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## One Plus Four: what NATO's new Strategic Concept should say, and how to achieve it

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### Analysis

NATO's current Strategic Concept, the Alliance's guiding document, was adopted in 2010. It is woefully out of date. Its message is emblematic of a bygone age of relative stability, in which the prevailing assumption across the North Atlantic was that the continent's divisions would be overcome by a magnetic, largely unchallenged and gradually expanding Western-led order. In that order, eastern Europe and eventually Russia could potentially find a place, the US would continue as an affirmative European power, and China –far from NATO planners' minds– would continue to develop as a regional power and 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system. Military tensions and military forces would be reduced, and growing interdependencies would lower conflict and generate greater security and prosperity. 'The Euro-Atlantic area is at peace and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low', the document declares. Challenges to transatlantic security appeared to emanate far from European shores, particularly terrorism and tensions across the Broader Middle East.

That age of stability is a paradigm lost. Today, NATO and other European and Euro-Atlantic institutions must be repositioned to address a more volatile age of disruption. Critical societal functions of our democracies are increasingly susceptible to disturbances, interruptions, and shutdowns. New and emerging technologies are changing the nature of competition and conflict. The speed of innovation makes pace as important as space to Euro-Atlantic security. Digital transformations are upending the foundations of diplomacy and defence. Policy makers accustomed to protecting territory must consider how to protect our connectedness. Climate change and energy transitions pose security dilemmas for which the Alliance remains unprepared. Europe's periphery has turned from a ring of friends to a ring of fire.

Through Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, its military intervention in eastern Ukraine, and its use of energy, cyber and other instruments as political tools, Vladimir Putin has delivered a clear three-fold message: (1) hard power matters; (2) borders in Europe can still be changed by force; and (3) Russia is intent on expanding the arena of competition to disturb and damage the critical functions of other societies. China's economic reach, its rapid technological progress and growing military

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capabilities, its global diplomacy geared to very different norms, and its vast resource needs render it a world-class challenger. Its investments in strategic industries and ports, its challenges to the global commons, and its entente with Russia, which includes arms cooperation and maritime exercises in the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas, has made it a power in Europe itself.

On top of these challenges, after years of turbulence Europeans wonder about the US commitment to the Alliance. The Biden Administration has an opportunity to use the current Strategic Concept review to reassure America's allies about US staying power, generate new unity and update NATO's tasks and tools for the age of disruption.

### (1) One Plus Four: what a new Strategic Concept should say

As of the time of writing the Biden Administration's approach to a new Strategic Concept continues to evolve. There is a general sense that the Alliance's three 'core tasks' of collective defense, crisis management and cooperative security, which featured in the 2010 Concept, remain important and should be preserved. But Administration officials are keenly aware that each of the three core tasks needs to evolve to meet disruptive threats and a range of new challenges to the Alliance. There is also a recognition that the Alliance must be able to perform each of these core tasks by incorporating military tools into a broader array of diplomatic, political and economic instruments.

NATO's own internal debates thus far reflect this basic framing. There seems to be broad consensus already on the threats and challenges posed by Russia, and on ways the Alliance's multi-domain defense and deterrence posture must be adapted. On a number of other issues, however, individual Allied views diverge in certain respects. Five areas in particular could prove more challenging to achieve consensus: (1) how to address issues of democratic resilience; (2) how to address the China challenge; (3) the appropriate relationship between NATO and the EU; (4) what lessons for crisis management can be drawn NATO's 20-year mission in Afghanistan; and (5) the future of arms control, including nuclear issues but also the impact of emerging disruptive technologies.

With this in mind, I argue that the approach taken by the US and its NATO allies should be guided by what one might call 'One Plus Four': affirming the singular importance of Alliance cohesion; bolstering NATO's ability to perform its three core tasks of collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security; and adding a fourth core task focused on the Alliance's role in strengthening resilience against disruptions to critical societal functions.

### (2) The 'One': building alliance cohesion

NATO's role as a defensive alliance of democracies has been weakened by assaults on democratic institutions and values in a number of allied countries, including the US. Reaffirming our common commitment to this foundational purpose as the basis upon which NATO must conduct its activities will be the most important element of a new Strategic Concept.

