



Wilton Park



Report

Adapting deterrence strategies to a changing security environment

Wednesday 20 – Saturday 23 June 2018 | WP1610

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The meeting convened to discuss how the United States and its allies are adapting their deterrence strategies to the evolving security environment, how the balance of strategic influence is shifting in Europe and Asia and what can be done to accelerate deterrence transformation and improve strategic competitiveness.

High level summary points:

- In 2012, NATO committed to ensuring that its deterrence posture would remain fit for purpose in a changing security environment. Since then, the changes have been dramatic and sometimes unforeseen, and the requirements of deterrence have evolved. The key driver of change has been Mr Putin's decision to forcefully oppose a European security order believes is aimed at encirclement and containment of Russia. But this is not the only factor, as other external and internal developments are driving changes.
- In the period since, beginning with the 2014 Wales summit, NATO has strengthened its conventional deterrence posture, especially in the Baltics, while also diversifying its deterrence toolkit with the introduction of missile defences and cyber capabilities. This raises a new question about how to ensure the appropriate mix of capabilities for deterrence at the minimum necessary levels.
- An additional question has been introduced by the Trump administration's National Security Strategy: in an era of renewed major power rivalry, how can the United States (and its allies) best compete for long-term advantage? President Trump's apparent ambivalence toward historic US allies and his commitment to "over-match" the military capabilities of adversaries add many new complexities to the Alliance's debate about deterrence and competition. So too does the US push for improved burden sharing.
- In facing these new questions, NATO members must come to terms with many politically sensitive issues, and engage in a complex balancing act. They must continue to adapt and strengthen deterrence while at the same time not reinforcing threat perceptions in Moscow or weakening the transatlantic link. They must balance competition with cooperation and dialogue. They must deal with potentially divisive issues in a way that strengthens cooperation and avoids signalling to Moscow that the allies could be divided in time of crisis or war.

- Some allies are tempted by the proposition that the Alliance has accomplished all of the adaptation for deterrence that was made necessary by President Putin's changed strategy. But failing to continue adaptation would leave NATO vulnerable in a crisis or war to Russia's strategy for escalating a conflict with the hope of achieving war termination on its terms. NATO must do more to counter Russia's strategy, which must begin with a general political-military NATO strategy toward Russia. Long overdue, such a strategy must balance political and military means to achieve agreed objectives. It can guide the further development of the deterrence toolkit, nuclear and otherwise.

The future of NATO's deterrence adaptation

1. For some allies, "adaptation" may no longer be the right word. Instead, they emphasise "consolidation". That is, given NATO's progress in recent years in developing rapid reaction conventional forces (improving speed, quantity, and quality), adding in missile defence and cyber deterrence, and strengthening nuclear deterrence, NATO can now focus on consolidating these gains by focusing on ensuring the needed coherence among the diverse tools in the deterrence toolkit. Consequently, some allies argue that consolidation is the right pathway forward. Their approach to deterrence adaptation is fundamentally bottom-up—that is, it begins with the 2012 posture and credits the innovations that have enhanced the alliance's deterrence credibility.
2. However, a top-down approach points to a different conclusion. NATO cannot know if the 2018 posture is fit for purpose if it doesn't clearly understand the purpose. NATO has not developed a strategy toward Russia that addresses both political and military challenges and thus cannot assess what makes the current mix of capabilities "appropriate" or what steps are necessary to ensure that a future posture is fit for purpose. NATO has also not revised its operational concepts to account for the requirements of effectively countering new developments in Russian doctrine and capabilities. Even in the absence of a new strategy and new operational concepts, we know enough about the challenges posed by Russian strategy and capabilities to conclude that further adaptation is essential to ensure the Alliance's deterrence credibility. The needed adaptations are not at the conventional level of war—instead, they involve the new domains.
3. An additional complication is that Russia cannot and should not be the sole focus of NATO's thinking about deterrence. NATO is now potentially looking at defending a border from the North of Finland to the South of Turkey. Moreover, future conflicts are likely to be more ambiguous than the standard force-on-force model, as they will likely involve modern forms of warfare, with "grey zone" activities below the threshold of overt warfare, and escalatory activities in multiple domains.
4. Alliance cohesion and unity are more important and less certain than they have been through the post-9/11 period focusing on the war on terror. Among European allies, public opinion is generally opposed to increases in defence spending. In general, the public appears to be less aware of, or convinced by, the need for deterrence. Threat perception also varies considerably depending on location.
5. Although it is now necessary for the Alliance to update its strategic thinking, it is not clear what approach is best. Developing a new strategic concept would take at least two years and would signal that the Alliance is inward-looking for the time being. Additionally, it is not clear whether the political will to develop a new strategic concept exists. On managing the conflict with Russia, much can be learned from the Cold War period, including how to maintain a dialogue with an adversary. However, it is important to remember that Russia is not the Soviet Union and has different weaknesses which NATO can focus on.

