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NATO 2030 – The Military Dimension *

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NATO must “stay strong militarily, be more united politically, and take a broader approach globally”.¹ When launching the reflection process on NATO’s future role, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg set these three priorities to frame his vision of NATO 2030.

At their meeting in London in December 2019, NATO’s political leaders mandated a “forward-looking reflection process” on how NATO should further adapt to ensure it was able to successfully cope with a world of competing great powers due to the rise of China and Russia’s persistently aggressive posture, together with instability along NATO’s southern periphery, new transnational risks emerging from pandemics, climate change and disruptive technologies. Establishing a unified strategic vision is vital for upholding the Alliance’s cohesion, credibility and effectiveness. Looking forward, what does this mean for NATO’s military dimension?

The fast-evolving strategic environment

Determining the forces and capabilities that NATO will need in the coming decade requires an analysis of the main strategic factors and risks that are likely to bear most on the security of the transatlantic community, in particular those that could turn into military threats.

Russia and China – an opponent and a strategic rival

In the coming years, Allies will face a systemic challenge cutting across the domains of security and economics. China’s rise to great power status, in political, economic, technological and military terms with its ideological and geopolitical ambitions is the most significant strategic development of our time.² The US considers China as its primary strategic rival and is shifting its strategic centre of gravity to the Indo-Pacific region. This has significant implications for the security of Europe and thus, for NATO’s agenda and posture. China’s investments in, and partial control of, critical telecommunications, energy and transport infrastructure in Europe and the cooperation agreements reached with 17 Central and Eastern European countries could pose a risk to NATO’s cohesion and freedom of action in a crisis. Allies should carefully monitor and consult each other on China’s geo-economic “One Belt One Road” strategy and the resultant security risks, and develop a common approach on how to tackle them.

China will be a defining issue for the transatlantic relationship going forward. Still, NATO will continue to be responsible for the security of the Euro-Atlantic area. Balancing Russia’s policy of confrontation, its use of

* This *Policy Brief* on the *military* dimension of the Alliance is the third of a series of three texts that the NDC has released in relation to the NATO 2030 process. The first two texts, dealing with the *political* dimension and the *global* dimension of NATO’s future, were released in March (*Policy Briefs* No.5 & No.6).

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1 Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on launching #NATO2030 – Strengthening the Alliance in an increasingly competitive world, NATO, 8 June 2020.

Keywords

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Military adaptation
Deterrence and defence
Emerging and disruptive technologies
NATO-EU cooperation

2 “NATO 2030: united for a new era – Analysis and recommendations of the Reflection Group appointed by the NATO Secretary General”, 25 November 2020.

hybrid warfare in peacetime and crisis, and its growing conventional and nuclear potential directed against Europe requires America's enduring military presence in Europe as well as its extended nuclear deterrence. Yet, the US does not have the capacity to deter Russia, contain China and protect the global commons all at the same time. Washington is currently reviewing its global force posture and will likely strengthen its military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Hence, Europeans need to do much more for transatlantic security – for deterrence and defence in Europe, for crisis management in Europe's South and for supporting the US in protecting freedom of navigation. This is all the more significant as there are growing indications of a Russian-Chinese entente, causing Western democracies to face two concurrent strategic challenges – in the Euro-Atlantic area and in the Indo-Pacific region.

Emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs)

Adding to the new geopolitical challenges are revolutionary technological developments. As a consequence, NATO can no longer take its technological edge for granted. The challenge is manifold.

First, a wave of new technologies is, now and over the next 20 years, entering the global market and will be recast into defence applications, such as big data, Artificial Intelligence, autonomous systems, space-based and hypersonic systems, and quantum biotechnology materials. Disruptive effects will most likely occur through the combination of EDTs and the complex interaction between them.

Second, resulting defensive and offensive cyber capabilities, new generations of sensors, space-based capabilities, autonomous weapon systems, much-improved air and missile defence, drones and long-range precision missiles will have a profound impact on security and defence and transform the way armed forces are organized, equipped and operate.³

Third, in the past, innovation and modern technologies were primarily linked to developing defence capabilities. Western forces built their superior military power on the basis of the technological dominance they had over their adversaries, an approach that was often referred to as superiority of quality over quantity. Nowadays, in most instances, EDTs are the result of civilian research. Competition between commercial companies has led to shorter innovation cycles, especially in the area of information technology, as well as to a geographical diversification of the centres of innovation – with new hubs sprouting up especially in Asia. Moreover, the civilian origins and related commercial interests in EDTs inhibit any control over their proliferation and use.

Finally, non-Western actors, particularly China, but

also Russia, are contesting the Alliance's technological superiority through their own, independent innovation in strategically relevant technological areas. Their growing ability to incorporate civilian innovation into defence applications is increasingly challenging the effectiveness of Allies' conventional deterrence and defence capabilities.

