



Wilton Park



Report

The European security crisis and the future of deterrence

Wednesday 13 – Saturday 16 July 2022 | WP3072

In association with:





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In association with Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL), Ministry of Defence, Sandia National Laboratories, NATO Defence College

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is entering its sixth month with no end in sight to the fighting that has killed thousands, uprooted millions, and reduced Ukrainian cities to rubble. In this watershed strategic moment—laden with multi-domain complexity, emerging technologies, and heated nuclear rhetoric—it is evident that the Russian invasion has brought war back to Europe.

The meeting at Wilton Park was convened to analyse this ongoing crisis, unpack deterrence implications for the United States and its allies, examine escalation pathways and risk reduction measures, and chart an expedient way forward to accelerate deterrence adaptation and improve NATO's strategic competitiveness.

Did deterrence fail? Understanding the Ukraine crisis and its deterrence implications

1. The crisis in Ukraine has reaffirmed that effective deterrence should be a first priority for NATO allies and partners, but also underlined that deterrence is not easy. In exploring the deterrence implications of the crisis, numerous questions arise; why was Putin not deterred from aggression? What was NATO trying to deter and did they succeed? What should NATO be doing now to influence Russia's strategic decision calculus?
2. The question of whether deterrence failed with regards to the Ukraine crisis is debated and is dependent on one's assessment of whether or not Ukraine is in NATO's strategic interest. As a NATO partner but not a formal ally, NATO's extended deterrence commitments do not apply to Ukraine, but from late 2021 NATO allies signalled resolve and commitment to deterrence by punishment should Putin invade Ukraine. While efforts were made to deter Russia, it is not clear how far the alliance is willing to go for Ukraine or any other non-NATO ally. Why did Putin continue with the invasion of Ukraine despite punishment threats from NATO? It is possible that Putin did not believe in the threats given the lack of clarity over deterrence commitments to Ukraine. It is also possible that Putin did not care, or that Ukraine was too important to him that high costs were acceptable and therefore nothing would have deterred him. It was also suggested that Putin may have believed he had a short window of opportunity in which to act whilst the West was divided and 'weak'.
3. No consensus arose as to why Putin followed through with the invasion, or whether deterrence failed. To determine the success or failure of deterrence it must first be clear what specific act by which specific actor you are trying to deter. It was noted,

however, that deterrence is not as binary as success or failure, for deterrence is a negotiation and it is possible for some elements of deterrence to hold whilst others do not. Whether deterrence failed in some limited way or not is important for figuring out whether deterrence needs to be maintained, reinforced or restored. If deterrence did fail in some limited way, it is essential that the allies explore why as quickly as possible.

4. One framing proposed for exploring Putin's decision making and risk threshold was prospect theory, used to assess whether Putin was in a gain frame or a loss frame. Those perceiving impending losses tend to be more risk accepting.

Integrated deterrence as a means of strengthening deterrence

5. The Ukraine crisis also underscores the need to develop an integrated approach to deterrence. The concept of integrated deterrence includes both vertical integration and horizontal integration. Vertical integration refers to ensuring coherence across conventional, nuclear, cyber, space and informational domains of deterrence at all operational levels. Horizontal integration concerns the inclusion and integration within governments and between allies and partners to ensure a 'joined up' approach. Although the concept of integrating deterrence is not new (it was noted that the UK first introduced the concept) the forthcoming United States National Defence Strategy will place significant emphasis on implementing integrated deterrence. NATO does not have a formal integrated deterrence strategy, but it has adopted a way of thinking about deterrence in keeping with the integrated approach.
6. A strategic case was put forward for why integrated deterrence is essential now, which included reference to:
 - Russia's invasion of Ukraine and use of nuclear signalling and rhetoric reinforces the case for integrated deterrence
 - The challenge that nuclear weapons do not deter all actions the alliance may wish to deter
 - Integrated deterrence may help minimise the risks of escalation
 - Multidomain complexity means we will have to be talking across domains anyway. Cross domain integration is happening in reality, so we must develop a more coherent integrated strategy to keep up.
 - Integrated deterrence is essential to increase efficiency and efficacy in our systems
7. There was consensus that whilst the concept of integrated deterrence is relatively clear and recognised as essential, ensuring implementation requires further work. Some of this work is already underway within the US, but more needs to be done to figure out what multidomain means in practice for NATO. One suggested area of work was to improve integration between NATO owned capabilities and nationally owned capabilities.
8. Whether integrated deterrence will strengthen deterrence remains to be seen, but it was concluded that an integrated approach is an inevitable reality that must be achieved sooner rather than later.

