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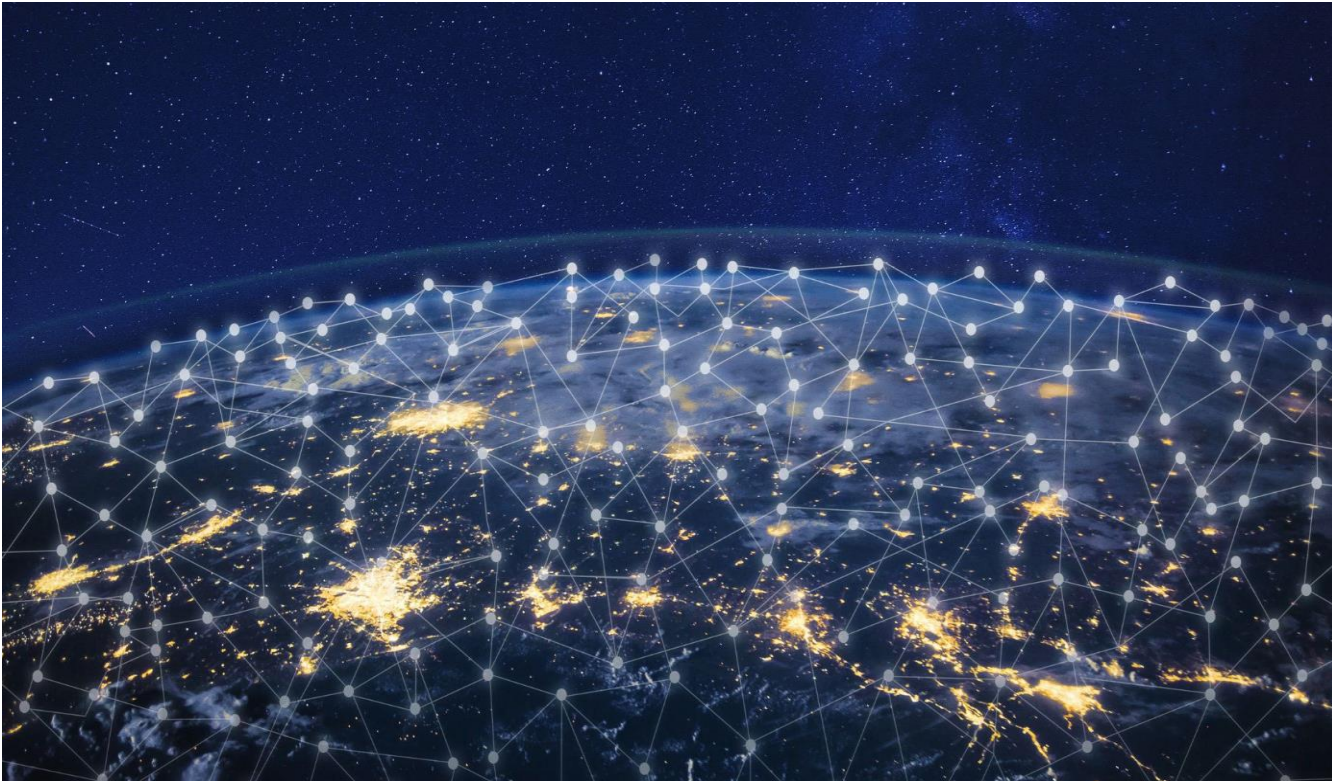


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Report

## **NATO'S New 'Deterrence Baseline' and the Future of Extended Nuclear Deterrence**

Wednesday 19 – Saturday 22 July 2023 | WP3131

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

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### Introduction

“Peace in the Euro-Atlantic area has been shattered,”<sup>1</sup> and NATO faces an increasingly dangerous and volatile security environment. In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and growing instability, NATO set a new baseline for its deterrence and defence posture at the June 2022 Madrid Summit. Furthermore, the Alliance has since been strengthened with the addition of Finland, with Sweden poised to follow. The meeting at Wilton Park was convened to assess NATO's current deterrence and defence posture, consider the impact of US defence strategy and deterrence policy for NATO's deterrence posture, and suggest how the NATO deterrence and US extended deterrence can be improved.

