



ANALYSIS

NATO'S NEW STRATEGIC CONCEPT

BALANCING RESPONSES TO MULTIPLE THREATS

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Cover page photo: The group of independent experts presents its report to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, 25 November 2020. Photo credit: [NATO](#).

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INTRODUCTION

The differences between the European security environment described in NATO's extant strategic concept, which dates from 2010, and the environment today are a vivid demonstration of the speed and depth of the changes that have taken place in the past decade. Although the essential core tasks defined in the concept—collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security—continue to broadly define NATO's nature and purpose, the circumstances in which the Alliance is now required to execute these tasks are markedly different.

In 2010, NATO leaders described the Euro-Atlantic area as being “at peace.”¹ With Russia, they sought “a strong and constructive partnership based on mutual confidence, transparency and predictability”; at their most recent Summit in 2021, while remaining open to a positive relationship with Russia, they devoted several communiqué paragraphs to describing the negative impacts of its actions and attitudes

on the security environment.² China, today seen by the US as “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system”, was not mentioned at all by NATO in 2010.³

The 2010 concept is clearly out-of-date. While in recent years there were calls for a new version to be drafted, concerns that the Alliance's internal difficulties—in particular the uncertainties created by the Trump presidency—might spill over into the drafting process relegated this issue to the back burner.⁴ This has led to the irregularity that NATO has updated its military strategy (MC 400/4, “MC Guidance for the Military Implementation of Alliance Strategy”), produced a Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area, and developed a twenty-year-forward-

NATO has updated its military strategy without the top-level guidance that an up-to-date strategic concept would be expected to provide

looking NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept, all without the top-level guidance that an up-to-date strategic concept would be expected to provide.⁵

Nonetheless, in the closing months of the Trump administration and in anticipation of a period of more constructive internal politics, NATO began the groundwork for developing a new strategic concept, even if it was not described as such. Most notably, in 2019 NATO leaders invited Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to present a proposal for “a forward-looking reflection process under his auspices, drawing on relevant

¹ NATO, “[Active Engagement, Modern Defence. Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon, 19-20 November 2010](#),” 19 November 2010, para 7.

² NATO, “Active Engagement, Modern Defence,” para 33; NATO, “[Brussels Summit Communiqué. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021](#),” press release (2021) 086, 14 June 2021, paras 9-15.

³ Joseph R. Biden, Jr, “[Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#),” The White House, March 2010, 8.

⁴ For example: Łukasz Kulesa and Anna Wieslander, “[A new Strategic Concept for NATO's 70th birthday?](#)” European

Leadership Network, 1 April 2019; Karl-Heinz Kamp, “[Why NATO Needs a New Strategic Concept?](#)” NATO Defense College Research Report 09/2016. Stanley Sloan, “[Don't Expect a New NATO Strategic Concept Any Time Soon](#),” Atlantic Council, 24 February 2017.

⁵ Sten Rynning, “[Deterrence Rediscovered](#),” in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020. Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, ed. Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijts (The Hague: Asser Press and Springer, 2021), 39; John R. Deni, “[China is a present danger to Europe. NATO's defense plans must respond](#),” Atlantic Council, 3 June 2021.

expertise, to further strengthen NATO's political dimension including consultation."⁶ In response, the Secretary General launched a 'NATO 2030' process that included the convening of a group of independent experts, whose report on reinforcing Allied cohesion, increasing political consultation between Allies, and strengthening NATO's political role will be a key input to the drafting of a new strategic concept.⁷ As part of the NATO 2030 process, the Secretary General has also commissioned a report from a group of

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Alliance is how to prioritise the geographic challenges and threats to Euro-Atlantic security

young leaders, and conducted several exchanges with various interested groups.⁸ As expected, at their summit in Brussels in June 2021, NATO heads of state and government invited the Secretary General to lead the process of drafting a new strategic concept to be agreed at the next NATO Summit, which will be held in Spain in 2022.⁹

The new strategic concept will need to address a broad range of issues relevant to NATO's future, including the challenges and opportunities offered by emerging and disruptive technologies, and the Alliance's role in dealing with climate change, energy security, and arms control. It will need to consider how NATO operates in non-traditional domains, notably space and cyber, as well as how it deals with other 'grey-zone' or 'hybrid' challenges. And it will need to re-examine NATO's responsibilities, alongside other international organisations, in addressing non-Article 5 missions such as peace support operations, capacity building in neighbouring

Allies' assessments of the relative importance of the challenges and threats that arise from Russia, China, and the areas to NATO's south have created divisions

and partner states, and response to natural disasters.

But perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Alliance is how to prioritise the geographic challenges and threats to Euro-Atlantic security that have required it to develop "a 360-degree approach to deter threats and, if necessary, defend allies against any adversary."¹⁰ Allies' assessments of the relative importance of the challenges and threats that arise from Russia, China, and the areas to NATO's south, and their views on how NATO should respond to these challenges and threats, have created divisions. A key task of the new strategic concept will be to reconcile these views, while satisfying the security concerns of all Allies and preserving Alliance cohesion.

This analysis examines the interests of Estonia and the Baltic states more broadly in these key aspects of a new strategic concept. While few Allies have staked out formal positions on the content of a new strategic concept, indications of support for and possible challenges to Baltic interests may be found in various official statements and publications, in analyses by think tanks located in Allied nations and in the outputs so far of the Secretary General's NATO 2030 process. This analysis includes consideration of a selection of such documents. It is not intended

to be a comprehensive survey of official and other opinions, but a limited review to map out the possible shape of the debate about the geographic challenges and threats that will face the Alliance in the coming decade. The first

⁶ NATO, "[London Declaration, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London 3-4 December 2019](#)," press release (2019) 115, 4 December 2019, para 7.

⁷ NATO, "[NATO 2030](#)"; "[NATO 2030: United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General](#)," 25 November 2020, 3.

⁸ "[NATO 2030: Embrace the change, guard the values. A report by the NATO 2030 Young Leaders Group – for this generation and](#)

[the next](#)," 4 February 2021; NATO, "[NATO 2030: NATO-Private Sector Dialogue](#)," press release (2020) 118, 23 November 2020; NATO, "[NATO's first policy hackathon about the future of our security](#)," 29 January 2021.

⁹ NATO, "Brussels Summit Communiqué," para 6h; NATO, "[NATO Secretary General welcomes Spain offer to host next NATO Summit](#)," 14 June 2021.

¹⁰ NATO, "[Statement by NATO Defence Ministers](#)," 25 June 2015, para 2.

chapter outlines Baltic interests. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 consider NATO's responses to Russia, China, and the regions to its south.

