

## Discussion Article

# NATO's strategic thinking in the changing security environment

*Tiina Mac Intosh, Policy Officer, European Commission, DG Defence Industry and Space*

## Abstract

Some argue that the Russian invasion of Ukraine caused NATO to change course and put more emphasis on Collective Defence, which as we know, was the initial intent of the 1949 Washington Treaty. I contest that argument by explaining that the NATO has never lost sight of this initial intent. In its Strategic Concepts NATO has always maintained Collective Defence as one of its core tasks. In response to the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea in 2014, it had just stepped up its efforts to be prepared to defend the Euro-Atlantic area - witness the expressions of political will at subsequent NATO Summits and the increased defense budgets of its member states.

## Keywords

NATO, collective defence, strategic thinking, Russia

## Introduction

To say that NATO found its purpose again with the 2022 Russian war against Ukraine is a misleading perception. The war sharpened the focus of the alliance, for sure, but it is worth emphasising that the strengthening of NATO's deterrence and defence already started years ago. Therefore, the war was not a total eye-opener to NATO. The long-term development of an alliance is the result of natural evolution of strategic environments and geopolitical phases. International relations are cyclical, oscillating between calmer and more turbulent times. Alliances are children of the times they live in, and they tend to adapt to new paradigms over time.

The end of the Cold War, the rise of international terrorism, out-of-area crisis management operations, and a more cooperative Russia led to the situation where territorial defence of the Euro-Atlantic area was not the most burning question that NATO had to address. During 1990s and early 2000s NATO, however, adapted to those new realities without bigger fuss and transformed itself first into a crisis management machine and later more into a wider political-military forum, emphasizing new military and non-military threats and challenges. Yet questions of its unavoidable death started to spread.

Past years, however, show that NATO has been on the right path at the right time. It has never abandoned its original purpose and the core task it has always held dear. Since its inception, deterrence and defence have always remained as main tasks of the Alliance, sometimes more, sometimes less, but still there. The Washington Treaty in general and the Article 5 in particular have never been in jeopardy, even though the Allies' domestic political waves have shaken its foundation every now and then.

## Understanding NATO

NATO has survived surprisingly well, but this has not created a wider scholarly interest to better understand the Alliance. Hyde-Price (2016, p. 22) notes that there has been less research on NATO than the European Union, and studies have been more policy-oriented and empirical. Policy-focus is understandable but theories in International

Relations could help to explain why NATO has endured. They offer interesting insights into explaining the resilience of the Alliance in better and worse times.

The fate of the Alliance has been analysed, for example, through institutionalist or neorealist lenses. Debates on whether institutions can survive the loss of common (military) threats have been one way to interpret the situation. Institutionalism offers one point of view to analyse the role of the alliance, showing that also other factors than a common threat can favour the survival of an alliance—such as common interests, norms, and other institution-supporting factors (Schimmelfennig, 2016, pp. 93–115). This contradicts with the common belief that NATO “needs” a strong adversary or a military threat to be a legitimate actor. NATO survived when military threats were weaker, proving neorealist theories incorrect.

A neorealist explanation for institution survival is that states form and join alliances when confronting a threat, and that institutions dissolve when that threat disappears (Schimmelfennig, 2016, p. 99). Wallander (2000, pp. 705–735), however, has noted that NATO's role has always been wider than pure defence against the Soviet threat, which in reality was proved right during times of the peace dividend and so called new (non-military) threats. But neorealists have not been totally wrong. If not threats, at least some kind of challenges have always been there uniting the alliance. Schimmelfennig (2016, pp. 103–104) rightly underlines that the Soviet threat provided such a strong focus to the allies that cooperation overruled possible differences—just like happened after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and has lately happened in the Russian War on Ukraine.

Collectively, NATO has to this day remained united—excluding perhaps the timing of the ratification process concerning new Alliance members. It can be argued that a common adversary helps the strengthening of the alliance in both political and practical matters, but alliances can and will survive also during normal times when threat is not that persistent. Even without visible threats NATO remained necessary and, most importantly, kept the core tasks intact.