### Strengthening Deterrence: Implementation Tasks and Challenges

- As highlighted by the Vilnius Summit Communiqué, Russia represents the most ‘significant and direct threat to Allies’ security.’<sup>2</sup> Russian hostile behaviour, including the invasion of Ukraine, the modernisation of its nuclear forces, and its continued nuclear sabre-rattling, have undermined peace and stability within the Euro-Atlantic region. Whilst Russia remains the greatest risk for the alliance, Allies recognise other security challenges, notably the People's Republic of China (PCR). Such challenges stem from the PRC's expansion and diversification of its nuclear forces, its production of plutonium for military programmes, and its reluctance to engage in strategic risk reduction discussions. Allies also raised concerns with the relationship between the PRC and Russia and noted that Iran and Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) also challenged security in the Euro-Atlantic area. Finally, NATO Allies underscored terrorism as a direct threat to the Alliance as well.

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<sup>1</sup> NATO, Vilnius Summit Communiqué, Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius 11 July 2023.  
[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_217320.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm)

<sup>2</sup> NATO, Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 2023

- Considering the current increased instability in the Euro-Atlantic and global security environment, the Vilnius Summit represented several important steps forward for the Alliance. Positive developments for NATO deterrence and defence posture include: Swedish pathway to accession, support for Ukraine, a renewal of the 2% minimum investment pledge, a commitment to building capabilities and replenishing munitions stockpiles, and putting in place new regional defence plans. NATO has also taken steps to develop and modernise its plans, forces/capabilities, and command and control architecture in both the nuclear and conventional domains. Improvements to NATO's nuclear deterrence posture are supported by the US nuclear modernisation programme, which includes all three legs of the nuclear triad and nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3). NATO's nuclear deterrent dual-capable aircraft (DCA) mission is also being modernised and strengthened through the procurement of the F-35 aircraft and the modernisation of the B-61 bomb.
- NATO should continue to place emphasis on improvements to defence and deterrence, especially in its coherence in posture and planning across all domains (nuclear, conventional, cyber, space). Positive steps have been taken to improve NATO's posture, readiness, and coherence. However, this effort is still ongoing, and work is still needed to ensure NATO's long-term security; for example, in integrating and increasing coherence between the nuclear and conventional domains in planning and exercising. Challenges to strengthening deterrence include: maintaining Allies' political willingness to invest in defence at the required scale and in the right capabilities, anticipating the changing nature of threat over the long term, and taking account of long implementation times. The DCA mission was highlighted as a crucial element of NATO's nuclear posture. There was broad agreement that the Alliance needs to ensure greater collaboration between US and Allies in modernising and supporting NATO's nuclear mission, and especially with the Allies who contribute DCA capability. Participants discussed potential options to increase participation in the DCA mission to enhance its effectiveness (e.g., additional nuclear storage sites/renouncing the 'Three Nos', additional DCA contributors to the mission, additional members to contribute to SNOWCAT).
- Raising the nuclear IQ of both the government and civil society is a priority and a challenge for the Alliance. Participants highlighted the key role of the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) over the last few years in increasing the nuclear IQ throughout the Alliance. However, more work needs to be done, notably in communicating what the Alliance is doing, how it is going about it, and the reasoning behind it. NATO was compared to an iceberg: being only partially exposed to external audiences. It was agreed that more transparency in the nuclear domain will benefit the Alliance in raising nuclear IQ as well as fighting disinformation. Participants notably welcomed the communication around and declassification of the name of the yearly NATO nuclear exercise, 'Steadfast Noon.'

### **NATO's Changing Nuclear Debate**

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a watershed moment for NATO, particularly in how it discusses nuclear matters and deterrence. It was noted that before the invasion, there was an inhibition for NATO and member states to talk about nuclear deterrence, as it could be perceived as escalatory. There is now broad consensus on the necessity of nuclear deterrence and an increased willingness to discuss nuclear matters across the board.

