

NATO Core Tasks in a Contested Global Landscape

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NATO's last strategic concept in 2010 stated: "the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low." Russia's invasion of Ukraine, annexation of Crimea, and willingness to use force or the threat of force for coercion show this framing is outdated. NATO is playing catch up, with deterrence and defense as its core tasks.

Two dynamics will play a crucial role in NATO's ability to adapt: the direction of US policy and Europe's ambition. The United States increasingly tries to meet China's challenge while Russia has demonstrated that it can quickly push itself back to the top of the US agenda. But there are other longer-term trends requiring attention. Shifting US priorities will have consequences for NATO. The United States will not abandon Europe, but the latter will have to shoulder more of the Euro-Atlantic security burden. Europe has made significant investments since 2014 but its share of the burden is still insufficient.

Refocusing on more conventional deterrence and defense is not an end point for NATO. It also needs to address several new cross-domain and transnational threats. Key to this is increasing the political consultation mechanisms within the alliance. NATO partners, including the EU, can also play an important role.

Introduction

When NATO set its last strategic concept in 2010, Russia had not yet invaded Ukraine, the alliance had not conducted operations in Libya, the Syrian civil war had not started, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria was a little-known local insurgent group, the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty was still in place, and China was not on NATO's radar. The same year, the United States would be again surging troops to Afghanistan and setting a timetable for withdrawal by 2014. Both sides of the Atlantic struggled with the lasting threat of terrorism but, as NATO allies looked out at the world, they concluded that "the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low."¹ Fast forward ten years and the picture is very different.

Russia's willingness to use force to change borders in Europe, annex Crimea, and further pressure Ukraine with a coercive military buildup directly contests the notion that the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace. The deployment of Russian intermediate-range capabilities in Kaliningrad brings back memories of the prospect of limited nuclear conflict in Europe. Moreover, new technologies and domains are blurring the lines of conflict, creating new concerns of escalation, and impacting how allies and adversaries understand deterrence.

Changes in the strategic environment have always forced NATO to rethink and reposition itself.

In this context, NATO staff and member states are again taking pen to paper to chart the alliance's course and reinforce its mission. The key task will be to match NATO's strategic outlook to the threat environment today and over the next several years. This will span regional and functional domains, including some that were not considered over a decade ago when the last concept was completed.

¹ NATO, [Strategic Concept](#), November 2010, p. 10.

Given developments in and around the Euro-Atlantic area over the past decade and more, elevating and reigniting the role of defense and deterrence should be at the center of NATO deliberations. This will require members to reassess core assumptions about their own defense, including understanding pressures on US foreign policy and European contributions to the alliance. To help understand and respond to these internal trends, this brief unpacks these key themes that will be critical in NATO's ability to shore up its collective defense and assert deterrence for a Euro-Atlantic area more insecure and under threat.

This is the first in, and the introduction to, a series of briefs that will dive into specific challenges facing NATO, including regional briefs on Russia, China, and the Middle East and North Africa, as well as domain-focused ones on climate, cyber, and societal resilience. By fostering in-depth analysis and providing workable policy recommendations, these briefs seek to spark critical reflection on NATO's thinking as it considers a strategic framework for the future.

Deterrence and Defense are NATO's Primary Tasks

Changes in the strategic environment have always forced NATO to rethink and reposition itself. But adaptation has never fundamentally altered its core purpose as defined by the Washington Treaty, which holds that an attack on one is an attack on all. Rather, as NATO evolved, a mutual commitment to collective defense has been the crucial through line.

Yet, the conclusions of the 2010 Strategic Concept conceived the need for collective action differently. Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, and NATO's Article V mission in Afghanistan, alongside engagements in the Middle East, the threat of terrorism weighed heavily. Informally, core deterrence efforts took a back seat as crisis management and cooperative security took on added importance.