1. BALTIC INTERESTS

NATO has endured in large part due to its ability to continuously evolve as the strategic environment has changed. The NATO that exists in 2021 is far more like the Alliance the Baltic states wished to join upon regaining their independence than the version they joined in 2004. While the West's relations with Russia had begun to sour with the election of Vladimir Putin to a second presidential term in March of that year, there was still a hope that a constructive NATO-Russia relationship could be forged through attention to common concerns such as terrorism, climate change, nuclear proliferation, and energy security.¹¹ Certainly, the threat of an attack on Alliance territory from Russia or anywhere else was remote and western states could continue to devote their energies to the Alliance and coalition crisis response operations, in particular in Afghanistan and Iraq, that were to be their focus for most of

Officials in the Baltic states see Russia as by far the most serious of the threats that NATO faces

the decade. Although the situation in the wider Middle East had very little direct impact on Baltic security, the Baltic states were willing participants in such operations which they saw largely as a tool to support their aspiration to belong to western security structures.¹² In a similar vein, the Baltic states today recognise the importance of acknowledging, and to the greatest extent possible taking part in the resolution of the security concerns of other

Allies. Estonia's contribution to French-led military operations in the Sahel is a good example of a small state taking steps to build security (in this case, outside NATO) by actively contributing to dealing with threats that are of far greater concern to an Ally than to itself.¹³

It was not until 2014, when in Putin's third presidential term Russia illegally annexed Crimea and began its aggression in eastern Ukraine, that the Alliance started to take more seriously its defence obligations to its eastern members. By 2021, following the direction set out at a series of summits in Wales, Warsaw, and Brussels, NATO had, among other measures, agreed updated defence plans for the Baltic

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states, deployed battalion-sized multinational battlegroups to its north-east flank (sizeable US forces are also now present on a rotational basis in Latvia, and Lithuania), stepped up the pace of military exercises in the region, and augmented its response forces. NATO's clear characterisation of Russian aggression as "a threat to Euro-Atlantic security" coincides with the views of officials in the Baltic states, who see Russia as by far the most serious of the threats that NATO faces, and who believe that the NATO's principal task in the coming years will continue to be to deter, and if necessary defend against, Russian aggression.¹⁴

When it comes to considering NATO's future development and the content of a new strategic concept, the Baltic states are pulled in two directions. On the one hand, they regard

¹¹ Julianne Smith, *The NATO-Russia Relationship. Defining Moment or Déjà Vu?* (Paris and Washington DC: IFRI and CSIS 2008), 14.

¹² Piret Paljak, "Participation in International Military Operations," in *Apprenticeship, Partnership, Membership: Twenty Years of Defence Development in the Baltic States*, ed. Tony Lawrence and Tomas Jermalavičius (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security 2013), 230.

¹³ Kalev Stoicescu and Maxine Lebrun, *Estonian-French Defence Cooperation – Where Estonian Pragmatism Meets French Vision* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2019), 9.

¹⁴ NATO, "Brussels Summit Communiqué," para 3; Michał Baranowski, Linas Kojala, Toms Rostoks and Kalev Stoicescu, ed. Tony Lawrence, *What Next for NATO? Views from the North-East Flank on Alliance Adaptation* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2020), 6. NATO's collective stance has also apparently stiffened. Meeting in Brussels in 2018, NATO leaders only went so far as to declare that Russian aggression was "undermining" Euro-Atlantic security: NATO, "[Brussels Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11-12 July 2018](#)," Press Release (2018) 074, 11 July 2018, para 2.

collective defence as the very essence of the Alliance and the core task upon which the credibility of NATO depends. They believe that NATO's continuing standing and success rests not only on it preserving a deterrence posture, but on strengthening it. This is particularly the case in the Baltic region where Russian forces far outnumber Allied forces, where reinforcement is complicated by geography, and where key capability shortfalls exist, for example in early warning and air defence.¹⁵ They want other Allies to acknowledge the seriousness of the military threat from Russia to their own territories, to commit to dealing with it so long as it exists, and to continue to take steps to strengthen deterrence and defence in north-east Europe.

On the other hand, the Baltic states understand that Alliance cohesion and unity—which are themselves essential for credible collective defence—depend strongly on NATO taking an appropriate stance when it comes to other threats and challenges. They thus support NATO's 360-degree approach, even if this risks that attention and resources being diverted from what they see as the primary security threat. The fundamental test of whether a new strategic concept satisfies Baltic interests will thus be the extent to which it finds an appropriate balance between these two directions.

2. DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE AGAINST RUSSIA

In the 2010 strategic concept, confirming collective defence as one of the Alliance's three core tasks, the Allies stated that they "will always assist each other against attack" and that they "will deter and defend against any threat of

aggression."¹⁶ Today, there is no question that deterrence and collective defence will remain central to the Alliance and will be a core component of any new strategic concept. Furthermore, there is a broad agreement that Russia is the principal—if not the only—state that may pose a conventional military threat to security in Europe.¹⁷ The seriousness with which all Allies take deterrence of Russia in NATO's north-east is evident in their commitment to the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups in Poland and the three Baltic states.¹⁸

In NATO's own reflection process, the Secretary General's independent experts' report noted

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that Article 5 was NATO's "first and most essential requirement" and, regarding Russia, found that NATO should, as part of a dual-track approach of deterrence and dialogue, "[raise] the costs for Russian aggression and develop a more comprehensive response to hybrid forms of Russian aggression."¹⁹ In a similar vein, the young leaders' report noted that, "Traditional territorial defence and deterrence should remain the key focus of the Alliance" and was "adamant on NATO continuing to assume and upgrade capacity and capabilities on NATO's eastern and southern flanks."²⁰

Key Allies take similar lines. The Biden administration's interim strategic guidance is somewhat vague, merely noting, for example, a growing rivalry with Russia, committing to "reaffirm, invest in, and modernize" NATO and promising to "work alongside fellow democracies across the globe to deter and defend against aggression from hostile

¹⁵ Baranowski, Kojala, Rostoks, Stoicescu, *What Next for NATO?*, 8.

¹⁶ NATO, "Active Engagement, Modern Defence," para 4.1.

¹⁷ "Russia's growing multi-domain military build-up, more assertive posture, novel military capabilities, and provocative activities, including near NATO borders, as well as its large-scale no-notice and snap exercises, the continued military build-up in Crimea, the deployment of modern dual-capable missiles in Kaliningrad, military integration with Belarus, and repeated

violations of NATO Allied airspace, increasingly threaten the security of the Euro-Atlantic area and contribute to instability along NATO borders and beyond." NATO, "Brussels Summit Communiqué," para 11.

¹⁸ In April 2021, 23 of 30 Allies were framework, contributing or host nations to enhanced Forward Presence. NATO, "[NATO Enhanced Forward Presence](#)," factsheet, 7 April 2021.

¹⁹ "NATO 2030: United for a New Era," 7, 12.