While the next few years will most probably not see significant increases in the defence budgets of Alliance members, owing primarily to the economic aftermath of the pandemic, the credibility of deterrence and defence requires NATO to manage a mix of old and new: it still needs to rebuild capabilities required for high-intensity warfare, while it must also keep pace with the radical technological changes that provide both opportunities and risks to Allies' security and their armed forces.

NATO's military adaptation towards NATO 2030

As a full spectrum systemic rival shifting the global balance, China undoubtedly poses the main strategic challenge to the whole Western community. NATO must develop a political strategy for dealing with it. Russia in turn "is likely to remain a chief threat facing NATO over the coming decade".⁴ Therefore, NATO's focus must be on implementing its deterrence and defence posture expeditiously and in full.

Further strengthening NATO's deterrence and defence posture

Since 2014, the Alliance has been implementing a comprehensive programme to strengthen its deterrence and defence posture.⁵ It is geared to significantly enhancing NATO's capacity to respond to potential threats in a number of regions at risk – stretching from the Norwegian Sea through the Baltic and Black Sea regions to the Mediterranean region. To that end, NATO's posture essentially rests on five pillars: increasing resilience; enhanced forward military presence in the East; sufficient forces held at high readiness; the capacity to move them quickly over great distances to support threatened Allies; and reinvigorating nuclear deterrence. Significant progress has been achieved since 2014, but the implementation of NATO's posture is not yet complete. The following measures should be taken in the years to come:

- societal and systems' resilience against malicious cyber activities and disinformation, as well as the protection of critical transport infrastructure, energy supplies, power grids and digital communications constitute NATO's first line of deterrence and defence. NATO should set national resilience targets to ensure a common standard;

4 NATO 2030, p.16.

5 See H. Brauss, "NATO beyond 70 – Renewing a culture of readiness", International Centre for Defence and Security, Tallinn, November 2018.

- the multinational battlegroups in the Baltic States and Poland (NATO's enhanced Forward Presence) signal to Russia that even in the event of a limited incursion, it would immediately find itself in a military conflict with the whole of NATO. However, Allies should further improve the combat readiness of the battlegroups by adding combat support capabilities (e.g., artillery, air defence). Furthermore, US combat units should supplement each of the battlegroups in the Baltic States, as this would further increase their deterrent value;
- the 2018 NATO Readiness Initiative committed Allies to providing 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels requiring no more than 30 days to be employed in theatre. As also agreed, these forces must be developed into several land combat brigades, maritime task groups and enhanced air wings at very high readiness, thereby greatly improving NATO's rapid reinforcement capability and flexibility. European Allies, in particular the ones with large armed forces, must provide these forces in the coming years;
- the ability to move such forces rapidly over distance to regions at risk in a crisis is key to effective reinforcement of Allies. NATO and the EU are working together to create the multiple conditions to be met to enable military mobility across Europe, on land and in the air, in peacetime and during crises (e.g., rules and regulations, transport infrastructure), but progress is slow. Nations that are members of both NATO and the EU must engage to accelerate implementation;⁶
- in 2019, NATO decided not to respond to the deployment of Russian land-based intermediate-range, nuclear-capable missiles by deploying new nuclear missiles in Europe, but instead primarily by advanced conventional capabilities.⁷ In this context, it is of the utmost importance for European Allies to acquire effective air and missile defence capabilities, including against drones, to protect critical infrastructure and reinforcement forces. Furthermore, NATO should improve its joint fire capacity with long-range conventional precision-strike weapons, to be able to defeat Russia's Anti-Access/Area Denial capabilities and strike command and control centres to impede Russia's ability to launch regional conventional attacks;
- NATO must also uphold its nuclear sharing arrangements which remain central to the US' extended nuclear deterrence. Russia must realize that its territory would not be a sanctuary if it were to threaten Europe with "euro-strategic" missiles. Also, Russia must be coaxed into embarking on effective arms control as a means to enhance strategic stability in Europe. Sub-strategic weapons threatening Europe must be included in the future US-Russian nuclear arms control negotiations, and NATO should be the forum for consultations on any future arrangements;
- Allies should adopt the Secretary General's proposal to launch a NATO Defence Innovation Initiative⁸ to further interoperability and advance transatlantic cooperation in this field. Such an initiative should focus on enhancing research and development projects and bringing together the private sector with the scientific community and academia to properly inform and assist Allies in seeking both to adopt and protect innovative technologies.