Russia's most recent military buildup along the borders of Ukraine—and its willingness to use force or the threat of force for coercive purposes—underscores

how outdated this strategic framework is. The chances of an escalation of conflict between NATO and Russia are at their highest level in decades. Consequently, the role of deterrence in averting conflict and added capability to undergird NATO's core collective-defense commitments is crucial. While the current Strategic Concept may be outdated, the alliance overall has not been stagnant. Responding to a deteriorating Euro-Atlantic security environment since 2014, allies reinforced eastern member states, creating the Enhanced Forward Presence, which sent four multinational battle groups to the Baltic states and Poland. It also launched and formalized other efforts like the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and the Four Thirties Readiness Initiative.²

But Russia's actions over recent months have only further cemented the concern of NATO member states and the need for added deterrence measures. On the conventional side, this could include an increased military footprint in key allies in Eastern Europe either on a permanent or rotational basis.³ But the alliance also needs to ensure the viability and readiness of existing mechanisms, like the NATO Response Force, the VJTF, and the Four Thirties Readiness Initiative.

Moreover, NATO—in coordination with the European Union—must bolster deterrence by finding ways to address untraditional, hybrid challenges that span military and civilian domains. This should include further refining tools such as NATO's counter-hybrid support teams as agreed in 2018,⁴ as well as augmenting NATO's Intelligence and Security Division to create a greater capacity for information sharing to alert allies of vulnerabilities spanning cyber defense, energy security, disinformation, and others. These efforts can ultimately help deter nefarious activities that are

below the threshold of conventional conflict but pose a significant threat to escalate above it.

US Foreign Policy

As allies refocus on collective defense and deterrence, internal dynamics will play a crucial role in NATO's ability to adapt. This is particularly true about the pressures reshaping US foreign policy and the remaining challenges and current opportunities around a greater European ambition in security and defense.

Successive administrations have signaled the emerging primacy of China in the US strategic calculus, posing the question of what happens when Russia—usually seen as the existential threat to Europe—may not be the chief concern of NATO's most important member? As the United States continues to prioritize the Indo-Pacific, Russia could become a second-order concern—albeit an important one. But Russia's most recent military buildup has again demonstrated its staying power as a threat and that it can quickly push itself back to the top of Washington's agenda.

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Nevertheless, the longer-term trends require added attention from NATO and Europe. Shifting priorities in Washington will have consequences for the alliance and its European members. While promoting the release of the NATO 2030 report aimed to inform alliance strategy for the next decade and beyond, former US assistant secretary of state and co-chair of the NATO 2030 expert group Wess Mitchell stated: "I can't emphasize to Europe enough how much the United States will, in coming years, be preoccupied with the security of the Indo-Pacific region."⁵ It is clear that for Mitchell, the result is a United States less able to engage in Europe and a call for a global division of labor.

2 The initiative requires NATO to be able to deploy 30 troop battalions, 30 aircraft squadrons, and 30 warships within 30 days' notice.

3 Hans Binnendijk and Julian Lindley-French, "[Prioritize NATO's core task: collective defense](#)," Defense News, November 23, 2021.

4 A Counter Hybrid Support Team was most recently deployed to help Lithuania respond to the weaponization of migrants along the country's border with Belarus. See BNS/TBT Staff, "[NATO Counter Hybrid Support Team arrives in Lithuania](#)," The Baltic Times, September 7, 2021.

5 Remarks by A. Wess Mitchell, "[NATO 2030: United for a New Era](#)," German Marshall Fund of the United States Event, March 8, 2021, 55:25.

