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NATO's Strategic Concept: Three Do's and Don'ts

The new Strategic Concept must clarify the tasks that NATO should undertake in the great-power competition with, and defense of common values against, Russia and China.

By Henrik Larsen

At NATO's next summit on 14 June 2021 in Brussels, the allies are expected to formally initiate the drafting of a new Strategic Concept. Sitting one level below the North Atlantic Treaty in the hierarchy of NATO documents, the concept will be authoritative for NATO's strategic thinking until 2030. The concept walks a fine line. China's rise combined with the persistent threat from Russia gives NATO increased prominence as a protector of free societies. Yet, the Strategic Concept should strive for precision about where NATO's core business of collective defense can bring added value in the pursuit of this goal.

As NATO adapts itself for the future, it should seek to tame the liberal impetus to define everything illiberal as a challenge requiring a response by the alliance. To this end, the drafters of the new Strategic Concept should follow three "do's": (1) define alliance cohesion as military burden sharing, (2) tie the meaning of resilience to collective defense, and (3) state NATO's intention to define gold standards and norms for the use of emerging and disruptive technology. However, the drafters should also bear in mind three "don'ts": (1) excessive criticism of fellow allies' democratic shortcomings, (2) extension of resilience into ordinary law-enforcement tasks, and (3) the pitfall of "going global."

New Concept Overdue

A replacement for the existing Strategic Concept from 2010 is long overdue. It was written in the context of the Afghan-

istan operation and discussions about "going global" in a benign strategic environment. The 2010 concept predated the rise of great-power competition that is now the order of the day. It aimed at a "true strategic partnership" with Russia, which was definitively shattered by its invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. It did not mention China, which despite its geographical distance has risen as a threat to the resilience and openness of Western societies. Moreover, it was written before foreign policy came to suffer from "Westlessness," which refers to a divided and in some parts illiberal West.

The new Strategic Concept should seek to rectify the lack of focus in the previous concept. Russia and China are a relevant backdrop because they give the alliance a strong sense of common purpose. However, discussions prior to the actual drafting indicate that the concept risks

Key Points

❙ The Strategic Concept should concentrate on military burden sharing to improve alliance cohesion rather than on the condemnation of allies' democratic shortcomings.

❙ The concept should tie resilience to collective defense and national security but not extend into an area like ordinary law enforcement.

❙ The concept should state NATO's ambition to define gold standards for new technology but refrain from "going global".

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg holds a virtual meeting with the NATO 2030 Reflection Group on 8 April 2020. *nato.int*

over-accentuating NATO's liberal identity in some areas to the extent that the alliance may lose precision about the role that it can realistically play. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg last year commissioned a report from a NATO 2030 Reflection Group of experts. According to this report, NATO should return to its pre-1989 role as "a bulwark of democracy against an authoritarian challenger." In this view, the alliance must play a larger role in an international order that allows open societies to flourish. It should also prevent the erosion of NATO's own values by recommitting to democracy, the rule of law, and free institutions.[1]

As the drafting begins, it is important for the alliance to get its focus straight from the outset. The NATO 2030 report offers useful recommendations and is likely to influence the next Strategic Concept. However, the drafters should identify the key meeting points where the role of defense alliance can be reconciled with that of liberal bulwark and hold itself back from the areas where it cannot.

Do #1: Cohesion as Burden Sharing

The Strategic Concept should establish military burden sharing as a formula for alliance cohesion. Wavering US commitment to collective defense is the most serious internal threat to NATO since its creation. Joe Biden's narrow victory in 2020 showed that it would be a mistake to ignore the possibility that Trump or a like-minded candidate could be elected president in 2024, with all of the consequences that this would have for NATO. European complacency after the return of a European-friendly president may be the biggest danger to alliance cohesion. The drafters of the concept must recognize the perception of inadequate defense spending by NATO allies as a major factor nourishing the Trump narrative of foreign countries free-riding on the American taxpayer.

The concept should explicitly mention China's rise and the threat from Russia to explain why the Europeans

must contribute more to the defense of their own continent and thus allow the US to focus its military resources on Asia. Recurrent policy discussions about European strategic autonomy must not obscure this fact. Allocations for the European Defense Fund and Military Mobility to allow a quicker movement of forces and equipment to the eastern border are first steps. A second step may be for NATO to leave the responsibility for KFOR, its 22-year-long peacekeeping operation in Kosovo, to the EU.

