Why NATO Needs a New Strategic Concept, What It Should Say, and How to Achieve It

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Why NATO Needs a New Strategic Concept

NATO is the most successful alliance in history. It is the preeminent institutional expression of the transatlantic bond and our common commitment to shared values. One reason for its success is its ability to adapt to evolving challenges and dangers.

Our alliance is again under pressure. NATO faces simultaneous dangers to its east, to its south, and from a series of security challenges unbounded by geography, all at a time when the four-year legacy of Donald Trump has cast doubt on US reliability, when our societies and our economies have been sickened by the coronavirus pandemic, and as some allies have stepped away from their own commitments to democracy and to each other. These internal tensions may be as consequential as external dangers to NATO’s cohesion and effectiveness.

Whenever NATO allies have faced critical junctures in the past, they have sought a new consensus on the changing strategic environment and how to address it together by crafting a guidance document that is called the alliance’s “Strategic Concept”.

NATO’s current Strategic Concept, its sixth over the past sixty years, was adopted in 2010, before:

- Russia’s annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula, its military intervention in eastern Ukraine, and its continued characterisation of NATO as a “threat” to Russia;
- terrorist attacks in a number of Western cities and the rise of the so-called Islamic State;
- the Syrian civil war, the continued conflict in Libya, and the 2015–2016 migration crisis;
• the systematic use of hybrid operations and unconventional warfare in both Europe’s east and south;
• continuous cyber attacks and intrusions on allied and partner societies and institutions, including widespread interferences and disinformation campaigns;
• the erosion of arms control and an array of confidence-building measures intended to regulate nuclear and conventional competition, avoid accidents and prevent incidents;
• China’s military modernisation, its aggressive stance on Taiwan and maritime claims, its involvement in militarising space and commercial activities in the Arctic, its purchases of strategic ports in Europe, its involvement in defence-related supply chains, and its joint exercises with Russia;
• fundamental internal challenges to allied cohesion – from democratic backsliding in a number of allied countries, including the United States, to the Trump administration’s consistent attacks on NATO and NATO allies – which have frayed alliance unity and cohesion;
• the COVID pandemic and increased concern about climate change.

The 2010 Strategic Concept shows its age in other areas. It declares that “the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low”. It says little about unconventional warfare tactics, makes only passing reference to the importance of enhancing resilience in the face of growing disruptions to critical societal functions, is silent with regard to growing anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) dangers, and devotes little attention to the need to generate a strategy for the vast and turbulent area to the alliance’s south, as well as to its east.

The 2010 Concept mentions the need to use resources efficiently and to sustain necessary levels of defence spending, but it does not adequately describe the extent of Europe’s defence spending deficit and the need to correct it quickly. It is silent on the risk of having no plans or models for returning to full mobilisation, if necessary, should a contingency arise in which allies may need to make good on their mutual defence commitments under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. It says little about the need for NATO to build the defence and security capabilities of vulnerable but critically important non-NATO members. It places inadequate stress on the need for better shared
intelligence, accurate situational awareness, rapid decision-making, and the defence of NATO’s eastern flank. It is inadequate when it comes to addressing the implications of revolutionary technological innovation for the alliance.

In sum, NATO’s Strategic Concept is not only woefully out of date, it has also become something of an embarrassment. This is recognised throughout the alliance. Yet while Donald Trump was in office, allies were fearful about opening up the Strategic Concept to a new review, concerned with what might happen. Instead, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg skilfully invoked a “Reflection Group” of former senior officials to propose ways forward for the alliance. As of this writing, the Reflection Group has not yet issued its recommendations, which will come later this year. The lone US participant, however, is a former Trump political appointee. However well-meaning the Reflection Group’s recommendations may be, they are not likely to reflect the priorities of a new US administration.

With a new US administration led by a president who has called NATO a “sacred duty”, allies have an opportunity to use a Strategic Concept review to reaffirm their mutual commitments, generate new unity, and update NATO’s tasks and tools within a narrative that explains why the alliance is as relevant for our future as it has been in our past. Such a review can usefully prod allies to reinvent NATO as an alliance continuously adapting to future threats. It can also be a means to engage a new generation of citizens and leaders who do not view the alliance through the twin lenses of the Cold War or the “endless war” in Afghanistan. They want to know why NATO is relevant for the future, not why it was important in the past. They deserve an answer.

What a New Strategic Concept Should Say

Given current fissures, alliance cohesion must be the central strategic underpinning of a new Strategic Concept. NATO must shore up its foundation as an effective defensive alliance of nations bound by common values. Reaffirming our common commitment to this foundational purpose as the basis upon which NATO must conduct its activities will be the most important element of a new Strategic Concept.
The preamble to the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty that established NATO states that the signatories “are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law”.\(^1\) Article II declares that signatories “will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions”.

During the Cold War, geopolitical realities led NATO to overlook the questionable democratic credentials of some of its member states. Today, the alliance can no longer afford to look the other way. In this new world of dangers, democracies that are not robust are more vulnerable to subversion through corruption, information warfare, and blackmail. Moreover, malign influences within such states could mean that non-NATO countries could influence internal NATO decision-making.