February 2022

The way in which the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan unfolded demonstrated the current administration's determination to recalibrate US military engagement abroad. This is in part due to domestic pressures and President Joe Biden's prioritization of ending "forever wars," but also because the administration sees key limitations and is concerned about overextending US hard power in the current global security environment. As Biden remarked in the speech following the withdrawal, "there's nothing China or Russia would rather have, would want more in this competition than the United States to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan."⁶

A second development, the concluding of the AUKUS agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States demonstrated how high on the agenda the Indo-Pacific sits in US foreign-policy thinking. In the Biden administration's attempt to stake out a significant win in the Indo-Pacific by providing nuclear-powered submarines to Australia's navy, the United States frustrated one of its longest-standing European partners, France, as AUKUS ultimately nullified the submarine deal Paris had with Canberra. For the United States to recover, it took a massive diplomatic movement, including direct engagements between Biden and France's President Emmanuel Macron, and the commitment of additional US assets to French-led counterterrorism efforts in Africa.⁷

More concretely in US military planning, the 2018 National Defense Strategy, which reoriented US policy away from crisis management and regional conflicts toward great-power competition, also did away with the US two-war strategy.⁸ In short, rather than being able to conduct two regional conflicts, the United

States is preparing for a single conflict with a major adversary. With the planning and focus centered around China and the Indo-Pacific, an acute problem for NATO and the Euro-Atlantic area becomes the moment of opportunity should a conflict arise.

In this setting, Russia's revisionism in its neighborhood, as well as its activity in the Mediterranean, could be particularly problematic for Europe. Potential future contingencies in the Indo-Pacific over issues like Taiwan could simultaneously create windows of opportunity for Russia to further challenge the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

US foreign policy also faces a multifaceted challenge at home.

But beyond the increased primacy of China in US national security, US foreign policy also faces a multifaceted challenge at home. Defense spending will likely be under increased pressure in the coming years, with some former US officials arguing that a flat defense budget may be the best-case scenario.⁹ Moreover, allocations within the budget will also increasingly focus on countering China. When the Pentagon released its budget request for 2022, Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks said that "the department in this budget takes a clear-eyed approach to Beijing and provides the investments to prioritize China as our pacing challenge."¹⁰ The pressure from China's military investments in the coming years will only further necessitate a closer focus of US resource allocation to counter it. NATO must take this trend and pressure on US policy seriously. Here, conversations about burden sharing will take on added importance. A continued push for a fairer burden sharing has broad support in the US Congress. There may be divergence over the

6 The White House, "[Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan](#)," August 31, 2021.

7 Pierre Marcos, "[After the AUKUS Crisis, Are France-U.S. Relations Back on Track?](#)" Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 16, 2021

8 Eric Edelman et al., "[Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission](#)" United States Institute of Peace, 2018, p. 20.

9 Hans Binnendijk and Jim Townsend, "[The Future US Role in NATO](#)," in Jason Blessing, Katherine Kjellström Elgin, and Nele Marianne Ewers-Peters (eds.), *NATO 2030 Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond*, Johns Hopkins University SAIS/Brookings Institution Press, 2021, p. 144.

10 Amanda Macias, "[Here's the firepower the Pentagon is asking for in its \\$715 billion budget](#)," CNBC, May 28, 2021.

proper metrics, but few would argue that the outsized contributions of the United States in all aspects of alliance activity are fair.

This reality becomes particularly problematic when combined with forces of US politics that are either more naturally inclined toward retrenchment or more skeptical of Europe or alliances in general. There is worrying space for the United States to eschew more common approaches to the Euro-Atlantic allies and partners. Case in point was the Trump administration, which took an overtly aggressive and at times hostile tone with some of the United States' longest-standing and closest allies. It was also reported that President Donald Trump floated the idea of withdrawing from NATO on multiple occasions.¹¹ These political sentiments put significant pressure on the US posture in Europe, with the Trump administration announcing it would cut US forces in Germany by one-third, with half of those troops returning to the United States. While never actually implemented and ultimately reversed by the Biden administration, this decision reinforced the confluence of burden-sharing problems and domestic political dynamics on US foreign policy engagement with allies in ways that had been previously unlikely.

