furthermore, it recognised the need to move away from crisis response to contesting and countering these threats by developing a common capacity for competition and deterrent power at all times, and not just in crisis and defence. This moved NATO—at least in principle—from a reactive to a deliberate strategy for force deployment.

5 John Allen, Ben Hodges, Julian Lindley-French, *Future War and the Defence of Europe* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021), 111.

6 Lucas Kello, *The Virtual Weapon and International Orde*r (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017), 78, 145; "Brussels Summit Communiqué", 2021.

7 Sten Rynning, "Deterrence Rediscovered: NATO and Russia", in Osinga and Sweijs (eds.), *Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020*, 40-41.

“

It envisages the complex nature of modern warfare as a contest where deterrence must demonstrate a clear ability to defend, and where this defence is based on controlling multiple domains of warfare simultaneously

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As a first step towards implementing the 2019 Military Strategy, NATO agreed in 2020 a Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area, usually abbreviated to DDA. Though a classified document, DDA is described by NATO as ‘a single, coherent framework to contest and deter and defend against the Alliance’s main threats in a multi-domain environment’.[8] It broadens the concept of deterrence in the direction of contesting hostile acts, rather than fully preventing them. It envisages the complex nature of modern warfare as a contest where deterrence must demonstrate a clear ability to defend, and where this defence is based on controlling multiple domains of warfare simultaneously. This contrasts with the established, minimalist conception of deterrence which asserts that deterrence has worked if military attacks on Alliance members are prevented.[9]

A second step towards operationalising the 2019 NATO Military Strategy, also drafted in 2020, was a longer-term vision for the Alliance’s development of warfare, known as the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept. This is based on a 20-year perspective on the future characteristics of warfare.[10] The Capstone Concept identifies five ‘Warfare Development Imperatives’ to ensure NATO’s success in future warfare: ‘cognitive superiority’, ‘cross domain command’, ‘influence and power project’, ‘integrated multi-domain defence’, and ‘layered resilience’.[11]

8 “Brussels Summit Communiqué”, 2021.

9 See, for example, Opening speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, 2021.

10 “Brussels Summit Communiqué”, 2021; “NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept Introduction”, YouTube, 2021; “NATO’s Allied Command Transformation Holds Virtual Chiefs of Transformation Conference”, NATO, December 2020.

11 Samuel Zilincik, Martijn Vorm, and Ivor Wiltenburg, “The NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept: Key Insights from the Global Expert Symposium Summer 2020”, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2020, 7.

The analysis of future warfare, put forward in DDA and in the Capstone Concept, is grounded in the challenges of the era of unpeace. Among the Capstone Concept's warfighting imperatives, 'cognitive superiority' calls for NATO strategists to be able to better understand and outmanoeuvre belligerents with the aid of the latest technological developments.[12] 'Cross domain command' emphasises that NATO commanders should be able to 'operate in a complex battlespace simultaneously across physical and non-physical domains', which can only be 'nurtured through doctrine, training, education and leadership development'.[13] Similarly, 'integrated multi-domain defence' dictates that in 'an era of persistent competition', NATO could not simply 'switch on and off' its defensive posture, but rather must actively compete to ensure strategic success.[14] Though 'influence and power projection' is focused largely on hard power capabilities, this is still linked to the idea of active deterrence, and 'layered resilience' focuses on how NATO members can foster the ability to absorb the costs associated with acts of unpeace and even direct conflict.[15] The Capstone Concept attempts to provide a long-term vision of how NATO should engage with the future characteristics of warfare. The concept calls for long-term, structural changes to how NATO thinks about the use of force in deterrence and in the defence of the Euro-Atlantic area.

Although already explored in some depth in published strategy documents in the US (with its deadline of 2035 for fully converged operations) and the UK (notably in the September 2020 Integrated Operating Concept and related papers), multi-domain warfare has yet to be fully spelled out by NATO, with clarification from the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation expected shortly. NATO's concept of multi-domain operations and joint combined all-domain command and control will likely be associated with artificial intelligence and machine-learning systems. Though the extent to which all members of the Alliance will embrace the logic of multi-domain warfare remains to be seen. Implementation of multi-domain capabilities across NATO would encounter serious issues, including logistics, procurement, the sharing of technology and information, and the enormous costs such an endeavour would entail.

Clear communication by NATO's political and military leadership will be essential in making the case to member governments seeking preparation for a new approach to deterrence that proactively contests hostile behaviour rather than seeking only to react to an armed attack, and for a new approach to impending multi-domain warfare. Political leaders will not pay for something they do not understand.