The search for modern deterrence: evolving P-3 strategies

6. The Trump administration has set out a comprehensive strategy for modern deterrence and strategic competition in its National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Nuclear Posture Review. A key driver of its approach is the assessment that Russia and China are revisionist powers competing with America and its allies to roll back the existing regional security orders—leading to the administration’s focus on rivalry and strategic competition. The administration’s two deterrence objectives are to deter aggression against US vital interests to avoid war, and to deter the use of WMD in war to avoid escalation. The Nuclear Posture Review was updated to react to Russia’s change in strategy which has fully integrated nuclear and conventional capabilities. Overall, the US aims to raise Russia’s threshold for nuclear use.
7. UK nuclear strategy dates to the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, which put the emphasis on modernising the way the British government conceives the ends and means of deterrence. It put a focus on the particular deterrence challenges in the new security environment and on the need for a full-spectrum approach to deterrence. The nuclear capability is at the apex of Britain’s modern deterrence strategy, but many other capabilities can and do contribute. The wider National Security Capabilities Review, conducted in 2017, emphasised the fact that the deterrence toolkit is increasingly diverse as it encompasses both hard and soft power means, as well as resilience and defensive capability in the private sector. The UK is committed to ensuring that NATO improves its nuclear culture and sustains the needed leadership focus on the nuclear deterrence mission.
8. France’s nuclear strategy has evolved little if at all over the course of multiple presidential administrations, a reflection of the deep political commitment in France to the nuclear deterrent. Nonetheless, the French nuclear policy community is focused on the dynamic character of the external threat environment. This dynamism is driven in part by Russia, but also by the emerging nuclear and missile threats from China and North Korea, and by the many indicators of potential future nuclear threats from states in the Middle East. France is strongly committed to the long-term preservation of the British (and American) nuclear deterrent and to Britain’s success in sustaining continuous at sea deterrence (CASD). With regards to modern areas of warfare such as cyber and space, France sees little applicability for a nuclear deterrent. It has already published a cyber strategy and is working on a space strategy.
9. All three countries face the challenge of how to sustain domestic political support for nuclear deterrence. Public support is episodic and driven largely by either the emergence of new threats or leadership efforts to educate and persuade in advance of some major policy decision. There is rising concern among European allies about the advocacy for the nuclear ban treaty. As ICAN’s goal is to end the practice of extended nuclear deterrence in Europe, it is now lobbying energetically with sympathetic political parties. The potential result could be an unravelling of the political commitment to NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements and/or a collapse of their planned modernisation. The resulting rupture in the transatlantic link would send a damaging signal of lack of resolve to Moscow and others.
10. The new technologies of modern warfare are labelled by some as “disruptive technologies”, reinforcing the political opposition of some to efforts to strengthen deterrence by integrating such technologies. Whatever one makes of this argument, these technologies cannot be ignored and are unlikely to be abandoned by potential military challengers to the Alliance. Their possible future relevance to nuclear deterrence is an open question, however. Especially when it comes to information warfare, there are gradations in risk between political behaviour and genuine aggression. Overall, it needs to be clearly signalled that attacking NATO is a bad idea, regardless of the choice of technology.