²⁰ "NATO 2030: Embrace the change," 5.

adversaries.”²¹ However, US analysts have been more explicit, noting that:

Top figures [in the administration] have already made clear that their strategy will prioritize closer U.S./EU coordination on pushing back against the Kremlin’s behavior and shoring up NATO’s military capabilities and the credibility of deterrence while leaving political space for cooperation on issues like arms control.²²

Commentators and policy makers generally agree that the nuclear aspects of NATO’s deterrence posture should be given renewed emphasis

In his confirmation hearing, Secretary of Defense Austin echoed these points noting, for example, that, “along with our Allies, it is critical that we maintain combat-credible conventional and nuclear forces to provide the most effective deterrent against Russian aggression.”²³

Among several statements in its March 2021 integrated review characterising the Russian threat and the need for a collective response, the UK notes that “Russia is the most acute threat in the region and we will work with NATO Allies to ensure a united Western response, combining military, intelligence and diplomatic efforts.”²⁴ In Germany, looking ahead to the Biden presidency, analysts at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs stated that “like the United States, Germany and its European partners are concerned to enhance the security and resilience of the countries that form NATO’s eastern flank. In line with a strengthening of

transatlantic relations, Berlin is interested in discussing this in the NATO framework.”²⁵

Chancellor Merkel, speaking at the June 2021 Brussels Summit, stressed that Russia was still the biggest threat facing the Alliance.²⁶ France notes Russia’s “strategic intimidation posture”, based in part on “the political priority given to the development and modernisation of sophisticated military capabilities, whether conventional (A2/AD [anti-access/area denial]), non-conventional (private military contractors or proxies) or nuclear” and promises to continue “a balanced response that combines firmness and engagement.”²⁷

While none of these statements (except that of the young leaders) explicitly suggest that NATO’s military deterrence posture in the Baltic region should be strengthened, they do at least indicate that Allies continue to take the Russian threat seriously and regard NATO as a vital component of their response. It is hard to find voices that disagree—in one rare example, commenting on the report of the group of independent experts, Pascal Boniface, Director of France’s Institut de

Allies continue to take the Russian threat seriously and regard NATO as a vital component of their

Relations Internationales et Stratégiques compares Russian and NATO defence spending to conclude that the Russian threat is “questionable.”²⁸

It thus seems to be the case that, taken on their own merits, Baltic arguments for a new strategic

²¹ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “[Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#),” The White House, March 2021, 6, 10, 19.

²² Eugene Rummer and Andrew S. Weiss, “[Back to Basics on Russia Policy](#),” Carnegie Endowment for international Peace, March 2021.

²³ Senate Armed Services Committee, “[Advance Policy Questions for Lloyd J. Austin Nominee for Appointment to be Secretary of Defense](#),” 38.

²⁴ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London: HMSO, 2021), 20.

²⁵ Laura von Daniels, Markus Kaim, Ronja Kempin, Kai-Olaf Lang, Marco Overhaus and Johannes Thimm, “[A New Beginning with](#)

[President Biden. Five German and European Priorities for the Transatlantic Agenda](#),”

SWP Comment 2020/C 61 (December 2020), 5-6.

²⁶ David M. Herszenhorn and Rym Momtaz, “[NATO leaders see rising threats from China, but not eye to eye with each other](#),” Politico, 14 June 2021.

²⁷ Ministère des Armées [Ministry of Armed Forces (France)], “[Strategic Update 2021](#),” 17, 20.

²⁸ “[sujette à caution](#)”: Pascal Boniface, “[OTAN: de la mort cérébrale à la résurrection face à la Chine](#) [NATO: from brain death to resurrection against China]”, IRIS, 4 December 2020.

concept that promotes a strong deterrence posture against Russia will be sympathetically received. A more difficult question may be how these arguments fare against those in favour of dealing with other geographic challenges to the Allies.

2.1. NUCLEAR DETERRENCE IN EUROPE

Throughout the Cold War, NATO's deterrence posture included a strong nuclear component. In its 2010 Strategic Concept, written in a low-threat environment, NATO declared that it would remain a nuclear alliance, but was also able to note that it had "dramatically reduced the number of nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and [its] reliance on nuclear weapons in NATO strategy."²⁹ Today, the threat from Russia and the requirement to enhance deterrence and defence in Europe has put nuclear capabilities back into the spotlight. At their 2021 summit, NATO leaders confirmed that nuclear deterrence is still essential to meet the deteriorating security environment in Europe but (in the context of the debate about the demise of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty) ruled out the possibility of re-introducing land-based nuclear missiles to Europe.³⁰

Russia sees non-strategic nuclear weapons as a militarily useful complement to its conventional forces.³¹ NATO military infrastructure is concentrated at a small number of European sites and, because Russia may not be confident in its conventional precision strike capabilities, it may see such locations as a credible set of targets for limited nuclear use. NATO (i.e., the US) may be reluctant to respond with nuclear weapons to such an attack as this would almost certainly involve targeting the Russian homeland, risking escalation, and thus creating what RAND corporation researchers

have labelled a "vulnerability gap."³² As a consequence, deterring the employment of non-strategic nuclear weapons has become more important. Russia's deployment of new land-based, nuclear-capable SSC-8 missiles and the end of the INF Treaty have only emphasised the need for a more robust NATO response.³³

Commentators and policy makers generally agree that the nuclear aspects of NATO's deterrence posture should be given renewed emphasis. The Secretary General's group of independent experts, for example, recommended that:

it is critical to sustain nuclear deterrence and conventional defence capabilities in the 21st century as the bedrock of our security. NATO should further adapt its deterrence and defence posture in the post-INF setting to take into account the threat posed by Russia's existing and new military capabilities

and further that NATO's nuclear-sharing agreements should be "revitalised."³⁴

Analysts at the German Council on Foreign Relations report a broad consensus among researchers from 11 European states on the

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critical importance for European security of nuclear deterrence and NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements.³⁵ Key Allies take similarly robust stances. The Biden administration has pledged to "take steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, while ensuring our strategic deterrent remains safe, secure, and effective and that our extended

²⁹ NATO, "Active Engagement, Modern Defence," paras 17, 26.

³⁰ NATO, "Brussels Summit Communiqué," paras 41, 26.

³¹ Dave Johnson, "Nuclear Weapons in Russia's approach to conflict," Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique recherches & documents no. 6/2016, 75.

³² Clint Reach, Edward Geist, Abby Doll and Joe Cheravitch, "Competing with Russia Militarily. Implications of Conventional and Nuclear Conflicts," RAND Perspective, June 2021, 19-20.

³³ Heinrich Brauss, Kalev Stoicescu and Tony Lawrence, [Capability and Resolve. Deterrence, Security and Stability in the Baltic Region](#) (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2020), 17.

³⁴ "NATO 2030: United for a New Era," 38.