12 Zilincik, Vorm, and Wiltenburg, "The NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept", 2020, 6.
13 Ibid, 7.
14 Ibid, 9.
15 Ibid, 8, 10.

RESILIENCE, COHESION, AND UNCHANGING CHARACTERISTICS OF WARFARE

The three specific qualities that Clausewitz identified as necessary to manage war—courage, fortitude, and determination—apply as much today as they have in the past.[16] These qualities are required not only in the front line, but among leaders and citizens facing terror and destruction at home. If the leadership of NATO member states do not have the courage, fortitude and determination to persevere against the hardship and fear that will accompany any peer-on-peer war, and the support of their citizens, they will be open to being coerced into submission. Advanced technology on the battlefield will not be enough.

There is a strong tendency, among NATO member states where there is active concern about the future of warfare, for the discussion to default to technology. In a very different context, Michael Howard worried about excessive concentration on technology more than four decades ago: 'we appear to be depending on the technological dimension of strategy to the detriment of its operational requirements, while we ignore its societal implications altogether—something which our potential adversaries, very wisely, show no indication of doing'.[17]

'Societal implications' are, of course, no longer wholly ignored, as policies for strengthening resilience have responded over the past two decades to the era of unpeace, brought on first by terrorism and then by new forms of great power competition. But there is a growing realisation that resilience—defined by NATO as the ability of states to absorb and recover from internal and external shocks—needs to be understood as an issue of political authority and leadership, and not just as preparation in various discrete sectors (cyber security, intelligence, supply chains), or even on a whole-of-society basis, against hostile acts.[18]

At the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit, Alliance leaders established seven baseline requirements for national resilience: assured continuity of government services, the ability to deal with the practical consequences of mass casualties and migration flows, along with having resilient energy supplies, food and water resources, communication networks, and transport

16 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Guilford, 1976 [1832]), 101.
17 Michael Howard, "The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy", *Foreign Affairs*, 57:5 (1979), 986.
18 Ralph Thiele, "Building Resilience Readiness against Hybrid Threats—A Cooperative European Union / NATO Perspective", Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy, 2016; "Resilience and Article 3", NATO, 2021.

systems.[19] The NATO 2030 reform agenda, announced at the June 2021 Brussels summit, 'agreed to strengthen the resilience of our societies' by developing specific objectives and goals for Alliance members.[20]

It was noticeable that the wording of the summit communiqué on the issue of resilience fell short of the suggestions made in the leadup to the Brussels meeting. Earlier this year, Secretary General Stoltenberg called for the adoption of a 'broader, more integrated and better coordinated approach to resilience'.[21] NATO's baseline requirements for resilience remain essentially apolitical, although resilience has a crucial political dimension.[22] In this era of unpeace, in which Russia and China have attempted to undermine political stability in democratic systems, 'resilience is often a measure of the public's confidence in… government', as seen in the varying responses of citizens to government directives regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.[23]

Different degrees of political resilience within member states of NATO will be mirrored in the cohesion of the Alliance as a whole, as it comes under pressure from external threats, hostile activity or attacks. The NATO Reflection Group's report was concerned with 'the question of how NATO should go about this task of enhancing political cohesion', pointing out that 'political divergences within NATO are dangerous because they enable external actors… to exploit intra-Alliance differences'.[24] The report concedes that differences among member states in their perception of threats cannot be wished away, as they reflect each state's understanding

"In this era of unpeace, in which Russia and China have attempted to undermine political stability in democratic systems, 'resilience is often a measure of the public's confidence in… government'"

19 "Resilience and Article 3", 2021.
20 "Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Heads of State and Government", NATO, June 2021.
21 Jens Stoltenberg, "Food for Thought Paper: NATO 2030 - a Transatlantic agenda for the Future", 2021.
22 Van Doorn and Brinkel, "Deterrence, Resilience, and the Shooting Down of Flight MH17", 370.
23 Elisabeth Braw (ed.), "Revamping Crisis Resilience and Security in the Post-Pandemic World", RUSI, 2020, 7.
24 "NATO 2030: United for a New Era", 2020, 9, 10.

of its own unique interests. The report does, however, note NATO should aim for at least some greater 'convergence of political and strategic priorities'.[25]

THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WARFARE

This limit to NATO's cohesion is central to Russian thinking about future warfare in Europe. Russian caution about the ability to prevail against a united NATO alliance in a prolonged conflict is consistent with a focus on the initial stages of conflict, and on exploiting the potentially divisive political impact on NATO of a sudden outbreak of hostilities followed by a rapid *fait accompli*. Any such operation would likely be designed to fragment NATO as swiftly as possible, undermining the coherent political and military response needed for rapid reinforcement, general mobilisation, timely escalation, and the restoration of deterrence.