The third and ultimate step is for European allies to shoulder the chief burden in the deterrence of Russia. Current US grand strategy aims to secure the capability to defeat one great power and deter another in a different theater at the same time. Allowing the US to focus its military resources on China requires a division of labor in which Europe gradually assumes responsibility for the defense of its own continent, thus allowing the US to reduce, but not eliminate, its presence. Such an arrangement should leave no doubt about US involvement in case of aggression but not assign it the role of first responder.[2] The European allies should continue to draw on NATO's intelligence and integrated command structure but otherwise invest in the readiness of their own forces to make their conventional deterrent solid and credible within this decade.

Don't #1: Condemn Democratic Shortcomings

While focusing on military burden sharing, the Strategic Concept should avoid creating the illusion that NATO can strengthen its cohesion by condemning allies' democratic shortcomings. The NATO 2030 report is correct in pointing out that disunity would allow Russia and China to take advantage of individual allies in ways that endanger their collective interests and security (Hungary and Turkey, for example). The report calls for all members to pledge recommitment to the letter and spirit of the North Atlantic Treaty's wording about democracy and the rule of law. It also calls for an increase in the number of political consultations to manage differing threat assessments.

However, the drafters of the Strategic Concept should be careful not to confuse process with result. Allies are free to discuss any topic they wish in the North Atlantic Council. The introduction of mechanisms to monitor or shame allies for not living up to the treaty commitments to free institutions and the rule of law almost certainly will fail to gain consensus and may alienate them further from a sense of belonging to the Western community. Criticism of fellow allies' democratic shortcomings should focus on what could actually curb authoritarian developments. NATO is simply not the best forum in which to monitor compliance with democratic standards.

Do #2: Tie Resilience to Collective Defense

Since 2014, the allies have expanded their toolbox to fight hybrid threats. Now it falls upon the Strategic Concept to crystallize what resilience means for NATO. It should do so by prioritizing tasks that relate to collective defense.

Russia's capacity for large-scale aggression in Ukraine and its recent saber rattling highlight the centrality of NATO's Article 5. While NATO since 2014 has made progress in deterring *faits accomplis* on its eastern border, it is important to keep in mind that Russia sees the use of kinetic force and the informational-psychological space as a continuum of coercion in non-linear warfare.[3] Russia's actions in Georgia, Syria, and even in Ukraine confirm that it is sensitive to the human and financial costs of military adventurism and more comfortable operating in the digital-subversive space where it can exploit the open nature of Western societies.

To mirror Russia's operational thinking, the Strategic Concept must tie conventional deterrence into NATO's gray-zone preparedness. It must reaffirm NATO's existing progress: recognition of cyber as an operational domain where Article 5 applies, its intensified counter-disinformation efforts, and its focus on the capacities to ensure national security. The concept may additionally recognize eastern allied territory (with significant Russian-speaking minorities) as particularly vulnerable to destabilization in a crisis.

To counter China, the Strategic Concept should specify which existing resilience tasks relate to NATO defense capacity. It should recognize foreign (Chinese) acquisitions of critical infrastructure as a vulnerability in force mobility in a crisis as well as 5G technology produced in illiberal countries (China) as a challenge to continued allied intelligence sharing and military planning. Moreover, resilience has become relevant from the perspective of outer space: Given that China has space ambitions, the Strategic Concept should clarify how it may affect Article 5. Clearly, it should address the vitality of Western space-based navigation systems (Global Positioning System, Galileo), which would be a rival's first natural target to eliminate before an armed attack against a NATO ally.

Don't #2: Extend into Ordinary Law Enforcement

The NATO 2030 report recommends the establishment of a Center of Excellence for Democratic Resilience to help allies resist interference from hostile external actors in the functioning of democratic institutions and processes. It is not clear how this would add value to the existing Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats under joint EU-NATO auspices. However, if the Strategic Concept wishes to follow this recommendation, it seems important to make one crucial distinction.

On the one hand, foreign influence campaigns on NATO soil, whether cyber or physical operations, require increased cooperation and information exchange among Western intelligence services. Counter-intelligence and counter-terrorism are typical competencies of intelligence services. On the other hand, NATO is hardly the right forum for ordinary law-enforcement matters with no clear connection to national security, especially in light of differing legal regimes among allies. Further areas of NATO cooperation that Biden has proposed, such as the fight against weaponized corruption, illicit party financing, the outsourcing of influence campaigns, and cyber theft[4], do not easily fall within NATO business.

Do #3: Set Gold Standards for Tech

China is not a territorial threat to the alliance but an economic great power with a high-tech edge that the Soviet Union never was. NATO has a direct interest in its allies maintaining superiority in so-called emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs). Innovation today no longer comes from the defense sector driven by government research and development. This fact requires NATO and allied governments to engage with the private communities in which innovation happens to identify dual-use cases, the need for legislation to follow suit, and the protection of technology against licit or illicit exploitations.

