


NATO gets an update: the Madrid Strategic Concept

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Theme

NATO has convened a summit for heads of state and government in Madrid in June 2022 to approve a new Strategic Concept to update the 2010 Lisbon Strategic Concept.

Summary

NATO is set to update its Strategic Concept in Madrid in order to align its political and military directives to the new strategic context after a decade of changes that include such major events as the Libya campaign, the Russian invasion of Crimea, the disputes between US and European leaders surrounding NATO and strategic autonomy, [Brexit](#), disruptive technologies and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, among many other events justifying its overhaul.

The Madrid Strategic Concept will need to focus on key questions for the NATO allies including strengthening the transatlantic bond, tailoring deterrence and defence to new threats, defining NATO's role in the strategic rivalry between [China](#) and the US, cataloguing and prioritising NATO's principal functions, reviewing the distribution of the financial burden, considering disruptive technologies and galvanising partnerships, among others.

This paper sets out the main elements of each debate and their possible repercussions for national security and defence interests, and this will be followed by similar analyses that the Elcano Royal Institute has commissioned from experts in seven leading allies (the US, the UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Portugal) to ascertain their respective countries' approach to the Madrid Strategic Concept. Once these have been published, the Institute will draw up an overall analysis from the Spanish perspective with specific recommendations for the government of Spain.

Analysis

NATO's strategic concepts delineate the way in which the organisation and its allies intend to respond to the challenges, threats and opportunities that any given moment of time may present to its security and defence. They codify what has changed in the security context in the years leading up to their ratification and lay down what needs to change within the organisation in the years that follow, using political and military guidelines to enable the organisation to adapt its functions and capabilities to the new

strategic context.¹ This internal reflection exercise, which serves to bolster cohesion between the allies, is followed by a strategic communication exercise aimed at its populations, partners and rivals, harnessing ratification of a new Strategic Concept and the presence and official statement of heads of state and government at a summit, such as the one due to be held in Madrid on 27-28 June 2022, which will thus not be a typical summit, but will determine the approach of NATO and the allies for years to come.

Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary General, had intended to start the process of updating the Lisbon Strategic Concept prior to the 2019 summit held in London, but the political differences that existed between the allies militated against it. Instead, in early 2020 he convened a group of experts to conduct a non-official strategic reflection exercise: 'NATO 2030: United for a New Era'.² Its recommendations were made public after the presidential transition in the US and the last of them refers to the launch of a new Strategic Concept. Member countries' heads of state and government took up the challenge at their summit in Brussels in June 2021 and officially tasked the Secretary General with the review of the Strategic Concept as part of the NATO 2030 agenda.³

Although it is still too soon to ascertain the contents of the Madrid Strategic Concept, both the aforementioned NATO 2030 agenda and the announcement made by the North Atlantic Council in Brussels seem to indicate the main subjects to be addressed, prominent among which are: reinforcing the transatlantic bond; adapting NATO to an era dominated by strategic rivalry between great powers, which translates mainly into the need to strengthen deterrence against Russia and address the challenge of China; reviewing NATO's priorities (cooperative security and crisis management); the distribution of the financial burden between the US and Europe; resilience; technological innovation; partnerships; and the climate-security nexus.

The procedure for drafting the Madrid Strategic Concept involves a process in which all the member states are due to take part and the conclusions of which will have to be endorsed by the heads of state and government at the Madrid summit.⁴ Over the course of this procedure and during the months to come, member countries will develop their stances of each of the points of interest, which are set out in more detail below.

¹ For a description of earlier concepts, see Félix Arteaga (2010), 'El Nuevo Concepto Estratégico de la NATO: lógica y estructura', ARI nr 2/2010, Elcano Royal Institute, 8/1/2010.

² Reflection Group, 'NATO 2030: United for a New Era', 25/XI/2020.

³ The 'NATO 2030' agenda –as distinct from the earlier Reflection Group's report– was endorsed in June 2021; see https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/2106-factsheet-nato2030-en.pdf.

⁴ The previous Strategic Concept was drawn up by the NATO Secretary General following the recommendations of a group of experts led by Madeline Albright. This time, Secretary General Stoltenberg has contributed only with some of his own recommendations (NATO 2030. A Transatlantic Agenda for the Future), which are not binding in terms of drawing up the Madrid Strategic Concept.

The transatlantic bond

References to the importance of the transatlantic bond and the political nature of the Alliance are common to all the strategic concepts and play the role of a manner of prologue. The change of the strategic paradigm, however, led by the re-emergence of competition between great powers, and following the uncertainty created around transatlantic cohesion in recent years, undoubtedly make it one of the most important sections in the lead-up to the Madrid summit and Strategic Concept.