Defining a European level of ambition

The sheer number and scale of the simultaneous challenges faced by the transatlantic partners make equitable burden-sharing between America and Europe a strategic necessity. The US still provides the majority of key strategic enabling capabilities for NATO. European nations must take on their full share in ensuring security for the transatlantic community, including with a view to potentially freeing up US forces to focus on the Indo-Pacific region. They must provide at least 50 percent of the conventional forces and strategic enablers required for collective defence in Europe and military crisis management. With this in mind, European Allies should set themselves a "European Level of Ambition" to achieve their joint share of NATO capabilities in quantitative and qualitative terms as a substantial part of NATO's overall capability requirements.⁹

On that basis, Europeans should develop a coherent force contingent capable of covering the whole military mission spectrum – from high-end manoeuvres' warfare to peacekeeping. Such a European Joint Force (EJF) within NATO should be designed to act as a first responder force to reinforce deterrence in Europe, conduct crisis response missions in Europe's neighbourhood and assist the US in protecting freedom of navigation. It must therefore be fully interoperable with US forces. As a result, such a high-end EJF would reinforce the "European pillar" of the transatlantic partnership and thus strengthen NATO. At the same time, the bulk of the EJF would essentially generate the EU's military ability to act on its own, since the 21 European Allies contributing to it are also EU members.

Further enhancing NATO-EU defence co-operation

The detailed capabilities needed for an EJF should be

6 See H. Brauss *et al.*, "Moving mountains for Europe's defence", CEPA Military Mobility project, Washington, DC, March 2021.

7 See statement by NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO's Defence Ministers on 26 June 2019.

8 Press Conference of NATO Secretary General on 15 February 2021.

9 N. Whitney, "Building Europeans' capacity to defend themselves", ECFR Policy Brief 04/2019.

identified in a strategic analysis and guidance endorsed by both NATO and the EU. Both are in charge of Europe's security and both essentially face the same risks and threats. The EU has started work on its "Strategic Compass",¹⁰ which for the first time provides a comprehensive analysis of the key challenges the EU faces. On that basis, the EU is now working to define the priorities for its Common Security and Defence Policy with respect to crisis management, resilience, capabilities and partnerships. In parallel, NATO will be working to update its Strategic Concept.¹¹ It is important that the development of these two concepts are closely coordinated to ensure strategic coherence. On that basis, the EU should contribute to developing those capabilities that are essential for the entire mission spectrum – crisis response and high-end defence alike, e.g., technologically advanced capabilities required to protect Europe, such as air and missile defence or long-range precision strike weapons, possibly through PESCO projects supported by the European Defence Fund.

To this end, NATO and EU defence planning staffs should further enhance their cooperation. The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) and the EU Capability Development instruments complement each other. In essence, the NDPP apportions capability targets packages to each Ally individually, which represent a fair share of NATO's overall military requirements. In turn, the EU instruments identify capability priorities that support the implementation of the EU Global Strategy. In this context, on the basis of a comprehensive overview of EU nations' capability development plans, including research and development (R&D) and defence industrial aspects¹², the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) identifies opportunities for both collaborative capability development and industrial cooperation.

Using the first CARD review conducted in 2020, the European Defence Agency (EDA) has proposed six Focus Areas for collaborative development of next generation capabilities:¹³ the Main Battle Tank; the Soldier System; European Patrol Class Surface Ships; Counter

10 European Union External Action Service (EEAS), "Towards a strategic compass", Fact Sheet, 20 November 2020.

11 Online press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the NATO Defence Ministers' meeting on 17 February 2020.

12 European Defence Agency, CARD – Results of the first coordinated annual review on defence, Fact Sheet, 20 November 2020.

13 *Ibid.*

UAV/Anti Access/Area Denial; Defence in Space; and Enhanced Military Mobility – areas which also match NATO requirements and would also be essential for an EJF. In light of that, NATO and EU defence planning staffs should systematically work together in setting capability targets for European Allies and NATO European Partners and advise them on how to implement them through collaborative projects.

Preserving NATO's technological edge

With a view to maintaining NATO's technological edge and ensuring transatlantic interoperability as well as developing an EJF, European Allies must invest in innovation programmes. However, as there are national concerns about technological sovereignty, governments have often gone their individual way. Also, as innovation increasingly emanates from the commercial sector, national control proves challenging, and the costs of innovation are rising exponentially.

This points towards the need for new, collaborative ways to help preserve NATO's technological edge. The Defence Innovation Initiative proposed by Secretary General Stoltenberg can build momentum in developing common approaches. In addition, NATO experts should liaise with both the EDA and the European Commission to coordinate efforts to incentivise EU nations to enhance investment and cooperation in both R&D and collaborative capability projects that remedy their shortfalls.

The initiative to link NATO and EU cooperative defence innovation efforts should be particularly supported by those 21 European nations that are members of both organizations, since their investments in R&D and modern capabilities benefit both the EU and NATO. Such an initiative and resulting PESCO projects supported by the EDF must, however, embrace the significant British military and technological potential,¹⁴ not least because the UK defence budget amounts to about one third of the combined defence budgets of the EU members. Initiating such a new European effort would be down to Germany in particular, as the central European power which has a good track record of supporting European defence and whose armed forces are for the most part geared to NATO requirements.

14 See Council of the European Union, Council Decision 15529/18 on third states participation in PESCO projects, 27 October 2020.



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