³⁵ Sophia Becker and Christian Mölling (eds.), [\(Nuclear\) Sharing is Caring. European Views on NATO Nuclear Deterrence and the German Nuclear Sharing Debate](#) (Berlin: DGAP, 2020), 4.

deterrence commitments to our allies remain strong and credible.”³⁶

For France, nuclear forces are intended to ensure deterrence and to prevent a major war, as well as guarantee freedom of action of conventional forces.³⁷ France also seeks to “promote a nuclear culture within the

The renewed prominence of nuclear weapons should be met with information and strategic communication campaigns aimed at Allies as well as adversaries

Alliance.”³⁸ The UK’s nuclear deterrent is intended “to deter the most extreme threats to our national security and way of life, helping to guarantee our security and that of our Allies”; in recognition of the evolving security environment, the UK will increase the ceiling of the nuclear weapon stockpile to 260 from a previously planned 180.³⁹

As a non-nuclear power, Germany has been the wariest of the larger Allies about the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence and defence; indeed, the German Council on Foreign Relations research quoted above was born of a debate about whether Germany should continue to host US tactical nuclear weapons on its territory and provide the dual-capable aircraft that can deliver them. But in Germany too there is a spread of views. Some analysts are ready to argue that even the deployment in Europe of land-based intermediate-range nuclear missiles “should not be ruled out at the outset.”⁴⁰ On the other side, the Green Party, supported by around 20% of the electorate for the German 2021 general election, advocates a Germany free of nuclear weapons and Germany’s accession to the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.⁴¹ While the Greens will most likely be a partner in any potential coalition after the election, their

ability to succeed in these aims will depend on the other partners in the coalition, with some combinations offering greater prospects than others.⁴² Even then, the Greens themselves recognise that delivering on their promises would require numerous talks within the Alliance, strengthening the security and reassurance of Poland and the Baltic states, and taking account of Russia’s conventional and nuclear armament.⁴³

Two other nuclear themes have broad agreement. First, that acceptance of nuclear weapons cannot be taken for granted, and their renewed prominence should be met with information and strategic communication campaigns aimed at Allies as well as adversaries. For example, reporting on the NATO Defense College’s 2016 Nuclear Deterrence workshop, researchers noted that:

The role of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence in Alliance security requires a clearer and more positive narrative. NATO needs to rejuvenate nuclear deterrence culture among its members and institutions. Central to this must be continuing dialogue among member states and a clear commitment to strategic education for current and emerging military and political leaders, something that is woefully lacking today. Knowledge of deterrence and its role and value to the Alliance is scarce today—not only among the younger generation of officials, but also the current leadership. With the return of collective defense as a core mission, NATO’s member states need to emphasize the education of their future leaders on nuclear weapons and the management of crises.⁴⁴

Second, that alongside strengthening nuclear deterrence, NATO must also play a greater part in arms control. The young leaders, for example, urged NATO to “play a greater role in promoting and facilitating dialogue on nuclear arms control,

³⁶ Biden, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” 13.

³⁷ Ministère des Armées, “Strategic Update 2021,” 26.

³⁸ Ibid., 27.

³⁹ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, 76.

⁴⁰ Heinrich Brauß and Christian Mölling, “[Europe’s Security without the INF Treaty: Political and Strategic Options for Germany and NATO](#),” DGAP Kompakt no.2, February 2019, 3.

⁴¹ “[Poll of polls: Germany](#),” Politico, 12 July 2021; Die Grüne, “[Deutschland. Alles ist Drin. Bundestagswahlprogramm 2021](#)

[Germany. Everything is in there. Federal election programme 2021],” 105-6.

⁴² Steven Pifer, [Germany’s Upcoming Election and the Future of Nuclear Sharing](#) (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2021), 10-12.

⁴³ Die Grüne, “Deutschland. Alles ist Drin,” 106.

⁴⁴ Alessandra G. Dibenedetto and Jeffrey A. Larsen, “[Keep Calm and Deter: NATO Nuclear Deterrence After the Warsaw Summit](#),” NATO Defense College Conference Report No. 01/17, May 2017.

non-proliferation and disarmament.”⁴⁵ Similarly, the Secretary General’s group of independent experts argued that:

Since nuclear deterrence and arms control efforts serve the security of the whole Euro-Atlantic area, more regular use should be made of NATO to discuss Allied views on [arms control] topics, with the aim of arriving at a common understanding and joint positioning, with a view to feeding into Allies’ and like-minded countries’ positions in UN and OSCE fora as well as in other relevant international formats.⁴⁶

2.2. CONCEPTS OF DETERRENCE

A further consideration is whether and how the concept of deterrence needs to be revitalised to meet new strategic circumstances. Some commentators claim that fundamental (primarily technological) shifts in warfare will require equally fundamental shifts in NATO’s response. Richard Barrons, for example, has argued that:

In a new era of constant confrontation and potential conflict with very high stakes, restoring defence and security also means bringing together all the levers of power available to a state and its allies. The way forward for military power is through the transformation offered by combinations of digital age technologies to build a new joint force by design, top-down.⁴⁷

Addressing the needs of the Alliance more directly, Ben Hodges and Julian Lindley-French write that:

[At the heart of a new strategic concept] there will need to be a truly integrated defence across the broad spectrum from sensors to shooters. To be credible such a system will need to be

digital resilient and able to identify and respond to a host of attacks. Emerging and disruptive technologies are fast changing both the character and nature of warfare across the multi-domains of air, sea, land, cyber, space information and knowledge in which all vulnerabilities are ruthlessly exposed and attacked. ‘Defence’ itself will need to counter disinformation, deception, destabilisation, systemic disruption and coercion through implied or actual destruction.⁴⁸

A new strategic concept offers an opportunity to outline a deterrence concept that is perhaps a better match to today’s strategic circumstances

Other commentators advocate greater resilience as a component of deterrence. London’s Royal United Services Institute, for example, runs a ‘modern deterrence’ project that “focuses on the blending of traditional deterrence and societal resilience against emerging forms of warfare.”⁴⁹ The Secretary General’s group of independent experts, focusing on the related theme of hybrid warfare, argued that “NATO should support Allies in developing a comprehensive response framework for countering hybrid threats,” including the communication of an ongoing and overarching narrative in response to

Some commentators claim that fundamental (primarily technological) shifts in warfare will require equally fundamental shifts in NATO’s response

disinformation aimed at NATO that would be “critical to the credibility of NATO’s deterrence”, response options to military intimidation and harassment, and “a political deterrence toolbox suitable for hybrid threats.”⁵⁰ The young leaders group, meanwhile, suggested that:

for NATO to continue to credibly fulfil its core mission and respond to future threats, it will also need to deter, defend and provide security differently in 2030. Indeed, the

⁴⁵ “NATO 2030: Embrace the change,” 6.

⁴⁶ “NATO 2030: United for a New Era,” 37.

⁴⁷ Richard Barrons, “[European Defence for the 21st Century](#),” LSE Ideas, 9 October 2018.

⁴⁸ Ben Hodges and Julian Lindley-French, “[NATO, Military Mobility and the Dark Defence Web](#),” Speaking Truth Unto Power, 6 June 2021.

⁴⁹ “[Modern Deterrence](#),” RUSI.