Peaceful times did not pass by without war wounds though. During the “interbellum”, the evolution of the Alliance combined with weaker military threat perceptions from 1990s until 2014. This era had very concrete and real consequences. Many NATO members decided to cash-in “the peace dividend”, leaving only a few members to meet NATO’s target of minimum 2 % of their Gross Domestic Product on defence spending up till the 2020s. Building defence capabilities takes decades, and the current need to strengthen the capabilities to deter and defend—and in the worst case to fight a large-scale war—differ drastically from those required for crisis management operations.

Military mobility, stocks, logistics, and equipment have to be reconstituted, while new requirements are born from the current strategic environment, such as the need for more heavy or high-end capabilities, high technology, innovations, use of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies, cyber and space capabilities, precision systems, new concepts, and ways of warfare. Meanwhile, Eastern European and Baltic countries’ warnings about Russia fell long on deaf ears in most NATO capitals. On the contrary, Russia became a friend and a NATO partner.

## Russian Roulette

In 1994, Russia was recognised as the first Partnership for Peace country, starting a decades long cooperation with NATO. Neither Russia’s 2008 war in Georgia nor the annexation of Crimea in 2014 or the use of chemical agents on British soil in 2018 were strong enough wake-up calls. The West was still on appropriate speaking terms with Moscow and these events were seen more like unpleasant disturbances in an otherwise working relationship. But in February 2022 the Russian Federation decided to start the unjustified aggression against Ukraine and “masks came off” as Finnish President Sauli Niinistö described the grim situation.

Was this a total eye-opener to NATO? Does it need to recreate itself all over again? Did this cause NATO to collect itself and rebuild its identity? Did this “save” NATO? The response is a blunt “no” if one takes past years’ developments into account. The focus on

preparations for large scale operations for collective defence was a little bit lost during the past decades, but wiping off the dust of defence plans happened relatively quickly. If we look at the speed of NATO’s decision-making since the 2014 Wales Summit, the pace has actually been pretty impressive. Critics might of course argue that concrete results remained moderate and rebuilding of defence capabilities will take years as defence spending has been and to some extent remains insufficient. Nevertheless, without these efforts and consistent political guidance, 2022 would have been an even crueller eye-opener for NATO.

Even five or six years ago times looked different. Conventional war on European soil was seen as belonging way back to history, as an outdated and unrealistic scenario. Looking back to 2017, Shirreff’s chilling book *War with Russia* was casually reviewed in the old NATO Headquarters’ canteen with amused curiosity but also with slightly irritated criticism. The scenario presented in the book is not yet reality, but we are witnessing a war in Europe for the first time in decades. It has also proven right that war, destruction, and power politics cannot be eliminated. What are the implications for NATO?

## Back into shape: deterrence and defence matters

*“The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.” (NATO Strategic Concept 2022)*

Strategic cultures change slowly. Strategic consistency has been a working choice for NATO. The direction does not change overnight and NATO’s character as a consensus organisation means that all the members have agreed on its political guidance, the level of ambition, and planning. This provides NATO political glue that holds it together. In 2019, France’s president Emmanuel Macron called NATO “brain dead” and questioned its commitment to collective defence. This caused a political stir. But it seems that neither the decades long war in Afghanistan nor the lately hyped US “pivot to Asia” caused the Alliance to forget the importance of defending the Euro-Atlantic area.

NATO has been on the right track far longer than since February 2022. The Warsaw summit in 2016 enhanced its deterrence and defence efforts that have been on the agenda since. This agenda has not raised huge media or public interest and rightly so. The alliance has been transparent but not too transparent, using strategic communication selectively to deter adversaries and inform taxpayers but not reveal too much of the work that has been conducted behind the scenes.

Zooming closer into both policies and actions of the alliance, there is still no doubt who has been the main adversary to deter and defend against. The Alliance started to pay more attention to the military strengthening of Russia's Western District, Russia's SSC-8 -violation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), military modernisation, and build-up. NATO members also stood united on Russia's breach of the INF Treaty during times when hybrid influencing was Russia's modus operandi. Russia's President Vladimir Putin begun to more openly talk of "Russkiy mir" (*Russian world*) to strengthen Russia's Great Power aspirations and to construct the Western threat. Roots of this thinking can be traced back to 2007 when Putin addressed the Munich Security Conference. Things were about to change.