- One important example of this move towards nuclear consensus is Germany and its shifting nuclear debate. Before the Russian invasion, the public debate was focussed on disarmament and the risks associated with nuclear weapons, with German decision-makers reluctant to lead public debate on the role of nuclear forces and the benefits of nuclear deterrence. After the invasion, this dynamic flipped, with those supportive of nuclear deterrence becoming more prominent in the debate. This historic shift was represented in the *Zeitenwende* speech of February 2022, when German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced that the German Government would be spending €100 billion to increase military spending. According to available polls, since 2022, the German public has become more supportive of nuclear deterrence, more accepting of Germany's nuclear sharing role in NATO, and more concerned with the prospect of Russian nuclear escalation. The acquisition of the F-35, previously highly contested, became an uncontroversial decision in the post-invasion environment. Germany's military support for Ukraine and investment in conventional forces and capabilities are also significant reflections of Germany's increasing support of NATO defence and deterrence.
- Finland and Sweden's decisions to join NATO are another important demonstration of the shifting nuclear consensus and debate. The Russian invasion of Ukraine represented a key turning point: with accession, these countries will be coming under NATO's nuclear umbrella for the first time, and increasing NATO's presence in the High North. Within Sweden, in preparation for alliance membership, this has sparked important discussions about nuclear deterrence, and about balancing NATO commitments with promoting nuclear arms control.
- Challenges remain for the Alliance in sustaining this level of consensus over the long-term. In the case of Germany, there is already evidence that a 'bounce back' to previous attitudes is beginning and that politicians might shy away from potentially controversial topics around deterrence and defence. It was suggested that long-term socialisation is needed to make this type of change entrenched. To encourage willingness and ability to engage with nuclear issues and in public debates on nuclear deterrence, more focus is needed on education, training, and support of politicians, academia, and think tanks.
- Despite the emphasis on consensus, there are still important debates occurring, both inside and outside the alliance, on the role of arms control and its relation to nuclear deterrence. It was noted that though 'arms control' and 'deterrence' are often presented as at odds with each other, this is not the case, especially for NATO: arms control and deterrence are the twin pillars of strategic stability. The coherence between these two concepts needs to be emphasised. The Vilnius Communiqué was highlighted as a document that brings together the language of both the arms control and deterrence communities: arms control and defence, risk reduction and deterrence. On the other hand, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), and certain Allies' observer status within it, was raised as a key challenge for the Alliance, given the TPNW's incompatibility with NATO's nuclear deterrence posture, especially in the current security environment. The TPNW further highlights the need for NATO to communicate to external audiences about nuclear matters.
- Another potential source of debate is around NATO nuclear sharing. Currently, there is consensus on the maintenance and modernisation of NATO nuclear sharing and the DCA mission; however, there is disagreement on whether and how to broaden it. For example, whilst Poland has been vocal in its desire to take on a NATO nuclear sharing role, there are allies that oppose this. This question

relates to a wider discussion about how to promote effective deterrence as opposed to engaging in provocative and escalatory behaviour. Future challenges to the Alliance's unity are raised by Ukraine's accession to NATO, and multilateral measures that exclude some of the Alliance, such as the European Sky Shield Initiative.

### **Re-calibrating the Russian Nuclear Threat to NATO**

- In re-calibrating the Russian nuclear threat to NATO, it is useful to assess what lessons the Kremlin might have drawn from the 2022 invasion. However, there are important caveats to NATO drawing its own lessons about the conflict as well as trying to project the lessons that Russia has learned. First, the war in Ukraine is still ongoing with incomplete and imperfect information about it. Second, Russia is not a monolith, and it is unclear whether actors within the Kremlin will draw similar lessons. Third, Russian actors may not have the capacity for systematic assessment that then informs decision making. Finally, whatever lessons Russia has learned now, they may radically change depending on the future course of war, and on its ultimate outcome.
- There was consensus that Russia would become increasingly reliant on its nuclear forces going forward, particularly whilst its conventional capabilities are constrained. A possible lesson for Russia that was raised was that nuclear intimidation threats obey the law of diminishing returns: the effectiveness of these threats has decreased and the costs have increased over time. It was also noted that it was unclear whether NATO had actually crossed Russian red lines, considering the difficulty in separating Russian signals from noise, which may prevent observers from drawing easy lessons about the credibility of Russian nuclear threats. Russia has aimed to keep NATO out of the Ukrainian war; however, whether (and how) NATO changed Russia's decision-making calculus is unclear: was it always Russia's intention to avoid direct confrontation with NATO or were they deterred? One concern was that Russia would assess that its early defeats in Ukraine were related to them not using nuclear weapons earlier in the conflict, which would have troubling implications for any future conflict.
- It was assessed, however, that whilst the threat of Russian nuclear use in Ukraine remains real, it is unlikely at the present time. There is a distinction between direct and indirect nuclear threats to the alliance. Direct nuclear threats specifically target the alliance, although the prospect of Russian nuclear use against allies does not appear credible at this time. Indirect nuclear threats relate to how Russian actions impact the thinking and behaviour of other actors. For example, Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling in Ukraine may show the effectiveness of nuclear coercion to other nuclear weapons states, and encourage similar behaviour. However, for now, Russian nuclear rhetoric has not been effective in coercing NATO or Ukraine.
- Participants discussed the motivations behind and effects of potential Russian nuclear sharing with Belarus. Several rationales were discussed, including: signalling to the West, achieving strategic depth, binding or reassuring Belarus, and using these weapons as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with NATO. Some noted that Russian nuclear sharing with Belarus may undermine Russian criticisms of NATO nuclear sharing. The implications for NATO security and vulnerability are still unclear, as it would depend on, for example, the number of weapons, weapons systems, and operational arrangements involved.