Understanding the other: Deterrence as a psychological activity

9. Participants at the dialogue were reminded that deterrence is a largely psychological activity. Whilst physical capabilities matter, the core purpose of deterrence is to influence an adversaries cost-benefit analysis in such a way that they are dissuaded from certain actions. Understanding the other, therefore, becomes an essential element in successful deterrence and also escalation/risk management. To deter certain actions, one needs to understand what matters to an adversary in order to threaten unacceptable costs. At the same time, escalation management relies on

understanding an adversary's red lines and how they perceive the alliance's actions. Specifically in the context of NATO and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was noted that more thinking is needed on how the alliance could conduct military intervention to take back territory without making Russia believe NATO could and would attack Russian territory. Similar questions were asked around the right number of forces to have in Eastern parts of the alliance; a balance needs to be struck between enough forces to deter but not too many to provoke further escalation.

10. There was consensus among the group that understanding the adversary was indispensable and it was recognised that there is a need within NATO to build more capability for this. Suggestions for improving the alliances ability to understand the other included:
 - Cultivating greater Russian expertise within the academic and policy communities
 - Conducting more studies on 'red' and 'blue' and their interactions, similar to the work Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory Centre for Global Security Research¹
 - Improving our ability to talk to the adversary, noting that talking brings with it a better understanding
11. Two points of caution were also raised regarding 'understanding the other'. Firstly, it is not possible to understand an adversary enough to guarantee that deterrence will work, we can only strive to improve our understanding. Secondly, understanding the other is not a panacea; it does not necessarily enable us to stop them following through with certain actions.

Towards a more granular and integrated approach to emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs)

12. Chyba's (2020) definition classifies a technology as "emerging" if either its "greatest potential impact in warfare remains undemonstrated and recessed" (as is the case with enabling dual-use technologies like AI and cyber) or the technology "has not yet been overtly significantly deployed by any nation's military" (as is the case with new weapons systems like hypersonic glide vehicles [HGVs]). Based on evidence to date, EDTs are not destabilising at the strategic level, since there is a lot of noise but not much signal. With that said, EDTs may impact stability, but this depends on the technology, its application, the context, and the actor. For instance, in the Russia-Ukraine case, there is marked scepticism of Russia's hype about its EDTs. Consider Russian use of hypersonics—Russia has used the air-launched hypersonic Khinzal on at least two occasions in Ukraine to hit hardened targets. On the one hand, this may have been a show of force to signal willingness to escalate. On the other hand, it was "serious overkill" (according to experts) and really not necessary. More likely, Russia was running out of other missiles (Iskanders and Kalbirs) or this was a marketing tactic, but doesn't seem to have given any sort of advantage. Poor performance of Russia's conventional forces should raise bigger questions about its military-industrial complex.
13. The complex interactions of EDTs could positively or negatively impact both the context in which nuclear decisions are taken and the choice of the particular course of action. With regards to the context, certain combinations of EDTs could improve the decision maker's ability to make a more informed decision during a rapidly escalating crisis or conflict. Conversely, in some circumstances, the benefits of such combinations of EDTs could be negated by the decision maker's overconfidence in the advice they provide and an adversary's countermeasures to exploit this overconfidence.
14. There was consensus that allied evaluations of EDTs are overly simplistic, and need

¹ See Brad Roberts (2020). 'On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue'. Livermore Papers on Global Security No.7. Available at: <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/CGSR-LivermorePaper7.pdf>

to be more granular. A scenario of Russia using a hypersonic cruise missile will be different in terms of stability than a Chinese electronic weapon system or attacks on NC3. Thus, there needs to be a tailored understanding not just of each technology, but also of factors including context and user. Further, there is a difference in strategic impact between EDTs that can be developed covertly, versus the contrary. It is also worth being creative in our understanding of what constitutes EDTs—social media and bioweapons may also be EDTs.

