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## NATO's strategic concept: responding to Russia and China

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### ABSTRACT

Both China and Russia have become more assertive strategic actors since NATO last revised its Strategic Concept in 2010. What major strategic decisions do Russia, China, and other major powers face in the next decade? How should these changes be reflected in the next Strategic Concept? We argue that NATO must seriously address challenges from China and Russia through increased commitment, preparedness, and coordination of the conventional forces Allies make available. This may require a more integrated, ready, and responsive command headquarters that should be agreed by Allies with the 2022 Strategic Concept and implemented without delay.

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Both China and Russia have become more assertive strategic actors since NATO last revised its Strategic Concept in 2010. What major strategic decisions do Russia, China, and other major powers face in the next decade? How should these changes be reflected in the next Strategic Concept? We argue that NATO must seriously address challenges from China and Russia through increased commitment, preparedness, and coordination of the conventional forces Allies make available. This may require a more integrated, ready, and responsive command headquarters that should be agreed by Allies with the 2022 Strategic Concept and implemented without delay.

The NATO Alliance, having weathered the Cold war with all its challenges, and navigated the post-Cold War “end of history,” now confronts a world that might be seen as a return to the “good old, bad old days” characterized by the rise (again!) of totalitarianism and challenges to the resiliency of democratic values. For those who question a future purpose for NATO, the next NATO Strategic Concept must be a forceful recall of the centrality of the Alliance’s shared values and a commitment to their defense and promotion in counterpoint to the competing world views proposed by Moscow and Beijing. The Strategic Concept must explore the possibility of wedge strategies and call for increased commitment in the form of Secretary General Stoltenberg’s (2018) famous 3Cs: cash, capabilities, and contributions, increased readiness of national forces and NATO structures, and increased coordination of the means to respond. This last element presupposes a new centralized command able to anticipate and respond to all threats with proportionate and credible forces in a timely fashion; something the Alphen Group has titled, the NATO Allied Command Operations Mobile Heavy Force (AMHF) (Alphen Group 2022).

## NATO and the “dragonbear”

In the current geo-strategic context, NATO’s relevance is less seriously questioned as the Alliance is continuously confronted with military, diplomatic, informational, and economic provocations from Russia and China. Both competitors openly question the world order built by the United States and its allies from the ashes of World War II and start from the premise that the US-inspired construct is neither representative of peoples around the globe nor reflective of Chinese and Russian interests (Cooley and Nexon 2020). As Beijing and Moscow seek to exert influence, establish dominance, and supplant the Western-dominated world order (Schmitt 2020a), concern grows that there may be a looming “Dragonbear” alliance (Tchakarova 2020) to confront NATO and its allies (Lukin 2021). The relationship also has an economic dimension illustrated by the war in Ukraine: the ties between Moscow and Beijing allow Russia to partially mitigate the effect of Western sanctions. While there are several convenient reasons for the two leaders to cooperate in the short term, some research suggests the inherent imbalance between the interests of a rising China and stagnant Russia makes any cooperative relationship necessarily fragile and tenuous (Gregory 2022). The apparent convergence of interests reflected in the Putin-Xi collaboration is not necessarily indicative of common values and certainly cannot be extrapolated into grounds for any type of alliance on the model seen in the West. The incompatibility of military structures is an initial stumbling block but also longer-term goals for economic and societal objectives may not clearly align. For some observers, Putin’s approach to Xi is an opportunistic foray to stave off conflict on one front while he provokes in Europe (Person 2022).

The interest of the United States, and other NATO member states, is to avoid actions that drive the two leaders closer to each other in the short to mid-term while strengthening the bonds and the institutions that have built the prosperity of allies and partners to counter their provocations (Gorenburg 2020). It is also worth exploring the possibility of wedge strategies preventing the further alignment of the two states. Wedge strategies encompass concessions, compensations, and other inducements designed to detach or neutralize potential adversaries (Crawford 2011). NATO leaders should be encouraged to think about the types of inducements that could at least slow down the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing, considering the whole spectrum of statecraft. This should include the possibility to “weaponize interdependence,” understood as the ability to “leverage interdependent relationships to coerce others” (Farrell and Newman 2019, 45). These wedge strategies could aim at “heightening the contradictions” of societies that, despite the best efforts of their authoritarian leadership, are not monolithic.

China’s Xi Jinping is advancing “socialism with Chinese characteristics” that includes a more muscular party apparatus to enforce discipline and expand China’s influence at home and abroad. However, burgeoning economic progress following choices that moved China toward other advanced economies creates dissonance in a political system that eschews the term ‘capitalism’ (Huang and Veron 2022). Will this apparent conflict be suppressed or prove disruptive to China’s future?

By contrast, Vladimir Putin’s Russia appears at an inflection point. The military advances of the last decades have come at high cost and deprived the population of a higher standard of living (Sherlock 2020). Needing to justify these sacrifices,

Russia is engaging in disruptive activities in its neighborhood and seeking support of Beijing as a foil to the western alliance it seeks to undermine. The recent invasion of Ukraine is part of a pattern that envisions the roll-back of history to earlier glory as the desired end-state. Domestically, Putin seems to face growing popular opinion that things could be better for Russian citizens, although he seems to ignore such sentiments in the short term, while seeking to use external threats to justify continued hardship for the population (Sherlock 2020).

Yet, these wedge strategies are likely to be more effective only once the war in Ukraine has reached some kind of resolution: the war is a driver of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing that supersedes any attempt to separate the two countries.