- There was lively debate about how to assess ‘rationality’ of Russia’s decision-making calculus when trying to calibrate the Russian threat to NATO. This question is fundamental for understanding how and if NATO can deter Russia and the actions it should take in order to do so. Some emphasised the emotional nature of Russian decision-making related to the start and conduct of the war in Ukraine. Others emphasised the role of information, rational miscalculation, and psychological biases. Others emphasised the level-of-analysis problem in assessing whether rhetoric and signals are aimed at domestic or international audiences. It is important to separate assessments of rational decision-making processes from assessments of outcomes: a decision that leads to an undesirable outcome is not necessarily an irrational decision, just as a decision that leads to a desirable outcome is not necessarily a rational decision.

### **Rethinking the Unthinkable**

- There are several implications arising from the war in Ukraine, which reflect an increased risk for nuclear conflict between NATO and Russia. First, the decision to invade Ukraine represents high risk acceptance and a propensity for miscalculation. Second, based on the Ukrainian war and the ongoing constraints on its conventional capabilities, Russia is likely to increase its reliance on nuclear weapons, and may even assess that it should use nuclear weapons earlier in a conflict. Third, Russian leadership may assess that NATO’s unwillingness to militarily intervene in Ukraine was related to Russian nuclear threats. Additionally, NATO should not assume that lack of nuclear use in Ukraine would mean that the Russians would not use nuclear weapons in a conflict with NATO. The two-peer problem (discussed more below) also complicates NATO’s conventional superiority and may incentivise Russian opportunistic aggression.
- Questions were raised on how to deter a Russian nuclear conflict with NATO, especially how to deter Russian limited nuclear use. There was a proposal to shore up deterrence through increasing conventional and nuclear capabilities, with European allies taking on a greater burden in the conventional domain. On the nuclear side, this could involve supplementing DCA capabilities in order to increase the flexibility, survivability, and readiness of NATO’s nuclear deterrent. This could include more DCA aircraft in the NATO mission, increasing DCA survivability through dispersal, deploying ground-based missiles, or the development of Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N). There was some debate about the deterrence benefits and escalatory risks of this proposal. Further, doubts were raised about the political viability and financial cost of this level of conventional and nuclear expansion for European NATO Allies.
- There was also consideration of the scenarios that would lead to Russian nuclear use. The key question for elucidating a deliberate use scenario is when nuclear escalation would be, or calculated to be, in Putin’s interest. One scenario might be a situation in which Putin believes he is losing the war in Ukraine, and nuclear use provides an option to save face. However, it is also important to consider the alternatives to Russian nuclear use in this ‘defeat’ scenario: Putin might try to drag out the war, or rely on chemical or biological weapons, or use nuclear rhetoric. Another scenario that was considered, was a scenario in which Putin fears replacement or assassination; however, there were doubts about whether Putin would have the capacity to order a nuclear strike in this scenario, and whether the Russian military would serve as a backstop. Another possible pathway involves the risk of misperception: that an attack in cyberspace escalates into full out nuclear conflict. One way to mitigate this risk is to set clearer policies about

what kinds of cyberattacks against the alliance would trigger Article 5, although this risks creating a permissive environment for everything that falls below that line.