15. There is an evident need to move beyond the definitional and exploratory phase of EDTs. The US and NATO will need to decide on some key questions about a competition strategy: What do we want from the competition, not in terms of “winning” or “losing”? Parity or superiority in EDT? Reactionary or visionary? Focus on a specific technology or do we want to do everything the best? Maintain or retire legacy systems to free up resources to invest in EDTs? US domestic factors will influence all these decisions; the war in Ukraine and the defence budget are already becoming partisan issues.
16. Finally, in an era of EDTs with the potential to upset strategic stability, the best risk reduction and conflict management tools will be stronger deterrence. Moving forward, instead of a siloed treatment, it is recommended to integrate and normalise emerging technologies into policy discussions.

The impact of multipolarity on NATO’s deterrence strategy

17. A close examination of publicly available guidance documents indicates a growing elucidation of the threat of the multipolar strategic environment. While NATO’s Strategic Concept warns the Alliance to stand up to the strategic challenge posed by China and of Chinese and Russian collusion, the United States’ National Defence Strategy fact sheet makes clear that China is Washington’s top security concern, implying that US military resources will be re-aligned, or pivoted to Asia, accordingly. As we grapple with how this pivot could affect transatlantic extended deterrence, it is useful to revisit a previous US pivot to the Pacific, the Vietnam experience. The lingering effects of the Vietnam debacle on the US military ultimately paved the way for today’s conventional military superiority – the AirLand battle concept and precision-guided munitions. And although the previous US pivot to Asia was disruptive to NATO, it was ultimately manageable and transformative.
18. With regard to the Middle East and Asia, it is perceived that the United States is engaged in “over-extended deterrence”—whereby adversaries see the US as deeply entrenched and bent on further regime changes, whilst most allies are unconvinced by US commitment to defence. Nuclear risk is underestimated in this region. For instance, many in the Gulf tend to believe that even if Iran obtained nuclear weapons, the country would not use them; instead fears mostly centre around how it might embolden Iran, or strengthen “hybrid expansionism.” US partners and allies in the region tend to undervalue arms control and push back on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Overwhelmingly in this part of the world, doubts about deterrence and a desire to rely less on the United States arise not from US capacity, but questionable US political will. There is a need to study what the region might look like with a nuclear armed Iran, including a look at escalation pathways and risk reduction, as well as possible nuclear use cases by North Korea.
19. In light of multipolarity and increased risk for opportunistic aggression, NATO’s deterrence strategy should undertake several activities. First, consider that general deterrence has failed vis-à-vis China, as it had with Russia beginning in 2006. As we head into the realm of immediate deterrence, the Alliance should focus on influencing China’s calculus on the use of force. This will require investment of intellectual capital by the Alliance and a dedicated program of study is required. It is also worth exploring the role that intelligence disclosure can play – even now – in exposing China’s plans so as to thwart them and to make China’s leadership less confident in

its strategy and timeline.