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It is clear that, as the United States focuses more on China, it will ask Europe to do more in and around Europe. Coming to terms with the challenges facing US foreign policy will be critical for its partners and allies. Europe must do more to shoulder the burden at home, which has direct implications for NATO deterrence and collective defense.¹² Political and economic

dynamics in the United States only add a need for NATO allies and partners to rethink the role they can play in shoring up the alliance's collective commitments in the current strategic environment. This includes contributions to collective defense. Russia's pressure on the alliance and key partners is unlikely to subside. In this space, added European capability will be critical and ongoing conversations around a greater European ambition or European strategic autonomy could prove useful if properly seized and leveraged by NATO.

A European Security and Defense Ambition

The shift in the United States' policy does not mean it will abandon Europe or the strategic umbrella—including the NATO nuclear-sharing agreement—which is a foundation of its commitment to the continent. But as former Deputy Assistant Secretary for Strategy and co-lead for the 2018 National Defense Strategy Elbridge Colby asserted in thinking through a new transatlantic bargain, “the lion's share of the forces required to deter or defeat a Russian attack on NATO would, however, be provided by European nations.”¹³ Colby argues that this would only require a modest increase and adjustment in the type of conventional capabilities required to deter Russia, but explicitly notes that “a dollar spent or soldier stationed in Europe will be one not spent or stationed in Asia. This means Europeans will need to pick up a considerably greater share of the burden.”¹⁴

While Europe has made significant investments since 2014, its side of the burden-sharing equation is still insufficient. More funding and political will is required to close the gap. High-demand capabilities like strategic lift and mission-enabling assets like intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities are still badly needed, not to mention more core conventional capabilities associated with territorial defense. The United States has been forced to step in

11 Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, “[Trump Discussed Pulling US From NATO, Aides say Amid New Concerns Over Russia](#),” The New York Times, January 14, 2019.

12 Francois Heisbourg and Maximilian Terhalle, “[6 post-Cold War taboos Europe must now face](#),” POLITICO, December 28, 2018.

13 Elbridge Colby, “[A New Bargain](#),” International Politik Quarterly, Issue 2, Fall 2020.

14 Ibid.

on multiple occasions to provide logistical and intelligence assistance for European forces in places like Libya and Mali. In some cases, there has simply been a lack of adequate munition stockpiles in Europe. Overcoming these deficiencies will be critical to creating an augmented level of European deterrence and an increased European ambition.

Beyond the need for added capability, at a strategic level, it is also critical to understand what kind of actor Europe sees itself as in this new geopolitical era.

Beyond the need for added capability, at a strategic level, it is also critical to understand what kind of actor Europe sees itself as in this new geopolitical era. Conversations around strategic autonomy have often been fraught for this very reason. At times, certain expressions or interpretations of the concept have created fears in the United States of geopolitical hedging or strategic ambivalence. But rather than lamenting a worst-case scenario, it is more useful for both sides of the Atlantic to jointly seize the current moment in a constructive way. Traditional US fears should be put aside and replaced with a proactive agenda that encourages a clearer European pillar in the alliance, that, for European purposes, could also be used more ad hoc in non-NATO contingencies. This should be done through new planning and thinking around burden-sharing metrics, including a more holistic reevaluation, reinvestment, and planning of Europe-wide contributions to the alliance.¹⁵ Ultimately, such efforts should fill gaps in European crisis-management capabilities and contribute to European defense within the NATO context. Such an approach “could also lead to a new

division of labor within the alliance. That need not divide the alliance. It would just create greater clarity as to who would lead certain missions and what they need to do to succeed.”¹⁶

The EU Council concluded in November 2016 that strategic autonomy is the “capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible.”¹⁷ In this sense, an EU-based strategic autonomy, as argued above, that aligns and coordinates with NATO’s defense planning and could operate formally within or informally below the consensus NATO or EU level would certainly be welcomed, particularly at a time when the United States will likely be increasingly preoccupied elsewhere. Europe’s ability to respond robustly in resolving regional crises, while complementing—and, if possible, supplanting—certain collective defense efforts traditionally borne by the United States would be a hugely welcome development for US policymakers and put NATO on a more sustainable footing.