The preamble to the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty that established NATO states that the signatories 'are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law'. Article II declares, 'The Parties will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions'. Nonetheless, today our democracies are under assault from within and without. NATO allies themselves are manipulating information and distorting data, engaging in direct cyberattacks on their opponents, undermining democratic processes and the rule of law, even threatening each other. In this new world of dangers, not only are fragile democratic allies more vulnerable to subversion through corruption, information warfare and blackmail, malign influence within such states could mean that Russia or other non-NATO allies could, in effect, enter into the NATO decision-loop.

Because the Alliance operates by consensus, it does not currently have provisions for sanctioning or suspending wayward members. Efforts to expel them would probably prove counter-productive. The Strategic Concept review offers a process through which allies can assess mechanisms to uphold their mutual commitment to strengthen their 'free institutions'. Proposals range from some version of qualified majority voting and monitoring powers for the Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs to barring errant members from common NATO projects or common funding, or even establishing oversight procedures by an independent NATO Inspector General. Regular review of allied commitments to democratic principles enshrined in the North Atlantic Treaty preamble could be an important outcome of an updated Strategic Concept. We should be clear-eyed, however, that achieving consensus on these elements will be difficult.

### (3) The 'Four': collective defence, crisis management, cooperative security and comprehensive resilience

#### *(3.1) Collective defence and deterrence*

Collective defence and deterrence remain central to NATO's purpose. The Administration supports two key initiatives stemming from the NATO 2030 programme launched at NATO's Brussels Summit. The first is the Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA). The second is NATO's Warfighting Capstone Concept. Both are opportunities to set forth NATO's military priorities and its approach to current and future threats. As they develop further, they will provide a guide to commanders for future security requirements and resources.

The US is particularly keen on ensuring that the Alliance can bridge current and future gaps in its ability to maintain its military and technological edge in an 'all domain' battlespace. Allies must enhance deterrence, including through new military technologies, greater readiness, improved military mobility, more effective and rapid decision-making, and the continued need for arms control and incident management.

That includes ensuring the Alliance is prepared to counter an aggressive Russia. In addition to its military interventions in neighbouring countries and its conventional and nuclear buildups, in recent years Moscow has been steadily constructing a set of anti-access/area denial outposts, from the Baltic and Black Seas to the Mediterranean, that

can offer Moscow a cheaper version of 'strategic depth' than was provided by the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War.

Advancing the Alliance's ability to deter and defend also means prioritising ways to deal with unconventional conflicts that might hover just below the Alliance's Article 5 mutual defence threshold –for instance, some types of cyberattacks, energy intimidation, election interference and disinformation campaigns–. Such dynamics will have to take account of the immediate concerns of exposed allies, and broader global concerns that affect all allies, such as China's growing influence.

Enhanced measures of deterrence and defense should be reinforced by NATO's readiness to engage with Moscow –not as a favor to Putin, but in our own interests–. Those include counter-terrorism and avoiding incidents at sea, on land, in the air and in space. NATO must also consider its coordinating role in broader strategy relative to Russian influence operations, including Moscow's own 'second strike' options on sanctions (such as stopping energy flows to key NATO allies), which can create non-military pressures that could freeze NATO from acting in a crisis.

### *(3.2) Crisis management*

The Alliance must continue to be able to reduce threats, prevent and respond to crises in its immediate neighborhood, and help address crises outside its area of responsibility that could affect Alliance interests. This core task has dominated the business of the Alliance for most of the past two decades. It has included NATO operations in Afghanistan and Libya, training missions in Iraq, operations against ISIS, counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia, naval operations to deal with the continuing refugee flows coming to Europe from the south and counter-terrorism operations in the Mediterranean Sea.

In many of these areas the EU and individual European allies play important roles, and have the potential to do even more. The US and Canada have a real interest in a more capable Europe that can address such challenges. In two statements together with French President Emmanuel Macron, US President Joe Biden has affirmed US support for 'a stronger and more capable European defense that contributes positively to global and transatlantic security and is complementary to NATO', for 'European Allies' and Partners' growing investments in the military capabilities that enable our shared defense', for 'strengthening the NATO-EU strategic partnership', which is 'unique and essential for the security and prosperity of our nations and of the Euro-Atlantic area', and for a 'US-EU dialogue on security and defense'.<sup>2</sup>

With this in mind, European allies should define a European Level of Ambition within NATO and align NATO and EU capabilities so that Europe can be the 'first responder' when it comes to crisis management operations in and along its periphery. NATO would continue to engage as needed, but Europe should take the lead.

