



NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept Change, Continuity and Implications

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- In the 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO reaffirms its founding purpose by returning to the pre-2010 tradition of presenting collective defense as the key responsibility of the Alliance. The three core tasks set out for NATO are deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security. Russia's aggression in Ukraine has led to a far stronger focus on conventional military forces on the strategic level. This change is well-harmonized with the significant boost to force posture announced at the Madrid Summit.
- Russia has gone from being described as a potential "strategic partner" in 2010 to being defined as an aggressive adversary. As a clear message to Russia and Ukraine, the Concept underscores that a strong, independent Ukraine is vital for the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area. The balancing act of both communicating firm condemnation of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine and presenting a vision for a more resolved relationship in the future is a key challenge for NATO.
- The new Concept represents a significant shift in NATO's official perception of China. The rhetoric on Chinese expansion of power, weaponized interdependence and threats to rules-based international order is firm and direct, but it is combined with an aspiration of constructive engagement.
- The Concept includes resolute affirmation of NATO's view of the EU as a vital strategic partner. At the same time, key countries in Europe continue to disagree about the division of labor between the two organizations.
- The Concept has positive implications for Norway and Norwegian security interests. The transatlantic connection and the High North are presented as important, and freedom-of-navigation an essential part of NATO priorities. In addition, the Concept presents a balanced approach to nuclear weapons, both recognizing its vital role in deterrence and the noble goals of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

Introduction

On the 29th of June 2022, in Madrid, NATO's 30 members adopted a new Strategic Concept for the Alliance. The successful adoption of the long-awaited new Concept is a positive achievement and the process leading up to its presentation has been extensive both in effort and scope. NATO arranged and participated in meetings across Europe with government officials and expert communities, and Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has been applauded for the open and inclusive process leading up to the adoption. Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24th marked a new watershed that changed the parameters for the drafting of the Concept.

The security environment has dramatically changed since the last Strategic Concept was adopted in 2010 and it predated the Arab Spring, the migration crises, the annexation of Crimea, Donald Trump's presidency, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the joint security approach to Russia.

This paper is offered as a food for thought on implications of the 2022 Strategic Concept.

Background

The history of NATO Strategic Concepts can be traced back to the very early years of the Alliance in 1949 with the DC 6/1 "The Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Area", published December 1st, 1949. In the decades that followed, the Concept was updated more frequently than in recent times. The Concepts presented during the Cold War between 1949 and 1968 were classified and fairly operationally relevant, making them more "military-strategic" than "political-strategic". This changed with the Concept of 1991 where the strategic outlook and priorities presented could be considered "political-strategic" in nature. It follows from this that NATO's strategic outlook underwent significant evolution in tandem with the end of the Soviet Union.

A key element in the move from "military-strategic" to "political-strategic" Concepts was the Harmel report published in 1967. The "Report of the Council on the Future Tasks of the Alliance" was crafted at the behest of Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel at a challenging time in NATO's history when some questioned the existence or character of the Alliance. A key development brought forth by the report was the introduction of a dual-track approach of deterrence and détente. The Strategic Concept presented in 1968 could

be seen as belonging to the deterrence and defense track of the dual-track approach. Later, both tracks were incorporated into the Strategic Concept.

The post-Cold War Strategic Concepts of 1991, 1999 and 2010 were all influenced by the relative strategic stability of the times and positive prospects for cooperative and constructive developments in global affairs. The Concepts of 1991 and 1999 still included deterrence as a fundamental security task for the Alliance, it was however presented in a much more sanguine manner than in the Concept of 1968. The Strategic Concept of 2010 presented three core tasks for NATO; Collective defense, crisis management and cooperative security. The tasks were presented as equal in importance although most observers of NATO considered collective defense to still be positioned above the other two in importance. Russia was described as a potential "strategic partner" of NATO in the document, a testament to the hope for the future that surrounded the previous Concept. China was not mentioned.

The Russian military offensive against Ukraine in 2014 contributed to a growing sentiment that the 2010 Concept needed to be updated. The migration crisis and manifestations of hybrid-threats like serious cyber-attacks also became important for Alliance members. However, the presidency of Donald Trump made it impossible to think seriously about writing a new Concept.

The 2022 Strategic Concept

The road to Madrid has been turbulent and difficult. NATO is an Alliance of many nations with diverging interests. This has been reflected in the discussions about how to deal with Russia and the size and shape of forward defense. Turkish resistance to Finnish and Swedish membership encapsulates a number of challenges in the South. In light of these complexities, the adoption of the 2022 Strategic Concept represents a significant achievement for NATO and its members. It signals to the world that the members of the Alliance have the unity of values and intent to come together on policy with significant implications for their national security. This unity could prove vital during hard times, both geopolitically and economically. The ongoing war in Ukraine has shown the world how important alliances and support from others can be in times of hardship.

The real substance of the achievement the new Concept represents beyond symbolic value is disputed. Some scholars and analysts consider the

Concept to have limited practical effects on NATO's development. Others assert that the Concept codifies a strategic direction that the members become committed to, thus truly shaping the future of the Alliance.