Russia would seek to impose its own rules of warfare in any conflict with NATO, as it did in Crimea.[26] It could exploit NATO's lack of nuclear deterrence in Europe, where Russia has developed and exercised the forces and strategies needed for threatening to use nuclear weapons, for the purposes of sudden escalation. Alternatively, Russia could deploy calibrated kinetic terror against a NATO state or part of a state, to demonstrate the costs of a wider war. Cyber sabotage could also be widely used for the same purposes. All these actions—in line with the strategies of unpeace and information warfare—would be aimed at fragmenting the unity within NATO that would be necessary for a coherent political and military response.[27] The fundamental objective would be a realignment of political forces in Europe, rather than seizing and holding territory. The importance of speed in bringing pressure to bear on NATO, and in achieving rapid military and political impact, was demonstrated in the Russian mobilisation of troops and armour on the eastern border of Ukraine in April 2021.

In contrast to the West, Russia has explicitly linked resilience to the possibility of war, reflecting a close integration of the political and military aspects of security. It has sought to instil among the Russian public a degree of resilience to the possible impact of conflict, by means of domestic propaganda and warnings concerning the ongoing dangers of nuclear war.[28] In this respect, Russia appears to be focused as much on characteristics of war that remain unchanged, as it is on technological and other determinants of future warfare.

25 Ibid.

26 Scott Boston and Dara Massicot, "The Russian Way of Warfare", RAND Corporation, 2017.

27 Conor Cunningham, "A Russian Federation Information Warfare Primer", RAND Corporation, 2020.

28 Tomila Lankina and Kohei Watanabe, "'Russian Spring' or 'Spring Betrayal'? The Media as a Mirror of Putin's Evolving Strategy in Ukraine", Europe-Asia Studies 69, no. 10 (2017): 1526-1556; Patrick Reevell, "7 Ways Russia Is Telling People to Prepare for War", ABC News, 2016.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Looking ahead to the debate around the drafting of the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept, the following conclusions and recommendations emerge from this discussion.

Defence-mindedness. Future warfare can be expected to penetrate even more deeply into our societies and into our politics, than was the case with 'total war' in the past. The daily intrusions of hostile actions by foreign powers during our current unpeace are a vivid testimony to this threat. Resilience needs to be at the heart of NATO's future strategic approach. In addition, NATO can only close the current gaps between the threat perceptions of its members, and hence enhance its cohesion, if political leaders take responsibility for being more open with citizens about the changing character of those threats. Similarly, there needs to be transparency regarding the costs and sacrifices that could be needed to defend their security in the face of future warfare.

Communication. NATO has yet to communicate effectively its understanding of future warfare. It remains difficult to understand what NATO really thinks about deterrence and multi-domain warfare, on the basis of discussion of abstract documents that remain classified. NATO's transparency is a great strength, but its poor communication so far on the new Military Strategy, on the DDA and on the thinking of future warfare, is an(other) example of a collective failure to educate the populations of Alliance member states on the nature of contemporary threats. A template for a more open discussion on future warfare was provided in the UK Ministry of Defence's Introduction to the Integrated Operating Concept.[29]

Deterrence. Maintaining deterrence in future against actions of hostile powers (and non-state actors) will involve a continual contest, and often asymmetric, rather than binary, responses. There is a need to develop new concepts for describing the posture and effects that will credibly convey to adversaries the potential costs, to them, of hostile actions against Allies.

Technology. While it is important not to equate future warfare with deployment of new technology, the investment needed to operationalise the capability for multi-domain warfare will be very substantial. Even among NATO members states that have given serious consideration to future warfare, notably the UK, there is a gap between recognising the role of new technology, and the priorities reflected in budgetary commitments. NATO needs to encourage a clear path in defence spending from all its members towards integrated multi-domain capabilities.

29 Ministry of Defence, Integrated Operating Concept, September 2020, p 2 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-integrated-operating-concept-2025

Unchanging characteristics of warfare. NATO's discussion on the future of warfare, in preparation for the next Strategic Concept, would be greatly assisted by maintaining attention on those characteristics of warfare that remain unchanged. These include; the primacy of political will, decisiveness, tenacity, and the calculated infliction of violence. In the absence of political determination in the face of new security threats at the level of NATO member states, and a lack of the necessary cohesion between NATO members that follows, technical preparations for future warfare will remain inadequate. ■

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