The Strategic Concept may specify NATO's role in the high-tech aspects of military capability and resilience. NATO will never become a regulator since it has no verification mechanism. However, NATO has traditionally defined gold standards for military technology for allies and close partners. The Strategic Concept should affirm that the alliance has a similar role in setting interoperability standards for EDT. It

Further Reading

Sara Bjerg Møller / Sten Rynning, **"Revitalizing Transatlantic Relations: NATO 2030 and Beyond,"** *Washington Quarterly* 44:1 (2021).
The case for NATO to go "narrow and deep" instead of "broad and shallow".

Mikael Wigell, **"Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy: a theory of external interference in liberal democracy,"** *International Affairs* 95:2 (2019).
Portrays the protection of Western democracies from external interference.

Henrik Larsen, **"NATO's Democratic Retrenchment: Hegemony after the Return of History,"** (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).
Examines the alliance's adaptation to an illiberal world.

should also affirm the alliance's role in defining norms for their responsible use and for export controls to prevent them from falling into the hands of rival powers.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is at the forefront of the alliance's tech adaptation, which comes as China and Russia are pressing ahead with AI applications in their militaries. Whereas NATO armed forces are only beginning to consider AI for intelligence analysis and logistics, China's disregard for ethics gives reason for concerns about its use of autonomous AI-powered weapon systems. Focus on interoperability (sharing datasets and streamlining AI algorithms) seems urgent, as the US and Europe are implementing systems at different speeds and proposing divergent regulatory approaches.[5]

Don't #3: Go Global

NATO is not the organization that is best positioned to lead on global trade and technology-related issues. It can insist that US and European economic dealings avoid aiding China's efforts in areas of advanced technology. It can also contrast its own policies with China's authoritarian approach to autonomous systems and data storage. On the other hand, NATO is not the forum to solve EU-US regulatory issues or to devise industrial policy for its allies.

If NATO wishes to stretch further into non-military aspects of security without harm to the integrity of its core business, it needs to enhance the use of its European partnerships. This concerns especially the EU due to the exclusive trade competencies that are needed for transatlantic harmonization (standard setting, investment screenings, export controls) as well as the significant civilian capacities it coordinates with relevance for gray-zone defense. NATO may perhaps see relevance in deepening its partnerships with Switzerland, Finland, and Sweden due to the high-tech industries they host (robotics, quantum computing, 5G).

As NATO definitively winds down its operations in Afghanistan, it must restrain itself from renewed global engagements in view of China's rise. Stoltenberg has emphasized the relevance of like-minded partner countries in the Asia-Pacific in preserving the rules-based international order. However, NATO's cooperation with these partners should focus primarily on their utility for the alliance's own efforts at supply-chain and technological decoupling from China. This could also lead to intelligence sharing and joint military exercises without necessarily giving NATO a global reach.

Allied Consensus

In adapting itself to meet the challenges posed by Russia and China, NATO must align its role as a defense alliance with aspirations to be a liberal bulwark. NATO remains a political-military alliance centered on the Euro-Atlantic area: It can define cohesion as military burden sharing, it should define resilience in a way that is closely related to national security, and it has a role to play in standard setting for tech with military implications.

Walking the fine line between defense alliance and liberal bulwark, if done successfully, could win political support for the Strategic Concept. Such an effort could navigate a compromise among NATO's three main tiers: globalists (US, UK), regionalists (France, Germany) and the "Article 5ers" (Eastern and much of Central Europe). The Strategic Concept is the place for allies to agree on elastic and open-ended language, especially because most European countries seek to avoid a confrontation with China and Russia. NATO is not moving east, but the Strategic Concept is the right place to lay the groundwork for its full adaptation to the great-power challenges from that direction.

Selected sources

1. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO 2030: United for a New Era (Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General, 2020).

2. Stephen M. Walt, "Exactly How Helpless Is Europe?," *Foreign Policy*, 21.5.2021. See also *Survival* 63:1 (February/March 2021).

3. Dima D. Adamsky, "From Moscow with coercion: Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41:1–2 (2018).

4. Joseph R. Biden / Michael Carpenter, "How to Stand Up to the Kremlin: Defending Democracy Against Its Enemies," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2018).

5. Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Allies and Artificial Intelligence: Obstacles to Operations and Decision-Making," *Texas National Security Review* 3:2 (2020).

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