A return to tradition

The 2022 Concept returns to the tradition of the pre-2010 Concepts with regards to its placement of collective defense as positioned above the three core tasks as the most vital element of NATO strategy. This in line with the founding principles of NATO enshrined in the Washington Treaty of 1949 and the conceptual tradition before 2010. The three core tasks of the Alliance are deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management and cooperative security. Resilience is also given a prominent role in the new Concept, underpinning the overarching emphasis on collective defense and the three core tasks.

The emphasis on deterrence and defense penetrates the Concept and is underscored further in a number of other documents related to the Concept. The Baltic states and Poland have been insistent on raising the forces level substantially, and forward defense becomes the essence of NATO's efforts on the Eastern Flank in particular, introducing brigade-sized structures instead of the present "tripwire" deterrent concept. Furthermore, the Alliance is expanding its force structure significantly, moving far beyond the current NATO Response Force and its spearhead force.

Last, but not least, the member states have recommitted themselves to meet the two per cent target for defense spending, at least most of them. In addition, Secretary General Stoltenberg has been successful in gaining support for increasing NATO's common funding, principally the investment program. Quite an achievement in light of opposition from several countries, France in particular, most notably since the summer of 2021.

Responding to Russian aggression

NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept identified Russia as one of the Alliance's potential strategic partners and stated that "NATO-Russia cooperation is of strategic importance as it contributes to creating a common space of peace, stability and security." The language concerning a strategic partnership with Russia has radically changed and in the 2022 Strategic Concept Russia is described as the most significant and direct threat to European Allies security while including balancing language referring to a willingness to keep open channels

of communication to mitigate risks, prevent escalation and increase transparency. Hence, NATO remains committed, at least in principle, to a dual-track approach towards Moscow. The balancing of language is intensely questioned by the Baltic states and Poland who argue that a key priority should be increased military capacities and confronting Russia.

Engaging a more assertive China

The potentially most game-changing difference between the 2010 and the 2022 Strategic Concepts is the communicated perception of China's role in global affairs. The Chinese practices of strategic investments and other initiatives leading to so-called weaponized interdependence is commented on in the Concept. This is interesting because it broadens NATO's official stance on Great Power competition to include security matters beyond the conventional military sphere. The Concept specifies that NATO plans to protect against coercive tactics in the political, economic, technological and military spheres. The language used to describe concerns about China is firm, but as with Russia, the Concept also communicates that NATO is open to dialogue, or constructive engagement. The United States has been a keen proponent of clear and direct language on the threat that China represents. Some European members are hesitant to formulating a policy that could become too confrontational.

The importance of the Indo-Pacific area of operations is mentioned in the Concept. It underscores the need for managing the challenges in the region but does not introduce any NATO military role in that part of the world. In the foreseeable future, any European contributions will most likely be in the form of participation from individual countries that are able and willing.

NATO-EU relations

NATO's third core task is cooperative security, where the Alliance aims to enhance international peace, stability, and security through partnerships, and most importantly through cooperation with the European Union (more specifically its Common Security and Defense Policy – CSDP). NATO and the EU face similar security challenges, hence strengthening the European Union as an active player in security and defense is paramount. This is recognized in the introduction and in paragraph 43 of the Strategic Concept, which is devoted to the NATO–EU relationship.

The provisions of both the NATO Strategic Concept

and the EU Strategic Compass are in line with the objective of enhancing NATO-EU cooperation. This signals unity and a shared interest in crisis prevention and management as both structures are attempting to elaborate the basis for cooperating with each other. NATO and the EU currently have 22 members in common which should justify a clarified division of labor and a well-structured communications sphere. NATO cannot be the only security framework for the EU, as there are EU member states which are not a part of the Alliance. However, while the Strategic Concept underscores the importance of the EU, the fundamental divergencies are unresolved. France in particular is on the alert against NATO trespassing EU's domain, while Turkey (and Norway) argues that non-European allies' fullest involvement in EU defense efforts is essential.

Norway and the Concept

There are several aspects of the 2022 Strategic Concept that signify positive development for Norway and Norwegian security interests. First and most important is the resolute commitment to strengthen the transatlantic bond and the US engagement. The emphasis placed on the High North in the Concept is also of vital importance for Norway. Efforts to enhance the fundamental principles of the Alliance are important for Norway.

This includes engagement to promote good governance and thereby building integrity. Finnish and Swedish membership will strengthen the caucus of democratic and liberal countries with high integrity in the Alliance.

The ability of NATO to deploy nuclear weapons is its strongest deterrent element and is vital when facing nuclear powers. Some have been critical to NATO's communication regarding its nuclear force posture in previous Concepts. The nuclear approach presented in the 2022 Concept is clear, both on the perception of nuclear weapons as a deterrent and on NATO's vision of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation as noble goals. Nuclear disarmament is an important issue for Norway and its inclusion in the Concept should be considered a step forward on this policy-field.

The recommitment to the 2% defense spending target could become a challenge for Norway. Should the Norwegian economy experience strong growth it could become difficult for Norway to reach the target in the years to come. In 2022, the defense expense expenditure as a percentage of GNP is as low as 1.55. This might weaken Norway's reputation as a traditionally solid and reliable member of the defense community. In line with the content and spirit of the 2022 Strategic Concept this should be considered in decision-making processes related to defense spending.

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