

NATO's Posture vis-a-vis Russia: Features and Challenges

by Elio Calcagno and Alessandro Marrone

The Russian war against Ukraine has had multiple impacts on NATO's deterrence and defence stance vis-à-vis Moscow, which today presents a number of challenges to allies – particularly European ones. The 2022 Madrid summit and the resulting Strategic Concept signalled a substantial departure for the alliance in terms of focus and posture.¹ First, the new Concept represents an unequivocal return to a Russia policy based first and foremost on deterrence and defence, rather than calls for cooperation that had been typical between the end of the Cold War and the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.² The 2022 Concept stands in stark contrast with this period of détente and instead explicitly points to Russia as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’

security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area”.³ This new focus on deterrence and defence is accompanied with an enhancement of NATO's military presence along the northern and eastern flanks.⁴

The impact on crisis prevention and management and cooperative security

On the contrary, crisis prevention and management and cooperative security, the other two core tasks featured in the 2022 Strategic Concept, are clearly de-prioritised in comparison with the previous 2010 Concept. First, it is explicitly stated that they serve the overarching goal of collective defence. Second, the sections devoted to these two tasks are worded in a cautious, vague and modest way, especially if compared with the ambitious, concrete

¹ NATO, *2022 Strategic Concept*, July 2022, <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept>.

² Elio Calcagno, “Dove punta la bussola Nato”, in *Affari Internazionali*, 1 July 2022, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=4236>.

³ NATO, *2022 Strategic Concept*, cit., point 8.

⁴ Ibid., point 21.

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and robust section referring to Article 5, which enshrines the principle of collective defence. To make just one example, two long-standing NATO partnerships such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative are not even explicitly mentioned in the Strategic Concept.

It appears somewhat inevitable that the focus on Russia's threat on the eastern flank must be balanced with a de-prioritisation of the southern one.⁵ To be sure, terrorism is still formally indicated as a major asymmetric threat to the Alliance; yet, the ruinous NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and, above all, the war against Ukraine have radically turned NATO's military posture towards the conventional scenario of a peer-to-peer conflict waged by a state actor on the Alliance's eastern border stretching from Scandinavia to the Black Sea. As a result, the crisis prevention and management core task may be relegated to a background role, at least in the short to medium term.⁶ This new reality will affect some European allies on the Mediterranean shores as they seek to keep NATO engaged in North Africa and the Middle East.

A membership postponed sine die

The war in Ukraine has ushered in a number of unexpected developments with regard to NATO's enlargement,

with Finland joining the alliance and Sweden currently in the process of doing so. At the same time, the issue of Ukraine's membership has remained controversial, as it has been since the 2008 Bucharest Summit.⁷

At the 2023 Vilnius summit, allies reiterated that Ukraine might not enter NATO while the conflict with Russia is ongoing, closing the door to such an outcome for the mid-to-long term.⁸ On the same occasion, G7 countries gathered in Vilnius pledged long-term military support to Kyiv both as a group and via bilateral agreements, *in primis* between Washington and Kyiv.⁹

As a result, for the foreseeable future, Article 5 will apply to the current NATO *limes* and will not include Ukraine as a third country: allies will continue to provide military assistance to Kyiv while refraining from a direct conflict with Russia on Ukrainian territory.

The challenges of the new NATO Force Model

The Alliance took several steps in order to meet the collective deterrence and defence goals set up by the new Strategic Concept. Among these, a new NATO Force Model stands out as

⁵ Alessandro Marrone, "NATO's New Strategic Concept: Novelties and Priorities", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 22|30 (July 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/15667>.

⁶ Enrico Casini and Andrea Manciuilli (eds), *La guerra tiepida. Il conflitto ucraino e il futuro dei rapporti tra Russia e Occidente*, Rome, Luiss University Press, 2023.

⁷ Andrew Gray, "Bucharest Declaration: NATO's Ukraine Debate Still Haunted by 2008 Summit", in *Reuters*, 10 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/natos-ukraine-debate-still-haunted-by-bucharest-pledge-2023-07-10>.