⁵⁰ “NATO 2030: United for a New Era,” 46.

growing complexity and often non-kinetic character of threats requires relying better on interlaced military and civilian instruments.⁵¹

NATO has certainly recognised that threats to its territories and populations are evident beyond the traditional warfighting domains. It has launched initiatives dealing with a range of non-traditional threats and responses, including resilience, cyber, hybrid, and comprehensive defence efforts.⁵² In Brussels in June 2021, Allied leaders stated that:

We are increasingly confronted by cyber, hybrid, and other asymmetric threats, including disinformation campaigns, and by the malicious use of ever-more sophisticated emerging and disruptive technologies. Rapid advances in the space domain are affecting our security. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the erosion of the arms control architecture also undermine our collective security. Climate change is a threat multiplier that impacts Alliance security. The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territories and our populations against attack, and we will address all threats and challenges which affect Euro-Atlantic security.⁵³

At the same time, they recognised that resilience is essential, and space of growing importance for credible deterrence and defence, and that deterrence requires the Alliance to maintain its technological edge.⁵⁴

However, NATO appears to treat these as discreet issues and its main focus still appears to be on more traditional concepts of deterrence. In the headline statements of its June 2021 summit communiqué, for example, NATO highlights, as it has for several years, a “commitment to maintaining an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities for deterrence and defence,” but raises the requirements to enhance resilience and foster technological cooperation in separate paragraphs without apparent connection.⁵⁵

A new strategic concept clearly offers an opportunity to draw these strands closer together and to outline a deterrence concept that is perhaps a better match to today’s strategic circumstances. The Baltic states, with fewer resources to develop fully integrated, high-tech deterrence and defence postures, and generally viewing deterrence and defence from a more conservative perspective, may be concerned that overly ambitious aspirations will, in fact, detract from NATO’s deterrence and defence posture. In support of this position, some analysts argue for more traditional, military-centric enhancements to deterrence to fill known capability gaps first and the prioritisation of the implementation of agreements that are already in place.⁵⁶

2.3. DIALOGUE WITH RUSSIA

In almost every case, recommendations for a robust deterrence response to Russia are accompanied by suggestions for a dual-track approach, with dialogue forming the second component and given varying degrees of prominence. For example, Italian analysts, suggesting that “Russia is likely to move forward its aggressive foreign and defence policy, not only in the former Soviet space but across [the Middle East and North Africa] too,” observe that:

[after 2014] Rome supported the Western dual-track approach towards Russia, but with a premium on dialogue over deterrence. In the Italian perspective, deterrence is necessary but is not the endstate: it serves to prevent conflict and lays the ground to find a diplomatic solution on Ukraine and pan-European security.⁵⁷

Others advocate dialogue but are more circumspect about possible outcomes. Writing for Clingendael, for example, Polish analyst Robert Pszczel argues that:

Talking to those who wield power today in Russia is tricky but necessary ... But if this appeal is rejected, we should not consider it a defeat

⁵¹ “NATO 2030: Embrace the change,” 5.

⁵² Michael Rühle and Clare Roberts, “[Enlarging NATO’s toolbox to counter hybrid threats](#),” NATO Review, 19 March 2021.

⁵³ NATO, “Brussels Summit Communiqué,” para 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, para 30, 33, 37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, para 6b.

⁵⁶ Heinrich Brauß, “Deterrence and Resilience on NATO’s Eastern Flank,” in “[Next Steps in NATO Deterrence](#)

[and Resilience](#),” GMF Policy Paper, June 2021, 9-11; Eva Hagström Frisell and Krister Pallin, “Towards a net assessment,” in *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe. Part I: Collective Defence*, ed Eva Hagström Frisell and Krister Pallin (Stockholm: Fol, 2020), 129-130.

⁵⁷ Alessandro Marrone and Karolina Muti, “[NATO’s Future: Euro-Atlantic Alliance in a Peacetime War](#),” Istituto Affari Internazionali Papers 20/28 (October 2020), 3,

but rather design a way forward which suits our interests.⁵⁸

While dialogue with Russia will often take place outside the Alliance (for example, in bilateral US-Russia arms control negotiations) it is likely that in a new strategic concept, Allies will wish to signal their continuing openness to a dialogue with Russia and perhaps propose the revitalisation of formats that had, according to NATO, achieved some results prior to 2014.⁵⁹ There is no reason that such proposals should stand in the way of Baltic interests to preserve, or strengthen, NATO's deterrence posture on its north-east flank; indeed, the likelihood that some Allies will link these two tracks will make a favourable outcome on deterrence and collective defence more likely if NATO's openness to dialogue is also reflected in a new strategic concept. It will be important to signal, however, that openness to a more constructive relationship with Russia does not mean the abandonment of western interests, such as the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

A further, related point is how the new strategic concept should treat the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act (NRFA), or even whether it should be referenced at all (as it is in the current concept).⁶⁰ In 2020, a prominent group of Russian and western experts argued that in the NATO 2030 process, NATO should aim to develop military-military dialogue with Russia, as part of which Russia and NATO would reaffirm their commitments under the NRFA and use the Act as a vehicle for codifying restraint, transparency and confidence-building measures.⁶¹ Other analysts dismiss the NRFA as

an obsolete constraint on NATO's deterrence posture, question NATO's insistence on continuing to abide by its terms while Russia consistently violates them, and recommend its termination.⁶² Polish analysts have also noted that some Allies have used the very existence of the NRFA, and its characterisation of NATO and Russia as partners, not adversaries, as a pretext to cut defence spending, in turn weakening NATO's ability to perform collective defence and crisis management missions.⁶³ Moscow, meanwhile, uses the NRFA as a tool to attack NATO.⁶⁴

3. CHINA

There is no mention of China in NATO's extant strategic concept, but the global impact of China's rise certainly requires a cohesive western response. Most analysts concur that NATO's search for its part in such a response is likely to reveal deep fractures amongst the Allies.⁶⁵ A more optimistic analysis agrees that this debate will be intense but notes that while NATO has periodically viewed China as a direct threat, it has been reluctant, despite US

In almost every case, recommendations for a robust deterrence response to Russia are accompanied by suggestions for a dual-track approach

pressure, to engage in the Asia-Pacific region; and that the reasons for this reluctance have not fundamentally changed.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Robert Pszczel, "[Dialogue with Russia: a Checklist of 10 Dos and Don'ts](#)," Clingendael Spectator, 21 April 2021.

⁵⁹ NATO, "[Relations with Russia](#)," 21 April 2021.

⁶⁰ "The NATO-Russia relationship is based upon the goals, principles and commitments of the NATO Russia Founding Act and the Rome Declaration, especially regarding the respect of democratic principles and the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states in the Euro-Atlantic area." NATO, "Active Engagement, Modern Defence," para 34.

⁶¹ "[Recommendations of the Participants of the Expert Dialogue on NATO-Russia Military Risk Reduction in Europe](#)," European Leadership Network, 5-6.