20. Second, NATO should expect and prepare for a US-China showdown, or a “two-theatre war” involving both Russia and China. Assuming current Russian leadership, NATO should expect a crisis with Moscow while the US is engaged in a major Asian contingency. This crisis could be spontaneous and related to Russian internal security (popular uprising) or the crisis could be opportunistic. That crisis may well involve other NATO members, such as the UK, France, and Canada acting as a “coalition of the willing” in the Asia-Pacific along with other states there, but there could be confrontations that implicate NATO directly and closer to home. For a potential breakdown in deterrence and a “two theatre war” scenario, US officials need to begin engaging in bilateral dialogues with individual allies about what US expectations might be in such a situation. Further, would such a scenario require a larger US strategic force, or a different one—or a larger and different strategic force?
21. Third, in the event of a US-China conflict in Asia, the Alliance should expect Washington to draw heavily on US forces available to support NATO. This could include US ground forces for the defence or liberation of Taiwan. In managing this redeployment, the White House likely will not cut NATO-designated forces so deep as to increase the Alliance’s reliance on nuclear weapons to deter aggression. European allies who share an aversion to greater reliance on nuclear weapons can help avoid this outcome by building up their conventional contributions in ways that mitigate the impact of a US redeployment to Asia. Revitalization of the German military is essential in this regard, and stocks of precision conventional weapons need to be built up.
22. Finally, NATO should be prepared to wield its enormous economic power as part of a broad Western deterrent or response to Chinese aggression in the Asia-Pacific. NATO and the EU have discovered new strength in their response to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, and there is sufficient time for finance and trade ministries to begin assessing what a sanctions strategy against China could entail and how to integrate it nationally, within NATO, and across the EU. It behoves the Alliance to do so not least because the Director of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation publicly warned recently that China appears to be taking steps to insulate itself from economic repercussions if it invades Taiwan. If it begins now, NATO has the time it needs to anticipate another cycle of conflict in Asia and prepare to mitigate the direct and indirect impacts on its security – given China’s strategic inroads in Europe and the potential for a coincidental or opportunistic crisis involving Russia. The new NATO Strategic Concept provides the foundation for doing so.

Managing escalation vis-a-vis a coherent Russia strategy and NATO unity

23. Russia introduced nuclear dynamics to the Ukraine invasion early on, perhaps to cover for a faltering conventional invasion. The crisis still portends a number of escalation pathways and it could be useful to categorise escalatory risks. The first is unintended escalation: There are risks from Allies (e.g. Turkey 2015; Lithuania/Kaliningrad); from partners (e.g. Ukrainian escalation such as cross-border shelling or sabotage); and from third parties (e.g. Iran to distract from other issues). Second, there is a risk to the cohesion of the Alliance in the face of escalation. Allies clearly have different approaches to deterring Russia, to escalating NATO responses, and to risk appetite/aversion. In a deep escalation crisis, there would be severe NATO tension between Theories of Victory and of Success. Finally, the incompetent management of risk poses a risk in itself. NATO lacks the concepts and the tools for de-escalation and war termination and it is high time to remedy this gap. NATO may also be weak in handling complexity in an escalating crisis, and it is entirely conceivable that Moscow would employ multi-domain complexity to paralyse NATO decision-making.

24. General provisions to reduce escalation risk with Russia should include understanding the adversary. NATO must study Red, study Blue and study the interactions between them. It is a risk to NATO that we do not have more Russian expertise in capitals and at NATO HQ; it is a risk to NATO that we do not sufficiently study ourselves and our interactions with Russia. NATO will also need continued use of good intelligence. In addition, effective communication will be crucial, in particular declaratory policy and delivery could be used to communicate clear thresholds to Russia. The role of private channels (back channels, hotlines) should not be underestimated.
25. An agreed Alliance concept and a coherent long-term Russia strategy would reduce risks to escalation in general and over Ukraine in particular. But at present, there are a wide range of views in NATO about long-term relations with Russia from those who favour promoting Russia's disintegration to those who still hanker after convergence. But Russian perception of NATO unity is critical. Finally, in the context of NATO-Russia, the contribution of deterrence to the management of escalation risk is massive. Deterrence is the currency Russia deals in, and it is the main tool that NATO has. While reducing the risks of accidental or inadvertent escalation will remain a requirement, there are now obvious risks of very intentional Russian escalation (possible WMD use) and NATO responses. Old tools will still be relevant, including for intended escalation (such as hotlines), but there is a need to think harder about new measures.