⁸ Sean Monaghan et al., "What Happened at NATO's Vilnius Summit?", in *CSIS Critical Questions*, 14 July 2023, <https://www.csis.org/node/106347>.

⁹ Laura Kayali, "G7 Countries Pledge Long-Term Support for Ukraine", in *Politico*, 12 July 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=3333672>.

a particularly ambitious undertaking. Among the initiatives under this model, perhaps the most advertised was the increase of the Rapid Reaction Force to 300,000 troops from the current 40,000 to be deployed within one month.¹⁰ Indeed, NATO is aiming at a force model in which allied troops are divided into three tiers based on their respective readiness level: tier 1 forces (over 100,000) are to be deployable in up to ten days; tier 2 (200,000) in around 10-to-30 days; tier 3 (500,000) in between 30 and 180 days.¹¹

This move will, in all likelihood, prove to be as difficult to implement in the short and medium term as it is ambitious. The task is particularly arduous considering the magnitude of the leap required in sheer numbers and, above all, the fact that most NATO countries outside of the US are already under pressure to maintain high readiness across domains as they concurrently make huge investments in the modernisation of their forces and re-stocking of ammunition.¹² Notably, these numbers entail a level of enablers and logistics not seen as necessary during the post-Cold War era marked by crisis management and stability operations. Even at the peak of its military engagement in Afghanistan in 2011, NATO deployed a maximum of 130,000 troops from 51 allied and

partner countries,¹³ though they did not necessitate the air and naval components, as well as the land heavy equipment, necessary to cope with a peer adversary.

For sure, from an operational point of view, it is much easier to plan and implement a major defence posture in Europe than in Central Asia. Still, military mobility remains a priority issue for NATO, to the point that even non-EU allies such as US, UK, Canada and Norway have joined the PESCO Military Mobility project to improve the related infrastructure and legal framework in Europe.

Forward defence in practice

At the same time, the 2022 Summit led to the commitment by NATO to strengthen its Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) – first established in 2017 with four multi-national battalion-sized battle groups in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland¹⁴ – both in size and scope. Indeed, they are going to be upgraded to brigade-sized forces.¹⁵ Moreover, under the enhanced Vigilance Activity (eVA) label, four other multinational battlegroups have been deployed in Romania, Bulgaria,

¹⁰ "NATO to Boost Troops on High Alert to over 300,000 - Stoltenberg", in *Reuters*, 27 June 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idUKKBN2O80RO>.

¹¹ NATO, *New NATO Force Model*, June 2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-infographic-new-nato-force-model.pdf.

¹² IAI interview, 6 September 2023.

¹³ "Blood and Billions of Dollars: NATO's Long War in Afghanistan", in *Reuters*, 15 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/blood-billions-dollars-natos-long-war-afghanistan-2021-08-13>.

¹⁴ Each Battlegroup is led by a framework nation, respectively US (Poland), Germany (Lithuania), UK (Estonia) and Canada (Latvia).

¹⁵ "NATO Reaffirms Plan to Have 'Combat-Ready' Brigades in the Baltic States", in *LRT*, 11 July 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2032611/nato-reaffirms-plan-to-have-combat-ready-brigades-in-the-baltic-states>.

Hungary and Slovakia, led respectively by France, Italy, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Again, framework nations and other contributing allies are, in many cases, encountering serious hurdles as they attempt to keep a battle-ready force in theatre, given the shortages in troops and equipment that appear to affect all Allies except the US.¹⁶ These land forces are integrated within a broader deterrence and defence posture which includes air policing of the whole European allies' airspace, standing maritime groups activities in the seas adjacent to Europe, and integrated air and missile defence (IAMD).¹⁷ Moreover, the Strategic Concept recognises space and cyber as operational domains where Article 5 may be invoked should an attack against allied assets occur, and sets the goal to integrate space capabilities within the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture by laying the ground for multi-domain operations. Meanwhile, the underwater environment is gaining more attention also within NATO.