### **'Information Confrontation' and Deterrence in Europe**

- Deterrence and information operations are closely connected. Deterrence is about knowing the mind of the adversary; information operations are about targeting the mind of the adversary. Information operations directly relate to deterrence in two ways. First, through 'positive deterrence,' or supporting deterrence vis à vis the adversary (i.e., making the adversary less likely to do something). Second, through 'negative deterrence' or subverting the adversary's ability to deter you.
- Whilst the information space has evolved, information operations are not new. During the Cold War, the USSR conducted extensive information operations for 'negative deterrence' or undermining NATO's nuclear deterrence policies, which were largely focussed on the political left and disarmament campaigns. To be clear, Soviet support of these groups does not mean that the Soviets created or controlled anti-nuclear civil society; rather, that information operations get the most traction where the audience wants to hear the message to begin with.
- Today, the situation is different, with less alignment between disaffected Western audiences and those with anti-nuclear views. Current Russian disinformation campaigns have most traction with the political right, where the audience is not interested in disarmament and anti-nuclear appeals may be counterproductive. This results in 'negative deterrence' information operations being less utilised and less effective against Western audiences than during the Cold War. However, today's changing audiences and widening rifts within societies can also provide important opportunities for disinformation campaigns. Rather than targeted campaigns, Russian current campaigns have mainly sought to flood the information space, making it difficult to distinguish fact from falsehood, in order to erode the notion of credible sources of information, and of truth itself.

Russian disinformation operations have the potential to erode NATO cohesion, making it critical for the alliance to address it. NATO should counter Russian disinformation and do so in a manner that respects its own core values, i.e., by not engaging in its own disinformation campaigns. There was debate about how NATO Allies could increase their resilience with regards to disinformation. There was consensus that NATO should increase transparency around nuclear matters, and that NATO should be more forthcoming and active in debates on nuclear deterrence, as a means of countering disinformation. Several participants pointed to successes in NATO countering Russian disinformation narratives about the war in Ukraine, pointing to several examples in which Russian disinformation did not manage to achieve their expected result (e.g., Ukraine biolabs). Finally, it was argued that NATO's messaging should focus on a rule-based order narrative, and on the UN Charter—to reach countries and audiences beyond the Euro-Atlantic area

## The Emerging Two-Peer Challenge and the Future of Nuclear Strategy

- The two-peer problem is the challenge of deterring and potentially defending against two nuclear-weapon states simultaneously: Russia and China. It was noted that the whole of tripolar interactions is more complicated than the sum of dyadic interactions. Strategic cooperation between Russia and China further complicates this dynamic. It was highlighted that this was both an emerged and an emerging problem, with planners needing to consider the current strategic environment, but also hedge against longer-term developments to Russian and Chinese nuclear forces. More specifically, the United States needs to confront the problem of potentially being simultaneously involved in two theatres: European and Asian-Pacific. This has important implications for US extended deterrence, and for NATO specifically. It is unlikely that a crisis or war would be confined to one geographical domain only, highlighting the threat of opportunistic or co-ordinated aggression by the second actor if the US is engaged in war with the first. It was noted that for NATO, the most likely pathway was a conflict emerging in China first, which may encourage a Russian opportunistic attack in Europe.
- In order to deal with this challenge, there was a proposal to change the US's force posture, while maintaining its strategy of counterforce for both peers. This proposal included increasing the number of deployed US nuclear warheads from reserves (particularly, after the expiry of the New START Treaty), increasing US forward deployed nuclear capabilities, and increasing regional conventional and nuclear burden-sharing onto allies in both Europe and Asia-Pacific. In considering the Russian and Chinese reactions to this proposal, some participants highlighted the escalatory risks for the proposal, questioned why current strategic levels were not sufficient, and wondered about the role of tactical nuclear weapons in this environment. There was also debate about the depth, strength, and durability of the Russian and Chinese partnership. Others highlighted limitations on industrial capacity as well as political will. It was noted that both action and inaction can carry risks: policy recommendations will depend on which risks are decision-makers more willing to take.
- Not all participants agreed with the framing of the problem. Some argued that the 'two-peer challenge' is a US framing, rather than a NATO one: for NATO Allies, Russia remains the main and current problem, emphasising that a nuclear scenario with China directly involving NATO is unlikely. Under this logic, the main problem is confronting that Europe may become a second priority for the US, and the implications for NATO security and deterrence.
- The unique position of France, as a NATO nuclear-weapon state outside of the NPG was raised. France supports NATO deterrent efforts, and includes a 'European dimension' to its 'vital interests' for which nuclear weapons could be used if they were threatened. It was highlighted that France's position outside the NPG enhances NATO's overall deterrence posture: it complicates Russia's targeting decisions against NATO, as Russia needs to consider France's separate nuclear capabilities and potential responses. To maintain its credible deterrent, France did a series of modernisation, and passed its latest *Loi Programmation Militaire*, amounting to investment of 413 billions euros over the 2024-2030 period. Whilst it is highly unlikely in the near future that France joins back the NPG, or takes part in joint military exercises, there are other ways France could further support NATO's defence and deterrence posture. It was suggested that France could place greater emphasis on the European dimension of its 'vital interest'.