NATO's nuclear deterrent: Fit for purpose?

28. The crisis in Ukraine and subsequent appreciation of the Russian threat has underscored the importance of NATO's nuclear deterrence posture. This was reaffirmed in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept which stated in the preamble that 'as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance'. NATO's reliance on extended deterrence, however, has become even more critical for Trans-Atlantic security in the face of a rapidly deteriorating security environment. NATO faces concerns over Russian expansion of theatre-range dual-capable missile forces, the introduction of 'novel' nuclear-capable systems, and increased Russian reliance on nuclear weapons as Russia faces conventional stockpiles depletion and conventional weakness. NATO is also tasked with ensuring its deterrence capabilities can handle future threats from a rapidly expanding and modernising China.
26. In light of these challenges and the implications of the crisis in Ukraine it is important to ask whether NATO's deterrence capabilities are fit for purpose. While the alliance has made progress, including in the development of new concepts for joint warfighting, deterrence, and defence—NATO has not deployed modern dual capable systems, advanced deep precision strikes, nor rewritten a basic approach to theatre war/deployments. Specifically, theatre nuclear capability is the one aspect of the NATO-Russia military balance in which Russia possesses a clear advantage and it is dangerous to rely on the assumption that limited theatre use is unlikely due to escalation risks. NATO's current nuclear capabilities are not militarily relevant for a conflict involving Russian limited theatre use. As such, the conventional-nuclear gap merits further scrutiny by the Alliance if it is to be fit for purpose.

Three suggestions were made to improve the credibility of NATO's deterrent:

- I. Improve the military utility of NATO's dual capable aircraft force by modernising it with the F-35 and B61-12, enable it to disperse/operate from austere airfields across Europe, and truly integrate it with NATO theatre conventional operations.
- II. The US should field SLCM-N on attack submarines.
- III. NATO should consider fielding a ground-based low yield nuclear capability that potentially piggy backs on deployment of ground-based non-nuclear precision strike systems.

28. To strengthen NATO's deterrence capability requires continued NATO unity and significant political leadership, most likely amongst the US and the UK. NATO unity was noted as one of the alliance's greatest strengths in the Ukraine crisis, but there are concerns that such unity will soon wither. Allies must work continually to reinforce the importance of NATO unity, sustain political will within and between their communities, and ensure equitable resource contributions are made towards the alliance.

Accelerating deterrence adaptation across the alliance

29. Deterrence must be conceptually adapted by leaps and bounds to keep up with NATO's adversaries. The past ten months greatly accelerated geostrategic trends and lessons of the last ten years. Moving forward, planned adaptations will not be accomplished without sustained leadership focus. This means improved operational planning, conventional-nuclear integration, and advanced defence capabilities. While this is old business for the alliance, adaptation has petered out, and this necessitates a commitment to leadership focus and institutional excellence. Further, NATO should have agreed upon metrics for success—absent this, any progress simply becomes good enough. If the mix is indeed “appropriate,” we should be able to understand why that is so, and vice versa. This requires a mechanism for monitoring progress. Many in NATO view deterrence adaptation as something that can be done in a few months or few years, but at the strategic level, adaptation takes many years. Therefore, NATO must plan for the long haul and there are a number of long-term oriented projects that can be taken on, such as audacious war gaming. While expedient adaptation may not be comfortable nor simple, there is a need for more resources and the support of the industrial base to make this possible. Some of NATO's processes may need to be expedited—or halted if no longer relevant—to meet this historic inflection point.

30. In addition, “deterrence campaigning” through external strategic communications and internal government communications could potentially raise public awareness and rally public support in this era of information warfare. For the Alliance's long term internal planning, the following is one important question to consider: How do we encourage new thinking needed about a changing world? There is no substitute for leading by example— countries across the alliance should all be demonstrating and calling for fresh thinking. Nuclear deterrence thinking, which currently resides outside of NATO, should be brought back to NATO Headquarters to prevent further marginalisation of this mission by the Alliance.

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