Inevitably, NATO's ability to properly bolster its forward defence capabilities represents a crucial element in the credibility of its standing forces along the eastern flank as a conventional deterrent. At the same time, the Alliance

is developing new regional plans that aim to blend with those of front-line nations, and testing them via large scale exercises such as Steadfast Defender 24. Still, these plans will require that the new Force Model effectively raises the number of high-readiness troops.¹⁸

Mass and credible deterrence

The Ukraine war has exposed substantial gaps throughout European militaries in terms of capacity: ammunition stocks, number of available weapon systems and the defence industries' ability to quickly ramp up production without clear international coordination and procurement commitments by governments. Ammunition stocks have rarely been a priority among NATO allies and should be brought to a level befitting a protracted, high-intensity conflict such as the one taking place in Ukraine. At the same time, the wide-ranging modernisation drive already underway in many allies' armed forces must deliver exquisite capabilities to the armed forces at scale, especially considering that the technological edge long given for granted by NATO forces has gradually been eroded in key areas, including emerging and disruptive technologies.

The war in Ukraine showed how mass is still a necessary precondition for victory in drawn-out conflicts between peer or near-peer forces. Mass, however, is not simply achieved by a

¹⁶ Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsh, "All Unquiet on NATO's Eastern Flank", in *Foreign Policy*, 13 April 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/13/nato-eastern-flank-battle-group-russia-poland-latvia-lithuania-estonia>.

¹⁷ On NATO IAMD see, among others, Alessandro Marrone and Karolina Muti (eds), "Europe's Missile Defence and Italy: Capabilities and Cooperation", in *Documenti IAI*, No. 21|05 (April 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/13072>.

¹⁸ Ben Barry et al., "The Future of NATO's European Land Forces: Plans, Challenges, Prospects", in *IISS Research Papers*, June 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/en/research-paper/2023/06/the-future-of-natos-european-land-forces>.

number of troops, but by the amounts and quality of available equipment, large ammunition stocks, the ability to quickly move forces as needed and adequate training beyond *élite*, front-line troops to bear high levels of attrition. Achieving adequate mass thus requires a concerted effort that transcends the purely numerical dimension, but combines crucial industrial, budgetary and readiness elements.

First, Western and especially European armed forces must be backed by solid industrial capacity. The European Defence and Technological Industrial Base (EDTIB) needs to be able to scale up production of low- and high-end equipment and ammunition in order to avoid the ammunition shortages that were widespread even before Russia's full-scale invasion. The fragmentation of the defence market in Europe, with countries pursuing separate national programmes for systems often answering similar requirements, is an obstacle to the achievement of true economies of scale making European products less competitive.¹⁹ This also means that the scarce funds available for research and development separately at a national level cannot be combined and leveraged together, at a time when much of the military spending is directed to filling post-Cold War gaps.

Second, defence budgets are increasing throughout NATO, though critical gaps accumulated over decades of prioritising stability, peacekeeping

¹⁹ See in this regard Michelangelo Freyrie and Michele Nones, "The Implications for the European Defence Industry", in Alessandro Marrone (ed.), *Russia-Ukraine War's Strategic Implications*, cit., p. 107-116.

and crisis management operations are set to absorb large part of these efforts in the short and medium terms. Many militaries will likely face an arduous task as they seek to prepare for large-scale, protracted and high-intensity conflict against peer- or near-peer level forces while at the same time bringing ammunition and equipment stocks to adequate levels.

Third, while the war in Ukraine presents many traditional features of 20th-century wars, such as attrition and the central role of artillery, it is also witnessing a number of revolutionary developments such as the massive use of uncrewed air vehicles (UAVs). NATO allies must put warfighting readiness back at the top of national priorities, with particular attention to morale and motivation but also training and education of personnel, in a way that favours a flexible and adaptable approach to military operations that transcends domains and requires an increasingly integrated use of wide-ranging technologies.

In conclusion, NATO has taken a number of meaningful steps to maintain a credible deterrent for its members in the face of Russia's war in Ukraine. Still, to prevent an attack to eastern allies by a risk-prone adversary, it must demonstrate to be on the whole capable of effectively responding to full-scale conventional war, and to do so for as long as it takes. This is probably the greatest challenge for the new NATO posture caused by two years of a large-scale, high-intensity war fought by Moscow at its borders.

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