⁶² Janusz Bugajski, "[Why Does Moscow View NATO as a Threat?](#)" CEPA, 23 July 2019; John R. Deni, "[The NATO-Russia Founding Act: A Dead Letter](#)," Carnegie Europe, 29 June 2017.

⁶³ Anna Maria Dwyer, Artur Kacprzyk, Wojciech Lorenz and Marcin Terlikowski, "[How Russian Violations of the 1997 Founding Act Influence NATO-Russia Relations](#)," Polish Institute of International Affairs, Policy Paper no. 6 (166), July 2018.

⁶⁴ Katrina Manson and Henry Foy, "[Mike Pompeo faces backlash over withdrawing US troops from Germany](#)," Financial Times, 30 July 2020.

⁶⁵ For example: Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, "[Towards a NATO China Strategy](#)," International Centre for Defence and Security Policy Brief, #NATO2030 Series No.2, 1.

⁶⁶ Jeffrey H. Michaels, "[A very different kind of challenge? NATO's prioritization of China in historical perspective](#)," *International Politics* (2021).

The main division lies in the Atlantic Ocean. With rare bipartisan agreement, the US sees an increasingly assertive China as a strategic challenge whose activities across a wide spectrum demand a broad and robust response (for example, confronting unfair and illegal trade, cyber theft and coercive economic practice, defending access to the global commons, diplomatic and military positioning to defend allies, support for Taiwan, and standing

The European Allies have tended to be more amenable to opportunities for trade with China and less inclined to see it as a threat

up for democracy and human rights, including in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet).⁶⁷ Furthermore, the US sees at least some role for NATO here. Speaking after a meeting of NATO foreign ministers in March 2021, for example, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken argued that China was a threat, in particular in economics and technology, to Allies in Europe and that the US should work “with our allies to close the gaps in areas like technology and infrastructure, where Beijing is exploiting to exert coercive pressure.”⁶⁸ In contrast to the previous administration however, Blinken also acknowledged that “our allies have complex

With rare bipartisan agreement, the US sees an increasingly assertive China as a strategic challenge that demands a broad and robust response

relationships with China that won’t always align perfectly with ours,” and pledged not to force European Allies into an “us or them” choice.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, the Baltic states and others are concerned that greater US attention on China, will mean less US attention and fewer US resources on countering Russia and on European security more generally.

⁶⁷ Biden, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” 20-21.

⁶⁸ Amanda Macias, “[Top U.S. diplomat warns China threatens NATO security, calls for joint approach to counter Beijing](#),” CNBC, 24 March 2021.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

The Secretary General’s group of independent experts took a similar line to that of the new US administration, noting that China did not “pose an immediate military threat to the Euro-Atlantic area on the scale of Russia,” but recommending that NATO should “devote much more time, political resources and action to the security challenges posed by China,” and take steps to include building cyber-resilience, assessing the implications of China’s technological development, and monitoring and defending against “Chinese activities that could impact collective defence, military readiness and/or resilience in SACEUR’s Area of Responsibility.”⁷⁰

Other US analysts, however, go further. John R. Deni, for example, writing for the Atlantic Council, claims that China is already a military

There is no mention of China in NATO’s extant strategic concept

threat to NATO, citing cyber attacks and threats to the global commons in the “increasingly militarized South China Sea”; and that until the European Allies wake up, at least the European aspects of this threat should be addressed in NATO’s Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area.⁷¹ Hans Binnendijk, and Sarah Kirchberger, also writing for the Atlantic Council, propose a broad set of responses under the leadership of a ‘Transatlantic Coordinating Council on China’, comprising NATO, the EU, and their members. Under their plan, NATO would add a fourth core task to manage “major threats to the Alliance that are global in nature, China primary among them,” commit to defending the global commons, and signal that the Allies would not stand by should China attack US forces in Asia.⁷² The authors also stress the importance of

⁷⁰ “NATO 2030: United for a New Era,” 27-8.

⁷¹ Deni, “China is a present danger to Europe.”

⁷² Hans Binnendijk and Sarah Kirchberger, [The China Plan: A Transatlantic Blueprint for Strategic Competition](#) (Washington DC: The Atlantic Council, 2021), 87, 5.

European Allies investing in defence capability in case a conflict in Asia should distract the US.⁷³ And Sara Bjerg Moller, arguing that NATO should prepare for the possibility that China may become a military threat even if it is not one at the moment, suggests that NATO should put aside other agenda items, such as its training missions in Iraq and Afghanistan and further enlargement, to do so.⁷⁴

As with Russia, almost all US commentators also advocate working with China wherever possible, for example on questions such as climate change, global health, and arms control. While the Trump administration castigated China for taking advantage of previous US support for its rise and made only parenthetical reference to cooperation as a lead-in to a litany of complaints about China's behaviour, the Biden administration is more open, stating that "strategic competition does not, and should not, preclude working with China when it is in our national interest to do so."⁷⁵

The European Allies have tended to be more amenable to opportunities for trade with China and less inclined to see it as a threat. A 2020 review based on inputs from 18 EU member states, for example, concluded that "They all consider the US their most important ally and they all depend on its military protection, but they also want to do as much business with China as possible. With this balancing act, the common European objective is to avoid a bipolar system in which EU member states are forced to take sides."⁷⁶

Key Allies do, though, accept that China poses serious challenges. France notes that:

Beijing intends to weigh more directly on global issues and to assert its strategic aspirations [while its] development of a first-rate military

capability is as much a quest for status as an operational ambition.⁷⁷

The UK observes that "China's increasing power and international assertiveness is likely to be the most significant geopolitical factor of the 2020s."⁷⁸ In Italy, "the widespread perception of

China has not been seen as a military threat, but as a foreign policy problem to be dealt with through the EU rather than NATO

both Russia and China is rather ambiguous, and largely positive, yet reflection on the various aspects of China's rise has moved forward, including in 2019 through the Ministry of Defence's assessment of this rise as a 'challenge'; while German-Chinese relations are described as approaching a crossroads as China has become increasingly bold in making favourable economic relations conditional upon Germany's restraint in raising human rights issues, while China becomes an election campaign issue in Germany.⁷⁹

Europeans are mostly guarded in their expectations for a western or NATO response. The UK is perhaps an exception: it notes that "China's military modernisation and growing international assertiveness within the Indo-Pacific region and beyond will pose an increasing risk to UK interests," but stands out by concluding in its defence review that, "from both a political and military standpoint, NATO must respond to trends such as ... the systemic challenge posed by China."⁸⁰ In Europe generally, China has not been seen as a military

⁷³ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁴ Sara Bjerg Moller, "China's rise is exactly the kind of threat NATO exists to stop," *The Washington Post*, 12 March 2021.

⁷⁵ Donald J. Trump, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, December 2017, 25, 46; Biden, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," 21.