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<sup>2</sup> See the US-France Joint Statements of 22 September and 29 October 2021 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/29/united-states-france-joint-statement/>.

### *(3.3) Cooperative security*

The Alliance has defined cooperative security primarily in terms of working on common security challenges together with other partners. This task remains important. NATO has more partners than members. Partners provide significant political support to the Alliance and can also contribute substantial military forces. NATO's partners are a significant asset that can enhance the capabilities of the Alliance at low cost. Key partnerships with Sweden and Finland can evolve further.

As of the time of writing, Administration thinking on cooperative security has yet to mature, beyond a sense that such partnerships should be 'interest-driven' in terms of what added value they might bring to the Alliance. There is still opportunity for creative thinking in this space.

With this in mind, NATO should consider supplementing its Enhanced Operational Partnership with Australia with similar arrangements with Japan and South Korea. Partnerships with Ukraine and Georgia are in flux, with each partner seeking NATO membership, but without allied consensus to take such a step. The Alliance should consider deeper deterrent and resilience initiatives that make those partnerships more operationally meaningful.

A new Strategic Concept has the potential to anchor an operational partnership with the EU that will leverage additional resources for the Alliance, help it deal with a range of civil-military and unconventional challenges, shore up democratic standards and shared resilience, and perhaps even lead to a 'military Schengen', easing cross-border movements, mirroring the EU's own civilian Schengen zone.

Today, however, cooperative security must evolve beyond earlier understanding to encompass challenges to the global commons. The Alliance is an important actor in at least four dimensions of the global commons: (1) protecting freedom of the seas; (2) upholding the global information commons; (3) ensuring security and norms of peaceful behaviour in space; and (4) protecting Alliance equities in Arctic security. China's activities pose challenges in all four areas. Such challenges can only be addressed cooperatively with a range of non-NATO state and non-state actors. In some areas, NATO will not be the lead institution, but it can offer specialised capabilities. In other areas, for instance protecting freedom of navigation, it needs to be equipped to play a leading role.

### *(3.4) A new core task: comprehensive resilience*

Joe Biden has called on the US to 'lead its democratic allies and partners in increasing their resilience'. The growing need to implement operationally the concept of resilience –the ability to anticipate, prevent and, if necessary, protect against and bounce forward from disruptions to critical functions of our societies– has become a challenge on par with NATO's other core tasks, and is in fact essential to the other three, yet it has not been adequately integrated into allied planning or operational activities beyond country-by-country baseline requirements. NATO's efforts thus far betray a static understanding of resilience, which encompasses a wide range of dynamic interconnections. The

Administration is keen on developing the concept further; here, too, there is opportunity for new thinking.

In this context, I contend that NATO needs to adopt comprehensive resilience as a fourth core task. The Alliance must move from a static, country-by-country approach to resilience and operationalise two more dynamic concepts. The first is 'shared resilience'. Given Europe's deep interconnections, it does not matter how resilient one ally is if its neighbour is not. The second concept is 'forward resilience'. Allies have an interest in projecting resilience capabilities forward to weak neighbouring partner countries, such as Ukraine, Western Balkan countries and states along NATO's southern flank.

Corrosive cyber operations, disruptions to defence-relevant supply chains and the COVID-19 pandemic have each underscored the need for the Alliance to address more effectively unconventional challenges to human security. Comprehensive resilience would also include efforts to withstand hybrid attacks on NATO societies and political will. NATO will also be impacted by global warming and efforts to deal with it may eventually require the capabilities of NATO militaries for things like emergency rescue and logistics support. This is also an area in which a more effective NATO-EU partnership can contribute. Resilience is a job for NATO, but it need not be a job for NATO alone. Enhanced NATO-EU cooperation offers a means to leverage the combined resources of both organisations in common cause.

One Plus Four: a NATO that is more cohesive, capable, balanced and resilient – an Alliance prepared for the Age of Disruption.

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**Disclaimer:** The Elcano Royal Institute is launching a series of publications with the aim of feeding into the emerging debate around NATO's Strategic Concept by providing a collective and national approach to the future of NATO. Selected national experts from different NATO allies (United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Portugal and Poland) have contributed to the series by portraying the current debate in their home countries around the Strategic Concept and the future of the Alliance. Thus, the Elcano Royal Institute seeks to highlight the importance of the renewal of the Concept and its adoption at the Madrid Summit, to be held in Madrid in June 2022.