A Strategic Concept review can provide an avenue through which allies can assess mechanisms to uphold their mutual commitment to strengthen their “free institutions”. A regular review of allied commitments to democratic principles enshrined in the North Atlantic Treaty preamble could be an important outcome of an updated Strategic Concept. Various proposals have been suggested in this regard. Achieving consensus on these elements could be difficult. Nonetheless, we must do so.

With this foundational affirmation in place, NATO will be well-positioned to update its three existing core tasks – collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security – and take on a new fourth core task: building comprehensive resilience to disruptive threats to our societies. The alliance must be able to perform each of these core tasks by incorporating military tools into a broader array of diplomatic, political and economic instruments.

Collective defence and deterrence remain central to NATO’s purpose. Allies must enhance deterrence, including through new military technologies, greater readiness, improved military mobility, more effective and rapid decision-making, and the continued need for arms control and incident management. They must do what is necessary to counter an aggressive Russia. Together with its allies, the United

States will need to undertake a strategic force posture review that considers optimal levels and positioning of forces needed to achieve these tasks. That is likely to mean a reconsideration of the Trump tweet announcing the removal of US forces from key bases and commands in Europe.

Advancing the alliance’s ability to deter and defend also means prioritising ways to deal with unconventional conflicts such as cyber attacks, energy intimidation, election interference and disinformation campaigns.

Allies should pair these efforts with a consideration of dialogue mechanisms that can make NATO intent and consequences clear to Moscow and address common issues, increase transparency, de-escalate and deconflict.

Crisis management is a second core task of the alliance worth preserving and updating. NATO must continue to be able to reduce threats, prevent and respond to crises in its immediate neighbourhood, and help address crises outside its area of responsibility that could affect alliance interests. This core task has dominated the business of the alliance for most of the past two decades. It focuses primarily on a range of diffuse challenges from NATO’s south. In some situations, NATO will do best by acting as a supporting organisation rather than as a leading institution. It is a difficult set of challenges. Eastern European NATO members are well advised to take such challenges seriously, however, if they expect solidarity regarding their concerns from allies to their south.

Cooperative security is the alliance’s third core task that remains relevant yet has evolved over time. The alliance has defined cooperative security primarily in terms of working on common security challenges together with other partners. This task remains important. NATO has more partners than members. Partners provide significant political support to the alliance and can also contribute substantial military forces. Today, however, cooperative security must focus on addressing challenges to the global commons. The alliance is an important actor in at least four dimensions of the global commons: protecting freedom of the seas; upholding the global information commons; ensuring security and norms of peaceful behaviour in space; and protecting alliance equities in Arctic security. China’s activities pose challenges in all four areas. Such challenges can only be addressed cooperatively with a
range of non-NATO state and non-state actors. In some areas, NATO will not be the lead institution, but it can offer specialised capabilities. In other areas, for instance protecting freedom of navigation, it needs to be equipped to play a leading role.

Under the umbrella of cooperative security, a new Strategic Concept has the potential to anchor an operational partnership with the European Union that will leverage additional resources for the alliance, help it deal with a range of civil-military and unconventional challenges, shore up democratic standards and shared resilience, and perhaps even lead to a “military Schengen” easing cross-border movements, mirroring the EU’s own civilian Schengen zone. Other forward-looking NATO partnerships may also be worth considering, for instance inviting Japan and the Republic of Korea to become NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partners, and creating an Indo-Pacific/NATO Council or Commission as a forum in which the alliance and close partners from the region can identify cooperative activities and share assessments about evolving security challenges, including from China.

Where the alliance can be most innovative is in agreeing to a new core task of comprehensive resilience. The growing need to implement the concept of resilience – the ability to anticipate, prevent and, if necessary, protect against and bounce forward from disruptions to critical functions of our societies – has become a challenge on par with NATO’s other core tasks, and is in fact essential to the other three, yet it has not been adequately integrated into allied planning or operational activities beyond country-by-country baseline requirements. Corrosive cyber operations, disruptions to defence-relevant supply chains, and the COVID-19 pandemic have each underscored the need for the alliance to more effectively address unconventional challenges to human security. Comprehensive resilience would also include efforts to withstand hybrid attacks on NATO societies and political will. While NATO scrambled to offer support to communities affected by the pandemic, allies should engage proactively to anticipate and be positioned more effectively to address such challenges should they arise in the future. NATO will also be impacted by global warming, and efforts to deal with it may eventually require the capabilities of NATO militaries for things like emergency rescue and logistics support. This is also an area to which a more effective NATO-EU partnership can contribute.
A new Strategic Concept that generates attention to a diverse range of external dangers, including the need to address resilience and human security needs, could offer NATO a way to tune its long-standing burden-sharing debate to new circumstances, including by adding resilience expenditures to calculations regarding how much each ally contributes to alliance efforts.

**How to Achieve It**

A NATO Summit no later than late spring/early summer 2021 can set the stage with allied heads of state and government affirming their mutual commitments to each other under the North Atlantic Treaty. At that summit, leaders should initiate a process leading to a new Strategic Concept to be unveiled at a bookend summit within 12 months. A new Strategic Concept is an opportunity to get all allies back on track in a NATO that is more cohesive politically, more capable militarily, more balanced between North American and European contributions, and more resilient in the face of disruptive dangers to our societies.