Extended deterrence in comparative global perspective

11. The effort to strengthen and adapt deterrence in Europe can be informed by parallel efforts in East Asia, but also vice versa. Japan and South Korea closely watch the debate within NATO about extended deterrence, with a particular focus on assessments of gaps in the regional deterrence architecture and on the Alliance's consultative mechanisms for nuclear deterrence. NATO could learn something useful from the efforts of the United States, Japan, and South Korea to address the challenges of deterrence of North Korea and of strategic competition with China.
12. A common challenge for allies in both East Asia and Europe is the arrival in the United States of a president with apparently ambivalent views on NATO, who seems to see alliances as barriers to the exercise of American influence, and who has cast doubt on his willingness to defend allies who have fallen short of his expectations for burden sharing. The "America First" rhetoric only reinforces allied anxiety. A deeper practical cooperation between the US and allies may be an answer to some of these uncertainties. However, European allies also need to develop their own robust deterrence strategy. A quiet conversation has begun in Europe about how this might be accomplished.
13. The Singapore summit between the US and North Korea, and its uncertain outcomes, may have profound and potentially unwelcome implications in Europe. On the one hand, successful denuclearisation of North Korea (along with the elimination of its long-range missiles) would directly and positively impact Europe, by freeing it of an unpredictable potential threat. On the other hand, a deal with North Korea has the potential to tempt Russia to seek its own deal with the US that many Europeans would consider bad. For example, the President's decision to cancel this year's military exercises in Korea because of their cost and (in the eyes of North Korea) provocative character, may generate concerns in Europe that comparable exercises in NATO might be ditched by the US as similarly costly, and (in Russia's view) provocative. The knock-on effects of making bilateral agreements with little or no clear attempt to take allied security concerns into account should not be underestimated. President Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal only amplifies these European fears.
14. South Korea stands out as the premier model of a US ally that has worked closely with the new US administration to seize opportunities in a changing security environment in a manner that balances deterrence and dialogue. South Korea and the United States pursue an integrated approach to strengthening and adapting the regional deterrence architecture and each has taken significant steps over the last decade to modernise deterrence strategies and capabilities as the North Korean nuclear and missile threat has emerged. South Korea's key contributions are threefold: first, an improved "kill chain" (to enable non-nuclear but strategic strikes on key North Korean targets); second, new missile defence capabilities, including THAAD; and third, the doctrine of "massive punishment and retaliation", whereby North Korea should expect a heavy, disproportionate response to any attack it conducts on the South.
15. Burden-sharing is critical for both Washington and Seoul. But Seoul does not want to be excessively reliant on the United States for its defence and wants to ensure a sovereign decision-making capability, especially in a war involving questions of its survival. This reflects a quiet debate in Seoul about the actual political will of the United States to defend South Korea once the American homeland is vulnerable to North Korean missile attack.

The nuclear deterrence taboo and Europe's nuclear future

16. Despite NATO's effort to renew its nuclear policy and posture, and to restore its nuclear culture, some European allies can be deeply ambivalent about nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence. Indeed, strong public support exists in many countries for withdrawal of the remaining US weapons. In some countries, a strong taboo has formed around the discussion of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence. This has been reinforced by the reluctance of political leaders to explain the need for, and role of, nuclear weapons in the Alliance's deterrence posture anywhere outside of the corridors of NATO. The publicly received message is generally that those leaders do not have the courage of their convictions—and thus that NATO nuclear policy lacks political legitimacy.
17. The Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) has significant support in many NATO countries despite the formal political opposition to the treaty by all NATO member governments. In support of the Ban, the NGO community is engaged in a campaign to pressure and shame NATO members, especially those involved in the sharing arrangements. This reinforces divisions within the Alliance. Conspicuously, this comes at a time when Russia is pursuing many different means to divide the allies politically. An additional complication today is that the anti-nuclear movement has taken a clear anti-Trump component.
18. Strong leadership in support of the Alliance's deterrence posture is urgently needed. The Alliance must maintain a clear and coherent strategy, which must be reflected in its documents. National capitals must articulate that strategy publicly and affirm their willingness to invest accordingly. Both the Alliance and its members must make the case that a NATO approach balancing deterrence and arms control is better for Europe than an approach that abandons deterrence in favour of disarmament. Academics and NGOs can both counter ICAN's message and work on engaging ICAN face to face. But at the moment it is not clear that such leadership is possible. Those who can and should lead are apparently reluctant to do so.
19. Germany is an example of a "nuclear taboo" country in Europe. It is getting rid of nuclear power and the government eschews all discussion of nuclear weapons. Germany has a history of a strong domestic anti-nuclear movement which is rooted in its peace and environmental movements. It is reluctant to discuss deterrence generally and nuclear deterrence in particular. This has created a "regime of unspeakability", which leads to strategic blindness and a self-inflicted ignorance of the new Russian threat. Independent strategic thinking is desperately needed in Germany and must be revitalised. There are few think tanks or experts in the academic community who engage in these kinds of discussions.