⁷⁶ Miguel Otero-Iglesias and Mario Esteban, "Introduction," in *Europe in the Face of US-China Rivalry*, ed. Mario Esteban and Miguel Otero-Iglesias along with Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Alice Ekman, Lucrezia Poggetti, Björn Jerdén, John

Seaman, Tim Summers and Justyna Szczudlik (European Think-tank Network on China, 2020), 20.

⁷⁷ Ministère des Armées, "Strategic Update 2021," 21.

⁷⁸ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, 26.

⁷⁹ Marrone and Muti, "NATO's Future", 13; Shannon Tiezzi, "China-Germany Relations at the Crossroads," *The Diplomat*, 29 April 2021.

⁸⁰ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, 29; Ministry of Defence (UK), *Defence in a Competitive Age*, (London: HMSO, 2021), 27.

threat, but as a foreign policy problem to be dealt with through the EU rather than NATO.⁸¹

Even so, like German-China relations, EU-China relations have also noticeably cooled in recent months. The European Parliament's refusal to ratify the December 2020 EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment while China maintains sanctions on EU officials (imposed in retaliation for EU sanctions against China for its treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority in the Xinjiang region) has been a major setback.⁸² Europeans have also been upset by China's (and Russia's) disinformation campaigns about Covid-19 vaccines.⁸³ Furthermore, there

It appears unavoidable that the challenges presented by China will become more prominent inside the Alliance in the coming decade and will thus feature in the new strategic concept

appears to be growing concern amongst Europeans that the (albeit somewhat casual) relationship between Russia and China may lead to more serious challenges.⁸⁴

Ahead of the NATO summit in June, there were suggestions that US and European positions may be coming closer together.⁸⁵ Nonetheless, there remains some distance between them. The EU still aspires to treat China not just as a strategic competitor and systemic rival, but also as a negotiating partner for cooperation. And European Allies are sceptical of a major role for NATO in dealing with China. In Brussels, Chancellor Merkel warned of the risk of overreacting to the risk from China and called for "balance" in NATO's approach, while President Macron was more forthright, arguing that:

NATO is a military organisation, the issue of our relationship with China isn't just a military issue. NATO is an organization that concerns the North Atlantic, China has little to do with the North Atlantic ... we should avoid distracting NATO which already has many challenges.⁸⁶

In the event, NATO leaders agreed to refer to China in their summit communiqué for the first time.⁸⁷ The text notes that China's "ambitions and assertive behaviour present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security." It calls on China to behave as a major power should, but contains no commitments by the Allies to take concrete actions.⁸⁸

While the Baltic states will be concerned that a more robust NATO stance on China may see attention and, more importantly, resources taken away from deterrence and defence against Russia, it appears unavoidable that the challenges presented by China

will become more prominent inside the Alliance in the coming decade and will thus feature in some form the new strategic concept. A proactive Baltic position might: advocate enhancing NATO's ability for understanding and situational awareness of the issue; more political discussion about, and perhaps even with, China; taking steps to address enhance resilience against possible Chinese malevolence in Europe that could weaken deterrence and collective defence (for example in cyber, and infrastructure availability)—especially in light of a growing relationship between China and Russia; while resisting any suggestion that NATO should undertake a military role (such as using naval forces to protect the maritime commons) in the Indo-Pacific.

⁸¹ Sven Biscop, "[Biden, NATO and the EU: Who Deals With China, and Who With Russia?](#)" Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, 29 March 2021.

⁸² Jan van der Made, "[European Parliament votes to freeze EU-China investment deal](#)," RFI, 20 May 2021.

⁸³ "[EU accuses Russia, China of COVID vaccine disinformation](#)," Deutsche Welle, 18 April 2021.

⁸⁴ Alexander Gabuev, "[As Russia and China Draw Closer, Europe Watches With Foreboding](#)," Carnegie Moscow Center, 19 March 2021.

⁸⁵ Laurence Norman, "[Europe to Tip Toward U.S.'s Tougher Stance on Russia, China](#)," The Wall Street Journal, 22 February 2021; Stuart Lau, "[EU slams China's 'authoritarian shift' and broken economic promises](#)," Politico, 25 April 2021; Lorne Cook, "[US,](#)

[Europe, NATO close ranks to counter 'aggressive' China](#)," AP, 24 March 2021.

⁸⁶ John Follain and John Ainger, "[Merkel Urges Caution as Allies Turn Focus to China: NATO Update](#)," Bloomberg, 14 June 2021; David M. Herszenhorn and Rym Momtaz, "[NATO leaders see rising threats from China, but not eye to eye with each other](#)," Politico, 14 June 2021.

⁸⁷ China was first referenced by NATO heads of state and government in London ("We recognise that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance"), but this meeting did not have summit status. NATO, "London Declaration," para 6.

⁸⁸ NATO, "Brussels Summit Communiqué," paras 55-6.

4. THE 'SOUTHERN AGENDA'

While differences over how NATO should respond to the challenge of China are primarily evident between the US and the European Allies, differences over NATO's role in dealing with the arc of instability to its south are more apparent among the European Allies themselves. An additional concern amongst Europeans is that the US will increasingly disengage from the greater Middle East and North Africa, withdrawing critical capabilities and leaving them to shoulder a larger share of the security burden there or suffer the consequences for failing to do so.⁸⁹

It is not a surprise that Allies in southern Europe see instability in the regions to their south and south-east as a pressing security concern—and sometimes as a more serious threat than the threat from Russia.⁹⁰ They are more likely to suffer the consequences of instability in these regions—in particular, terrorism, migration

France, for example, claims that a dynamic of revenge and violent engagement is preparing the next generation of jihadists in Syria, Iraq, neighbouring countries and farther afield, and that in the next decade “the jihadist phenomenon will continue to pose a global security challenge” while “Western countries remain targets of choice for jihadist organisations. Moreover, the endogenous threat has never been so high and is likely to increase further in the near future.”⁹³ For Italy, the ‘enlarged Mediterranean’ (a security complex comprising the coastal states of the Mediterranean Sea, the Maghreb and Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East up to the Caucasus) is “a top priority for Italian interests and national security.”⁹⁴ For Spain, “instability and security crises threaten to become constants in [the Middle East and North Africa] region in coming years” with North Africa a strategic priority “because of its possible direct and indirect impact on national security, given the concentration of threats and challenges in the area.”⁹⁵

The multi-faceted problems of the regions to Europe's south and south-east demand the multi-faceted solutions that the EU can potentially provide

pressures and trafficking of people and illicit goods. A recent development likely to contribute to the finding of common ground between southern and north-eastern Allies is the growing geopolitical influence of Russia, and to a lesser extent China, in the Mediterranean and beyond.⁹¹ Some commentators, for example, fear that Russia will exploit the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan.⁹²

Key southern Allies are clear on the importance and magnitude of the threat from the south.