The restating of the bond is essential after a period of turbulence. The advent of Donald Trump as US President in January 2017, his unusually explicit criticisms of NATO and the European countries raised major doubts among the European allies regarding the US commitment to the defence of Europe and led them to push the 'strategic autonomy' agenda within the framework of the EU. The pivot to Asia and the importance placed on China by US Administrations completed a context of uncertainty in which the French President Emmanuel Macron went so far as to assert that NATO had become 'brain dead'. Added to this was the questioning in some countries of the democratic values and the rule of law that have maintained internal cohesion and require an unequivocal reaffirmation.

Against such a backdrop, it would appear essential for the Madrid Strategic Concept to consider certain aspects of the transatlantic bond such as the reaffirmation of the values of the North Atlantic Treaty, the centrality of NATO and its European allies for the US, NATO's response to the challenge presented by China and the security of the Asia-Pacific region, the validity of Article 5 and the reformulation of NATO-EU relations in order to incorporate the 'open' concept of European strategic autonomy. The Alliance is reluctant to acknowledge that relations between the two sides of the Atlantic no longer occupy the centre stage of global security. The Madrid Strategic Concept will have to reconcile the Europeans' security concerns on their doorstep with those of the US in the Indo-Pacific, with a distribution of roles and responsibilities. The emergence of China as a systemic challenge –albeit not yet as an adversary– to NATO presents the Europeans with the choice of whether to accompany the US in its geopolitical stand-off or to maintain their own strategy.⁵ The response that is given to the challenge of China may strengthen the transatlantic bond or accelerate its decline.

Transatlantic relations are founded upon values that unite the societies that share them as well as a collective identity nurtured during the Cold War. Amid the phenomenon of generational turnover, however, NATO's longevity has not been capable of rendering its values and identity immune to crisis, and there is a stark need to renew the transatlantic bond by means of a modern narrative for new generations, hence the centrality of the bond to the forthcoming Concept. It will need to strive to bolster the liberal rhetoric of values with the realist pragmatism of interests; strengthening of the transatlantic bond may be expected if the value that NATO adds to the day-to-day security of its members, societies and citizens is properly explained.

⁵ European Commission, 'EU-China: A Strategic Outlook', 12/III/2019.

Given the primacy of values to Spanish and European foreign policy and security, their reaffirmation will undoubtedly garner domestic support, as will the centrality of the transatlantic bond, as all the official documents reiterate.⁶ The latter also back the development of European strategic autonomy, in conjunction with NATO and the allies whenever possible and independently whenever necessary. It is a concept of autonomy that is also open to industrial and technological cooperation within the Alliance. It will be more difficult to determine the Spanish stance with regard to China and the Asia-Pacific, given its limited strategic presence in the region and the need to coordinate its position with the EU's foreign and security policy.

Deterrence and defence

NATO endorsed its posture of deterrence and defence after the ratification of the Lisbon Strategic Concept as a means of having a combination of capabilities appropriate to a range of possible scenarios.⁷ In the absence of a specific adversary, the capabilities to be established could only be generic, but the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and its burgeoning hostility forced the Alliance's military posture to be redefined. NATO had to deploy forces on its Eastern border to reassure the allies and strengthen its capacity for deterrence.

The Russian aggression forced the natural procedure to be inverted and, since 2014, NATO has had to adapt its deterrence and defence posture to the new situation without waiting for the formal review of the Lisbon Strategic Concept. It began by strengthening its reassurance and adaptation measures on its eastern flank (its Readiness Action Plan) in 2014,⁸ followed by a review of its military strategy (MC 400/4) in 2019, the adaptation of its defence and deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic region (Defence and Deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic Area, DDA) in 2020 and NATO's fundamental concept of combat (NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept, NWCC) in 2021.⁹ In recent years NATO's military authorities have thus been establishing the doctrine, goals and capabilities needed to confront the Russian threat before the political concept that will require them is approved.

The new military developments are not known in detail given their confidential nature, but amid a specific threat such as Russia's they will have been tailor-made to address it, and therefore will be less reactive than those envisaged in the current Strategic Concept, which are restricted to awaiting an armed attack before responding. The new military strategy will need to address the new forms of confrontation in all domains (land, sea, air, outer space and cyberspace) and in their conventional and non-conventional forms (hybrid war), a more proactive and anticipatory shift in focus that now requires a political justification. As matters stand, the necessity now arises of reconciling the political component of the Madrid Strategic Concept with the military strategy already adopted,

⁶ Among the most recent are: 2020 National Defence Directive, 11 June; 2020 Defence Policy Directive, 6 August; and Foreign Action Strategy, 2021-2024.