## Creating Strategic Advantage While Protecting Strategic Stability

- The strategic environment is becoming increasingly unstable and unpredictable. NATO's strategy needs to adapt accordingly to account for this. The revisionist nature of actors like Russia and China, as well as the previously mentioned 'two-peer problem,' were highlighted as important drivers of instability. One proposal for addressing this changing and increasingly unstable environment was coming to a consensus on what the Alliance means by strategic stability, or what outcomes the Alliance is trying to work towards in the international system. There was debate on the various meanings of strategic stability and the desirability of attempting to form an Allied consensus. It was generally agreed that the concept of 'strategic predictability' provides a useful starting point.
- There was also discussion of the current strategic balance between Russia and NATO and how to maintain stability. One assessment emphasised that the military balance was shifting in favour of Russia in the nuclear domain, and in several key technologies. The Chinese nuclear development is also an important aspect to consider in assessing the strategic balance. NATO's nuclear posture has largely been static, with preference to pursue arms control and risk reductions and neglecting nuclear deterrence. It was noted that arms control should not replace deterrence, and that strengthening deterrence can be a risk reduction measure. It was suggested that there were three imbalances vis-a-vis Russia in the nuclear domain that needed to be addressed by NATO: 1) imbalances in modernisation and production; 2) imbalances in high level attention and rhetoric; 3) imbalances in strategic thought. Whilst there have been recent progresses in NATO's nuclear planning and rhetoric, more work needs to be done to address these imbalances. Measures in the nuclear domain to address this could include: nuclear hardware and software updates, improving conventional/nuclear integration, and increasing participation in NATO nuclear sharing—however, many of these measures could be politically difficult. Non-nuclear measures could include improving or developing: cyber capabilities and resilience, multilateral cooperation in space resilience, and coordinated deterrence campaign planning, missile defence capabilities, deep precision strike capabilities.
- There was discussion about how Russia's performance in the war in Ukraine could affect assessments of the strategic balance, with some sceptical that the balance was shifting in favour of Russia. Some participants noted that NATO should avoid 'mirroring' Russian nuclear posture, and questioned whether the nuclear domain was the appropriate place to start to achieve strategic advantage. When pursuing 'balance', state actors should take into account that this may trigger further instability through adversary reaction.

### Fit for Purpose? Next Steps for NATO's Deterrence and Defence Posture

- NATO should ensure to continuously review its deterrence and defence posture, so that it remains fit for purpose in the face of a changing strategic environment. In particular, NATO's nuclear deterrent should address the following contingencies: 1) Russia in the aftermath of the Ukrainian conflict, where it is conventionally weaker and feels increasingly vulnerable; 2) China's nuclear expansion; 3) the 'two peer problem,' including the risk of opportunistic aggression when the US is engaged in another geographical domain; and 4) further erosion of nuclear arms control architecture.
- NATO's key strength is its unity. NATO's recent expansion in the High North also provides important strategic opportunities for the Alliance. The DCA mission was

also noted as a key strength, as a means for signalling unity and resolve. Overall, the Vilnius Summit represented a positive momentum for developing NATO's deterrent posture.

- The Alliance can, however, sometimes be too slow in making progress, with some highlighting that NATO was operating from a very low base. Allies should not only be addressing current threats, but also consider the long-term when assessing and developing their deterrence posture. Some focussed on NATO's nuclear posture, proposing to supplement the Alliance's tactical nuclear capabilities in order to increase flexibility and survivability. Furthermore, it was also argued that the Alliance should address its lack of unity in the International fora (e.g., at the NPT Review Conference, at the NPT PrepCom, or at the TPNW Meeting of States Parties), which hinders the Alliance's cohesion and unity in the international community.
- Some participants highlighted the lack of capacities within NATO that should be addressed. On the conventional side, participants generally agreed that NATO Allies should invest in deep precision conventional strike capabilities and ballistic missile defence—as could allow NATO to have a strategic advantage over Russia, without seeking to 'mirror' their nuclear arsenal. One proposal was to broaden the nuclear sharing mission, for example, through increasing DCA participation, setting up DCA dispersal locations, or through adding additional tactical nuclear capabilities. One participant argued that increasing nuclear capabilities would convince Russia to come back to the arms control table. On the other hand, there were some concerns that this might fuel an arms race with Russia.

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