Key southern Allies are clear on the importance and magnitude of the threat from the south

The picture among other Allies is more mixed. The UK has committed to continue to contribute to the global coalition against Daesh in Iraq and Syria

as well as pledging (as befits a country with ambitions to be “a European country with global interests”) to work for growth and stability across the entire region to NATO's south and south-east.⁹⁶ But German analysts, noting that geostrategic and geoeconomics conflict is increasingly centred on the Mediterranean Sea, regret that Germany and its EU partners do not give this development the attention it deserves

⁸⁹ Ministère des Armées, “Strategic Update 2021,” 19; Marrone and Muti, “NATO's Future,” 2-3; Kalev Stoicescu, *Stabilising the Sahel. The Role of International Military Operations* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2020), 7.

⁹⁰ Ian Lesser, “Emerging security challenges in NATO's southern neighbourhood,” Elcano Royal Institute, 3 July 2019.

⁹¹ “NATO 2030: United for a New Era,” 34.

⁹² Warda Imram, “Afghanistan: Does US exit offer Russia a chance to fill power vacuum?” Die Welle, 20 April 2021.

⁹³ Ministère des Armées, “Strategic Update 2021,” 14-15.

⁹⁴ Marrone and Muti, “NATO's Future,” 17.

⁹⁵ Presidency of the Government (Spain), “National Security Strategy 2017,” 43-44.

⁹⁶ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, 63-4.

and observe that Europe will suffer the consequences of conflict in the region even as it loses influence there to actors like Russia, Turkey and the UAE.⁹⁷

The German analysts' reference to the EU is pertinent, as the multi-faceted problems of the regions to Europe's south and south-east demand the multi-faceted solutions that the EU can potentially provide, more than they do the harder security solutions that NATO may offer. It is perhaps inherently difficult to define a role for the Alliance in terms of actionable proposals which will bring tangible results.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, southern Allies and other commentators frequently expect NATO to take on a greater role—even if there is little consensus on what that role should be. Clashes among the Mediterranean Allies themselves also make the definition of such a role very difficult.⁹⁹ In their Brussels meeting in June 2021, NATO leaders were far from explicit, merely pledging to “continue to strengthen our capacity to deal with the threats and challenges emanating from the South, including in the Mediterranean Sea region and its approaches, by enhancing our strategic awareness, our plans, and the readiness of our forces.”¹⁰⁰

Among other, slightly more concrete proposals, the Secretary General's group of independent experts advocated a “clear, consistent approach to the South,” to address both traditional threats and the growing presence of Russia and China, including increased military preparedness and response, cooperation with the EU and other regional organisations, and increased political dialogue among Allies.¹⁰¹ Analysts at the Atlantic Council have also recommended a strengthened military posture in the south (“making the south the new east”) as well as more capacity building including with partners such as the EU.¹⁰² Italian

analysts, meanwhile, have proposed a “non-traditional approach for NATO, with a focus on the civilian alongside the military dimension, by supporting more than intervening directly, and by establishing partnerships with well-rooted local non-state actors: NGOs, UN and EU agencies, delegations and missions.”¹⁰³

Broadly, increasing instability in the regions to NATO's south and south-east will require Europe to do more, not least because American attention here is likely to be diverted to the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰⁴ Whether the European Allies rise to this challenge through the EU, which might be a better fit for capacity building initiatives, or NATO, in response to more traditional military threats, a southern response will clearly put pressure on their military resources.

CONCLUSIONS

In its assessment of the various challenges and threats to Euro-Atlantic security, NATO's June 2021 summit produced a good outcome for the Baltic states. The communiqué included strong condemnation of Russia's destabilising

Increasing instability in the regions to NATO's south and south-east will require Europe to do more

behaviour and important commitments (if not especially concrete ones) to continue to build deterrence in north-east Europe. The US appears not to have pushed hard for a potentially distracting role for NATO in dealing with China, and the challenges to NATO's south—another potential diversion of attention and resources—were largely untouched.

It is likely that the tensions between Allies evident in recent years were temporarily dissolved in their euphoria at being once again

⁹⁷ Muriel Asseburg, Wolfram Lacher and Guido Steinberg, “Regionale Unordnung in Europas südlicher Nachbarschaft. Konfliktakteure verfolgen Interessen unbeirrt [Regional disorder in Europe's southern neighborhood. Conflict actors persistently pursue interests],” in *Internationale Politik unter Pandemie-Bedingungen Tendenzen und Perspektiven für 2021* [International politics under Pandemic Conditions Trends and perspectives for 2021] ed. Barbara Lippert, Stefan Mair and Volker Perthes, 73, 76.
⁹⁸ Marrone and Muti, “NATO's Future”, 18.
⁹⁹ Kalev Stoicescu, *NATO's Southern Neighbourhood. The Alliance Needs a Strategy for the Regions to its South* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2021), 4-5.

¹⁰⁰ NATO, “Brussels Summit Communiqué,” para 34.

¹⁰¹ “NATO 2030: United for a New Era,” 34-5.

¹⁰² Alexander R. Vershbow and Lauren M. Speranza, *More in the Med. How NATO Can Refocus its Efforts in the South and Italy Can Lead the Charge* (Washington DC: The Atlantic Council, 2019), 8-13.

¹⁰³ Marrone and Muti, “NATO's Future”, 18.

¹⁰⁴ The new US administration is clear that it does not “believe that military force is the answer to the [Middle East] region's challenges.” Biden, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” 11.

able to deal constructively across the Atlantic and in their shared determination to show revitalised Alliance unity to the world. The 2021 summit will certainly help set the tone for the coming process of redrafting the strategic concept, but the communiqué is only a short-duration snapshot, while the concept must look ten years ahead. Allies will need to continue their search for a balanced response to the multiple challenges they face that is satisfactory to all.

Clearly, the Baltic states would be dissatisfied with a new strategic concept that does not take the threat from Russia seriously, or one that pushes NATO too far in the direction of addressing other challenges at the expense of deterrence and defence in north-east Europe. The evidence presented in this analysis suggests that most Allies will be sympathetic to Baltic concerns, and may be ready to act on these sympathies by agreeing to a strategic concept that lays the ground for further measures to enhance NATO's deterrence and defence posture. At the same time, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania clearly cannot expect that NATO will not accommodate the legitimate security concerns of other Allies, nor will they wish to see Alliance cohesion weakened by an agenda that appears to privilege their security interests over those of others. A proactive Baltic approach might thus advocate a formula that encourages concrete measures to strengthen deterrence and defence and does more to reflect the desire of Allies to respond to challenges from the south and from China. NATO's deterrence and defence against Russia in the north-east will, in any case, be strengthened if NATO acts, for example, to prevent Russia from gaining more, potentially malign, influence in the regions to its south and south-east, and if it works to build resilience to China's economic, cyber and other activities in Europe that could adversely impact the Allies' abilities to conduct collective defence in Europe.

Such a formula will increase NATO's workload at the same time as the leading Ally—the US—continues to pay greater attention to the Asia-Pacific region. The unavoidable conclusion is that the European Allies will need to do more themselves. Whether they can rise to the challenge will be key to NATO's success in the coming decades.

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