⁷ 'Deterrence and Defence Posture Review', Chicago Summit, 21/V/2012.

⁸ The Readiness Action Plan endorsed at the Cardiff Summit increased the size of the NATO Response Force (NRF) threefold, created the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VTJF) and eight general bases (NATO Force Integration Units) to strengthen the allied deployment in Eastern Europe.

⁹ Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning, 'NATO's Next Strategic Concept: Prioritise or Perish', *Survival*, vol. 63, nr 5, October-November, p. 147-168.

which could present problems if one or several allies disagree with the new terms of military planning.

Spain has contributed and will continue to contribute to collective deterrence on NATO's eastern borders, meaning that it will not be difficult to adapt itself to the new deterrence and defence guidelines from a military point of view. It may be more difficult to acknowledge the Russian Federation as a threat and to act accordingly from the political perspective, because Spanish strategic culture is reluctant to put a name to threats to national security and because adopting the necessary measures would incur major political and economic costs.

Russia, China and strategic competition

The North Atlantic Council described Russia's aggressive conduct as a 'threat' at its June 2021 meeting in Brussels,¹⁰ together with terrorism and other asymmetrical threats such as hybrid threats, disinformation and cyberattacks. Numerous acts jeopardising Euro-Atlantic security were listed and laid at Russia's door, and consequently Russia is going to provide the adversary that the Alliance lacked in the Lisbon Strategic Concept. With China, the Council's communiqué was more cautious: the country was described as a 'systemic challenge' to the international order and it was called upon to behave more responsibly within this order. However, while the NATO 2030 report drawn up by a group of experts did not deem China a 'military threat' like Russia, it placed it on an equal footing in terms of threat to the security of the Alliance.

The allies, including Spain, will need to endorse the characterisations in the Madrid Strategic Concept and the respective measures to reverse these types of behaviour. The measures to be taken against the Russian threat already seem to be defined in the new allied strategy, but it remains to be seen what measures are adopted against China. The allies are faced with the dilemma of how to address the geopolitical rivalry between China and the US and to take preventative measures to deter and defend their security interests against Chinese power in the European region, the scope of its global capabilities and, above all, the application of its disruptive technologies to erode NATO's military superiority.¹¹ In this context, the NATO 2030 report warns about China's strategy of civil-military fusion, whereby Beijing seeks to acquire the intellectual copyright and advances of European and Western research centres and companies with the goal of boosting its own military development.

All the foregoing presents the Madrid Strategic Concept with the need to use a public language of diplomacy that explains the reasons and consequences of returning to a strategy of deterrence and containment. This constitutes a significant communication effort because the allies and their citizens have become accustomed over the course of various decades to prioritise crisis management to the detriment of collective defence and deterrence. It was a habit they hurriedly had to abandon in 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea and required halting the freefall in military spending and committing

¹⁰ Brussels Summit Communiqué, 14/VI/2021.

¹¹ Agneska Bloch & James Goldgeiger (2021), 'Military and security developments involving the People's Republic of China 2021', US Defence Department report to Congress, 3/XI/2021.

to investing 2% of GDP by 2024 (NATO Defence Investment Pledge). Spain is not one of the allies most affected by geographical proximity to Russia or the Asia-Pacific, but it must share its allies' concern about the growing physical presence of these countries in its space of strategic interest in the Mediterranean and Africa and about the virtual reach of their hybrid capabilities to destabilise national security. The tendency of Spanish strategic culture is inclined to prioritise détente over deterrence, but it will have to revise this inclination if the Madrid Strategic Concept incorporates binding containment measures against the Russian and Chinese threats.

The Alliance's functions

NATO has three fundamental functions: collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security, with none of these taking precedence. The Madrid Strategic Concept will have to address the situation on NATO's eastern flank and experiences such as Afghanistan so as to prioritise collective defence against the Russian threat, to the detriment of its functions of crisis management and cooperative security. As well as priorities, the allies will have to weigh whether to add new functions to the traditional list, and candidates such as resilience, cybersecurity, pandemics and technological disruption, among others, are all under consideration.

Prior to the Lisbon Strategic Concept, the usefulness of crisis management operations – referred to variously as international, humanitarian or, in Spanish terminology, peace-keeping missions– was being called into question. It was agreed in Lisbon to halt combat missions in Afghanistan in 2014 and promote the construction of local capabilities as a way of avoiding new interventions within the function of cooperative security. The outcome of operations in Libya and Afghanistan had the effect of discrediting the crisis management function, at least whenever it involves mass troop deployments on the ground, and the Madrid Strategic Concept should reduce its priority compared to deterrence, which is necessary against the Russian threat, and cooperative security, which is necessary in order to strengthen local partnerships.