### **Addressing the threat of emerging and disruptive technologies**

Russia and China are pursuing asymmetric, emerging, and disruptive technologies (EDT) to counter perceived technological advantages enjoyed by NATO forces. One area seems instructive, namely hypersonic weapons. While the implication of their employment gives many Allied planners pause, the very real challenges of perfecting and fielding such capabilities are evidence that continued development by Russia may serve as a drain on limited resources and result in no meaningful military advantage. The likelihood of achieving very fast, undetectable, and highly maneuverable weapons quickly bumps up against the limits of physics, negating these same advantages (Williams 2021). While hypersonics may have great applicability to future space travel efforts, their strength as weapons vectors is more questionable (Kunertova 2022).

As we extend consideration to the broader range of EDT (e.g. Artificial Intelligence (AI), autonomous systems, quantum computing/machine learning, robotics, big-data analytics, nanotechnologies, biotechnologies, and bioengineering, to cite the most prominent), the question arises whether states risk the possibility of the “tail wagging the dog” as EDT raise the stakes in international relations or cooler heads find diplomatic solutions to keep technological capacity from driving us into senseless cycles of threat and counter threat (Alphen Group 2022). In the meantime, NATO should make a dedicated investment in its air defense systems and upgrade its ballistic missile defense systems to take into account the new technology. This should include new capabilities, including a space sensor layer, glide phase interceptor, and alternative kill mechanisms (Karaka and Dahlgren 2022). NATO leaders should then discuss how to fund and deploy such capabilities. Overall, NATO leaders should start reflecting on the onset of a “third nuclear age” characterized by:

- a growing perception that strategic forces and population centers can be protected against nuclear attacks by missile defense
- the spread of non-nuclear weapons threatening nuclear and associated systems
- unconventional capabilities providing new means of attacking nuclear systems
- the real-time digitized environment constituting the new normal of nuclear signaling (Futter and Zala 2021).

These developments should be incorporated into NATO's nuclear deterrence posture, as discussed by Bell et al. in this special issue. Moreover, US, French, and UK efforts to modernize their nuclear deterrence capabilities should continue.

### **Adapting the current force posture**

For now, the combined specter of Chinese and Russian challenges to the West is sufficient incentive to develop credible responses. In the Cold War period, NATO forces were organized and prepared based on ratios of force that helped planners to calculate the likelihood of successful defense against attack, which served as a deterrent to Soviet adventurism and a bulwark to Alliance solidarity. Current analysis of the NATO Force Structure and anticipated response times in periods of increased tension provides sobering reading (Sokolsky 2017; Meijer and Brooks 2021). Observing Russian modernization, conduct of snap exercises, and generally improved levels of readiness, researchers have analyzed response time to indicators and warnings and the availability of forces to achieve required force ratios to conduct realistic defense in Western Europe (Khranchikhin 2018; Reach et al. 2020). Not only are the scenarios daunting to muster the requisite forces to achieve a deterrent effect, but the assumptions about training, readiness, deployability, and theater entry require a rather permissive environment that is quite speculative to imagine (Schmitt 2020b; Gilliam and Van Wie 2022). If conventional forces are not currently sufficient to deter future threats and Europe might have to be prepared to handle challenges with reduced American resources, there is a clear requirement that the strategic concept address this situation.

Until 2014, with the Russian annexation of Crimea and support to separatists in the east of Ukraine, Europe was considering a future “whole, free and at peace.” The imperatives driving NATO to consider a revised Strategic Concept more reflective of current reality call for the Allies to be clear-eyed and practical in their forward view, even if the aspiration remains unchanged. Given the possibility that armed forces could be called upon to defend the territory of NATO Allies, there must be a capability to anticipate, mobilize, deploy, and command such forces (Schmitt 2018). The current command and force structure of the Alliance may lack sufficient robustness and command and control authority to effectively accomplish these tasks on timelines that move at the “speed of relevance,” to quote former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis. The shadow strategic concept produced by the Alphen Group suggests creation of an Allied Command Operations Mobile Heavy Force that relies on Canadian and European Forces to form a single pool of trained and ready units to complement US Forces or to respond independently should US participation not be required (Alphen Group 2022).

While there is no shortage of headquarters and commanders in the NATO Force Structure, the perceived lack of total forces and the identifiable capability gaps that have been signaled for years in NATO mean that the issuance of a new strategic concept offers an opportunity to “get things right.” NATO should agree to create the headquarters proposed above; provide the trained, equipped, and ready forces need; and give the necessary authorities to enable to command to respond at the speed of relevance. A decision to take this step will strengthen Allied commitment to each other, build greater interoperability, and increase solidarity among Allies at a time when challenges

are being felt from many directions. The strengths that have made NATO successful for over 70 years are the foundation to continue to keep it strong for “seven times seventy years” going forward.

## Conclusion<sup>1</sup>

Finally, it must be noted that neither China nor Russia has a value base for its pursuit of influence and power internationally. They both depend on coercive means, payment, and hard power to maintain internal control and to manage their international relations. They offer the world models of political systems that deny individual liberty, democratic rights, the rule of law, and the derivative institutions required to sustain these values. From this perspective, the most imminent threats to the United States and its NATO allies may in fact be those which progressively undermine the values on which the transatlantic alliance was founded. The new strategic concept must recognize this threat and commit to respond to it by reinforcing in both domestic and foreign policies the application of the values on which the alliance’s future viability will continue to be based.

## Note

1. Some of the material in the conclusion was published in Sloan (2022) and is reproduced with the authorization from H-diplo.

## Disclosure statement

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