The balance of strategic influence in Europe: shifting in whose favour?

20. European security requires more than a sound deterrence strategy and posture. It requires also a strategy for long-term competition, or so argues the Trump administration in its National Security Strategy. This invites a host of difficult questions. How should we compete? What are we competing for? How can we compete without creating an unnecessary and unwelcome arms race? How can we shift the balance of strategic influence in the favour of the West? Who is winning the competition? What does it mean to win? Many of these questions remain unanswered. The Trump administration's high-level answer is that the United States must compete to gain "over-matching" military capabilities so that adversaries will not be tempted to challenge militarily the security interests of the United States or its allies.

21. Russia too sees the world in competitive terms, and much of President Putin's foreign policy and military strategy is driven by an assessment that Russia has been losing the competition. Seen in the long term, there is good reason to believe that Russia is playing a losing game. Russia isn't going to collapse, but nor is it going to grow in a manner sufficient to keep its desired seat at the head table. It has the resource capacity to maintain the state, but the economy is not strong enough to maintain over the long term a position at the head table. The Russian economy is weak, and the country has been falling back further in global rankings. Russia's inability to allow evolution of its political model is weakening the state in the medium to long term, which poses a further constraint on innovation. In this circumstance, Russia's leaders work hard to shape the security environment to try to achieve their goals without resorting to armed conflict against NATO, which would necessarily be high risk.
22. The country's economic issues are beginning to have an impact on military reform - last year's budget was cut despite ambitious headline targets. The sanctions regime also poses a constraint on developing dual use capabilities. The rules-based global order is constraining the political regime in Russia to maintain domestic control and push off foreign influence, which helps to explain why Mr Putin protests against treaties and international rules. The Russian strategy is to use and exacerbate political polarisation in western countries and thus exploit western weaknesses. The scope of the campaign is only slowly being revealed. However, it is dangerous to simply wait for Russia's economic collapse, which could still be far in the future.
23. Russia's chronic inability to overcome these challenges while dominated by Putinism points also to a possible opportunity. Mr Putin is now signalling his willingness to re-engage. If he sticks to prior demands, his price for a deal will be high: a re-making of the European security order, a significant weakening of NATO, and the elimination from Europe of US nuclear weapons and missile defences. He may believe he has a deal-maker in an American President willing to set aside traditional definitions of American national interest in favour of deals that put America first, whatever their impact on America's allies.
24. Relative to Russia, the West is in a much stronger position—politically, economically, and militarily. Despite its inability to organise defence matters, the EU has begun to make contributions where it can. The Commission is ahead of its member states on thinking about cyber and hybrid capability. The Wales and Warsaw summits have allowed NATO to modernise and to renew, and it is now much better prepared to deal with Russian competition than it was 5-6 years ago. The UK's departure from the EU will affect the EU's position on Russia, possibly for the worse. UK defence investment however will allow the UK to have a stronger defensive position in general. In short, the West brings many strengths to long-term competition.
25. But political changes in Western countries are changing the basis of strategic competition. The rise of populism and of anti-Trumpism are both re-shaping the European security landscape. Confidence in the Alliance is waning, as is confidence in the United States as a partner and security guarantor. The impact of Brexit is hard to predict, but it is unlikely to have no impact. And Russia has been skilful at exploiting and magnifying political problems in the West. The re-nationalisation of defence planning in Europe – something that has not been a concern for decades – must now be considered as a real possibility.

The balance of strategic influence in Northeast Asia: shifting in whose favour?