It will certainly be in Spain's interests to have a ranking of priorities in NATO's functions that does not neglect its security interests on its southern flank. The North Atlantic Council acknowledged in June 2021 that the worsening security situation in the Sahel was affecting NATO's security and proposed a tightening of relations with regional actors. The concern reflects both the stability of these local actors and the activities of terrorist groups, which remain among NATO's threats. But as well as making progress on cooperative security, it is in Spain's interest for NATO to set out how it is going to contribute to regional security, and to address the role that Russia and China may play in the region.¹²

¹² For an in-depth analysis, see Luis Simón (Coord.) (2021), 'NATO and the South: a tale of three futures', Elcano Royal Institute, May; and the chapter 'The South', in the *NATO 2030* report, p. 34-36.

The distribution of the burden

The debate about how to share out the financial burden does not jeopardise the continuity of the organisation, but it does hamper friendly relations. In recent years, and since expenditure targets were set for the allies in 2014, solidarity and contributions have come to be measured almost exclusively in terms of percentage of GDP, with 2% as the benchmark. This system works against countries such as Spain, which provide NATO with a greater volume of expenditure in contributions to the common budget and gross spending on defence and equipment compared to many of the countries that fulfil the 2% quota (more than any barring the US, the UK and France), enabling it to offer and plan highly available forces, maritime capabilities and strategic transport.

The forthcoming Madrid Strategic Concept ought to broaden the number of indicators for measuring contributions and introduce mechanisms that reflect contributions to deterrence and defence activities such as those involving the maintenance of an advanced presence, policing airspace, maritime deployments and the exercises that have been proposed by the current secretary general. A more balanced metric would be to the advantage of Spain, which punches above its weight in various forms of contribution without getting due recognition.

Resilience

Together with the three fundamental functions and owing to a growing interaction between military and non-military instruments of aggression –needing to be addressed not only by countries' armed forces but also their other security institutions–, the importance of resilience has grown for NATO. Resilience, which refers to the capacity for resistance and recovery in the face of various kinds of crisis and external meddling, complements deterrence and is particularly necessary when the threats are aimed at civilian targets and affect the functioning of societies, public services and critical infrastructure, among others. This is a subject that has been gaining priority in NATO circles owing to the growing prevalence of hybrid threats and can therefore be expected to play a major role in the new Strategic Concept. Whereas in the past, national defence required the concerted deployment of civil capabilities in situations of war, deterrence and defence now also require these capabilities in the times of non-war (hybrid war, grey areas and asymmetrical conflicts) currently being faced by the allies. Military power on its own is not enough to confront the threats and new risks: societies' resistance and recovery capacities (resilience) must also be strengthened and have the collaboration of new actors and instruments. An armed forces response is no longer sufficient; there is also a need for a whole-of-nation response from political decision-makers and societies, as well as a modernisation of article 5.

Each ally is responsible for its level of national resilience, including anything that affects its military capabilities, but NATO's military planning ought to include the strengthening on national resilience capabilities to support their armed forces' commitments to NATO. However, the Alliance cannot impose resilience policies that evade oversight by the diplomatic and military ministries. The participation of interior ministers and national security advisers in the North Atlantic Council might incentivise cooperation between the allies as long as it does not involve subordinating civilian powers and resources to a

military command structure, given that each country manages coordination in its own way.

These new functions are necessary to ensure that the Alliance protects its military capability in light of the new risks, but it would be a mistake to extend these functions beyond the military domain and try to turn NATO into a superstructure for coordinating civilian security organisations. Such organisations boast more resources and experience than NATO as well as their own powers that do not fall under military coordination. Moreover, many of the European allies think that the EU is more able to tackle the challenges related to resilience of a non-military nature. Thus, the challenge of how to bolster member states' resilience, using an integrated approach that addresses the military, political, economic and social dimensions, looks set to be a central point in NATO-EU discussions.

Emerging and disruptive technologies

Industrial cooperation and technological innovation is a subject that has been gaining ground in NATO circles in recent years, particularly with regard to emerging and disruptive technologies. It is true that the economic interests of the companies based in the member countries differ, and that so far NATO has not managed to consolidate the channels of existing collaboration. Furthermore, the EU's aspiration to attain strategic autonomy, and the particular attention it pays to the technological-industrial aspect of defence, heralded another episode of transatlantic discord, now on the way to being healed thanks to the concept of so-called 'open' strategic autonomy, which will enable non-EU-member allies to take part in its industrial and technological initiatives.