After 2014 and especially in 2016, NATO reacted and started to increase its readiness and responsiveness, decision-making, and resilience. In 2019 and 2020 the Alliance adopted a bunch of documents such as the new Military Strategy followed by the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept and a Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area. All these developments tell a story of a united threat perception although there surely have been differences in terms of how severely the threat is perceived and how to address it.

## The New Cold War?

Many analysts compare the current security situation to the Cold War. Heavy tanks are rolling on European soil and Russian troops are conducting brutal military campaigns. It would be easy to draw an equal sign between these eras, but the situation is much more nuanced and complex. This has been

a war of both conventional equipment and new technologies. The increasing use of drones and space-based capabilities have, if not altered, at least changed the course of war. For NATO, getting back into shape has not been only a physical exercise but also a mental one to achieve a solid political unity and guidance for the most important work-strand of deterrence and defence. Political decisions to strengthen collective defence mean the need for more resources. Rebuilding warfighting capabilities is not a cheap project.

Troops need the right equipment, training and exercising up to brigade or even divisional level, and high-end warfighting capabilities are more and more expensive. Threat-based planning takes into account capabilities that adversaries are developing (whether Russia or the challenge of China in a longer term), meaning that maintaining a technological edge requires more high technology and innovations. In future, both conventional and unconventional, kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities matter as brute force is not enough. More precision, speed, and information are needed. This is not the Cold War that we used to know. Conventional weaponry and numbers do and will count, but the additional layer comes from a more multi-domain environment, adding cyber and space elements into the warfighting concepts.

Many lessons will be drawn from Russia's failures in Ukraine. It has demonstrated the weak condition of both Russian military and strategic thinking, Russian mismatch between its doctrine and reality on the ground, and Russian willingness to sacrifice its troops. It has also demonstrated the capability and will of an underdog to defend itself and even to penetrate into operational depth of the aggressor. Finally, Russia's warfare has demonstrated the importance of information warfare as well as space and cyber capabilities. In brief, Putin's Russia made a big miscalculation that cannot be fixed. Will this be the end of the current administration? President Putin will be eligible for a re-election in 2024, but Russian *siloviki* will most probably remain in power in one way or another.

## Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw from this? NATO has been both praised and blamed for not intervening in Ukraine but NATO naturally reacts behind the scenes, following the situation and altering its course with political guidance. The direction is there and most importantly, the political will has lately been there. Of course, the change is slow and painful, revealing possible gaps with capabilities, resources, and skills. But NATO's unity has held despite the alliance facing a tense and difficult situation. This situation was, however, threatened when a missile killed two people in Poland, which raised concerns of a Russian attack on a NATO country, possibly leading to the invocation of the Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. The world was holding its breath. It was a false alarm this time, luckily.

NATO has been acting in unison with the European Union, which has imposed unprecedented sanctions against Russia while providing comprehensive support to Ukraine. Russia's war also caused close NATO partners Finland and Sweden to submit applications for NATO membership, permanently changing the geostrategic environment in Northern Europe. Even though the step to take is a big one for both the Nordic states, they do not start from scratch as they have had an ever increasing, close cooperation with the Alliance since 2014 (as Enhanced Opportunities Partners).

To say that NATO just figured out its commitment to collective defence is therefore an understatement. The focus is of course strengthened and concretised by the events of the past year, but the development was already ongoing and moving forward. What is the way forward for NATO? Like the past year showed, forecasting the future is not an easy task. Russia's war against Ukraine came as a cold shower for many and its course is difficult to predict. The course of the war has not followed any expected logic. NATO, however, will continue to follow its logic, taking care of its deterrence and defence.

*The discussion article is based on my experiences as a Defence Counsellor for Finland during 2017–2022 as well as my PhD studies background material (unpublished) at the National Defence University of Finland. Opinions are my own and not of my employer.*

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