Beyond Collective Defense

Given the significant security threat looming in Europe today, a refocus on deterrence is of critical importance. But internal dynamics impacting the United States and Europe complicate the picture. And, while collective defense should be the primary core task, it is in no way the only priority or adjustment that NATO must make to remain fit for purpose. In fact, as NATO refocuses on defense and deterrence, it also needs to be able to address several new cross-domain and transnational threats. Central to this is increasing the political consultation mechanisms within NATO to better discuss and understand threats. This includes global challenges such as China, what its rise means for the transatlantic partnership, and how it is impacting allies’ security

15 For more on what this might look like, see Steven Keil, “NATO Burden Sharing in A New Geopolitical Era,” in Jason Blessing, Katherine Kjellström Elgin, and Nele Marianne Ewers-Peters (eds.), *NATO 2030 Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond*, Johns Hopkins University SAIS/Brookings Institution Press, 2021.

16 Hans Binnendijk and Alexander Vershbow, “[Needed: A trans-Atlantic agreement on European strategic autonomy](#),” *Defense News*, October 10, 2021.

17 Josep Borrell, “Why European strategic autonomy matters,” *European External Action Service*, March 12, 2020 https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89865/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en

within the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO's approach with its partners can play an important role, particularly by engaging the expertise of those in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁸ Moreover, cooperative security and partnerships will remain a key component of NATO's ability to address a broad range of regional security issues in and beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, as well as its ability to tackle threats from new domains and technologies.

Regional instability along the Mediterranean Sea is likely to remain a significant challenge for NATO and the European allies in particular. Even with some important capability gaps, NATO's southern periphery is an area well within the operational reach of key allies, not least France, Italy, and Spain. Taking into account the human, maritime, and border security elements characteristic of the region, European allies are already present and active. And, given the nature of many security challenges around the Mediterranean, this is also a promising area for future NATO-EU cooperation. Security management in the Mediterranean is less likely to produce high-intensity, high-consequence demands of the kind that could arise elsewhere. Here, again, European efforts around strategic autonomy may be hugely beneficial in freeing up US resources that will either inevitably be engaged in the Indo-Pacific or directed toward territorial defense in Europe.

New challenges unconsidered a decade ago are also growing in speed and scope. NATO has no choice but to bolster its engagement in domains like cyber and space that will have a considerable impact on

deterrence. Furthermore, massive shifts caused by climate change are challenging the security of NATO members and could create crises in which they will be required to respond. New technologies are creating novel ways to undermine the resilience of national infrastructures and democratic processes, threatening the core of Euro-Atlantic societies. However, technologies, like artificial intelligence, may also help in operational settings and decision-making, or help identify multi-domain hybrid operations.¹⁹ There are challenges and opportunities in these emerging technologies, and they will require added investment and engagement by NATO and its members.

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NATO's need to refocus on more conventional deterrence and defense is critical for shoring up and elevating collective defense, but it is not an end point. From there, allies must address numerous ongoing and developing challenges that, at their core, also threaten their very security. The other briefs in this series will help elucidate the ways in which NATO should understand and respond to these challenges. This brief has laid out a framework of the larger trends impacting internal alliance dynamics and NATO's ability to bolster collective defense. They will unpack the external threats and challenges the allies face, and what NATO's role may be in addressing them.

18 For more on how to revamp NATO's partnership policy, see Sophie Arts and Steven Keil, "[Flexible Security arrangements and the Future of NATO Partnerships](#)," German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 2021.

19 For more, Ralph Thiele, "[Artificial Intelligence – A key enabler of hybrid warfare](#)," Hybrid CoE, March 2020, p. 6

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Acknowledgments

This brief is part of a project at the German Marshall Fund of the United States supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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