Added to the discrepancies between allies there is now the need to address the challenge posed by emerging technologies and those threatening to disrupt the traditional military superiority of the Alliance. In this context, the NATO 2030 report emphasises the importance of the Alliance maintaining its technological lead over possible rivals and warns of the progress made by China in terms of innovation. The adoption of NATO's first Artificial Intelligence strategy in 2021, the setting up of the Defence Innovation Accelerator of the North Atlantic (DIANA) and the launch of the NATO Innovation Fund in October 2021¹³ are tangible progress in the chapter of technological innovation and is destined to play a prominent role in the Madrid summit and Strategic Concept.

Partnerships

Associations of pooled interest and trust, the partnerships, enable the Alliance to explore avenues of cooperation with third-party countries and organisations that share NATO's interests and values.¹⁴ Although the partnership concept has for a long time been viewed as a kind of 'waiting room' to NATO membership, the scant likelihood of additional enlargements makes it necessary redefine the concept. Moreover, NATO's shift from a

¹³ At the time of writing, Spain is not included among the Fund's subscribers.

¹⁴ Lisa Aronsson and Brett Swaney criticise the geographical focus, the limited empowerment and the scant funds available to the partnerships. See 'Three priorities for NATO partnerships in a contested world', *New Atlanticist*, 14/VI/2021.

paradigm dominated by crisis management to one in which strategic rivalry between great powers and deterrence and defence reassume their former centrality constitutes an additional incentive to reconceptualising partnerships.

In specific terms, the Alliance seems to be moving away from a relatively uniform model of partnerships towards a more flexible model, tailor-made for each partner, where more emphasis will be placed on high-priority partners. The EU certainly figures prominently among NATO's preferred partnerships, above all in terms of resilience, technological innovation, the crisis management-cooperative security nexus (capacity building) and the southern flank. At the same level, NATO's partnerships in the immediate European vicinity ought to be highlighted, both in the south (the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative) and in the east (Partnership of Peace), and the growing popularity of the concept of 'advanced resilience', which manifests NATO's intention to strengthen the resilience of its neighbours. It may also be worth underlining NATO's four partners in the Asia-Pacific region (Japan, Australia, South Korea and New Zealand), whose importance is growing given the Alliance's increasing interest in the region and in China, although the recent AUKUS episode could represent a setback to further progress of the NATO-Asia Pacific partnerships. Finally, and in the absence of a partnership between allies of the south, it is worth mentioning other partnerships, perhaps with less priority, but of a specific importance for some allied countries, including Spain, such as Colombia and Mauritania.

Security and climate change

The NATO 2030 agenda and the North Atlantic Council's communiqué of June 2021 both call for the Madrid Strategic Concept to include the implications of climate change on security. Just as in the case of resilience, NATO should not encroach on the powers of member nations as a means of reducing their emissions and strengthening their sustainability, but it should aspire to leading the adaptation of the armed forces, their operations and facilities to the challenge of climate change to avoid its negative impact on the Alliance's basic functions. Since March 2021 NATO has had an Agenda on Climate Change and Security, which has been combined with an Action Plan endorsed in June 2021.¹⁵ In addition to the above, the Madrid Strategic Concept should acknowledge the need to cooperate with third parties, including Russia and China,¹⁶ on a problem of global security. The Spanish armed forces already cooperate in the national mitigation of global warming and in the adaptation to the new environmental and energy context,¹⁷ but a harmonisation of allied standards and goals would facilitate its consolidation in defence planning.

¹⁵ North Atlantic Council (2021), 'NATO Climate Change and Security Action Plan', 14/VI/2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_185174.htm.

¹⁶ Brookings & Robert Bosch Foundation (2021), 'Finding the right role for NATO in addressing China and Climate Change', November.

¹⁷ Ángel Gómez de Ágreda & Lara Lázaro (2019), 'Cambio climático y defensa', *Revista Española de Defensa*, December.

Conclusion

This analysis reflects the need to launch a national debate about the Madrid Strategic Concept with an opening sortie from the Elcano Royal Institute, which will be followed by others from allied think tanks, as mentioned above, to contribute to the collective and national deliberation. On the basis of such elements of reflection and together with activities that have been programmed to enlarge and deepen the debate under way, the Institute hopes to help shine a spotlight on the process of updating NATO's Strategic Concept and its endorsement at the organisation's summit in Madrid.

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.