26. When trying to understand the dynamics of strategic competition in Europe and the transatlantic security environment, it can be helpful to examine the lessons of strategic competition in Asia and the transpacific security environment. In both regions, the rumours of American decline are exaggerated. In relative terms, decline is indisputable, as both regions have risen, including local major powers. In absolute terms, US decline is negligible, as it remains preeminent in both hard and soft power terms and is the only power with global reach. Especially in East Asia, America has done well and continues to do well in a long-term competition, even without a very explicit strategy for doing so. This has been reinforced by a great deal of policy continuity from Washington over many administrations.
27. Although many countries seek to remain close to, or grow closer to the US, it is the US that appears to be pulling away. Especially in East Asia, the slogan “America First” is interpreted as a commitment to disengagement, a perception that is reinforced by the radical changes in American trade policy made by President Trump. Uncertainty about American reliability means that countries may move closer to China in the long term.
28. The corollary of the above is that the balance of strategic influence has not shifted to China as much as many have feared, or as China might wish, but China is concerned about new forms of competition being unleashed by the US. It has been very concerned about being lumped in with Russia in Trump Administration policy documents. Chinese experts are aware that China is still far behind the US in terms of military capabilities. Both Japan and the Republic of Korea have stronger military capabilities than China which means that the alliance balance in the region remains tipped in the US’s favour. However, there is a danger that China’s capabilities are overinflated in the US domestic discourse, which is also due to China’s economic capabilities. China has been effective at enforcing UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea but finds itself in the difficult position now of neither wanting a nuclear North Korea nor wanting US dominance on the Korean peninsula. If China feels threatened in that regard, it may further invest in modern weapons technologies which is an area which may grow to a real advantage if it chooses not to be constrained by ethical concerns. In the long term, this may cancel out conventional US advantages. The threat from China also comes in an economic form: the mutual economic dependence between the US and China carries its own dangers which can have implications for global security.
29. For the most part, US allies in East Asia share the assessments above, but this is not universal. Some are very alarmed by the shifting balance and believe that the new strategic vulnerabilities of the United States to nuclear attack by long-range Chinese or North Korean missiles has effectively de-coupled the United States from their defence in time of crisis and war. Moreover, some perceive a lack of US will, as opposed to a lack of capability, to defend allies. This concern spiked in response to the Singapore summit and the perceived insults done to the interests of allies.
30. Overall, Asian countries are cautious about Trump’s position on the region and rather pessimistic about the regional order and the threat China poses. After the Singapore summit, only 25% of Japanese are optimistic about the future of negotiations whereas in the Republic of Korea, 60% of the population are positive. What happens if denuclearisation won’t happen? Japan will have to coexist with a threat from North Korea. If the US makes further concessions to North Korea, there is also a risk of further decoupling between Japan and the US.

31. Caution is therefore in order before proclaiming a shift in East Asia decisively favouring China, but also about proclaiming a similar shift in Europe. Under Putin, Russia has recovered many strengths and become much more assertive, but it also has many weaknesses, some of them chronic, and potentially crippling over time. Both Russia and China have made hard power progress but their ability to generate and utilise soft power is very modest in comparison to the West and the United States.

Priorities for bolstering deterrence and improving competitiveness

32. NATO should remain the focus of efforts to bolster deterrence in Europe. National efforts can reinforce deterrence, as can improved military coordination by the European Union, but neither can substitute for NATO. This implies that NATO members must take specific steps to ensure that the commitments made in Articles 3, 4, and 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty can be fulfilled. The article 3 commitment to maintain the forces for self-help and collective aid requires achievement of the 2% spending mark. The article 4 commitment to consult when under threat requires lowering the political barrier to such consultations, which is unhelpfully high in an era when a key adversary utilises hybrid and information warfare techniques in pre-conflict strategies. A lower threshold of what constitutes an article 4 consultation could become an avenue for states to discuss grey zone violations and to discuss their concerns around them. This would acknowledge that the alliance is under attack and would allow it to communicate to the public that there is a wide array of provocative action going on and that the nature of threats and warfare is changing. It would also help to demonstrate cohesion because it would increase communication between allies.
33. The Article 5 commitment to collective defence is the most demanding. It requires updated operational plans that address the most stressful plausible threats, supplemental capabilities to fulfil those plans, a campaign approach to exercising all levels of the alliance, improved deterrence communications strategies, a stronger Alliance culture of nuclear deterrence, and improved coherence among the tools of deterrence. All of this must be aligned with a political-military strategy that both deters and engages Russia.
34. The most essential Alliance asset for deterrence is political cohesion. As further strengthening of military capabilities is needed over the next 5-10 years so that NATO members remain able to act militarily in a crisis, such strengthening must not stretch Alliance cohesion to the breaking point. This will not be easy from a political point of view but is essential for maintaining European security. The test for action within the Alliance is therefore not whether it might provoke Russia so much as whether it might undermine alliance cohesion. The bottom-up approach may be more effective than top-down in achieving the needed balance between progress in strengthening deterrence and maintaining cohesion. A top-down approach would require political consensus on a new Alliance Strategic Concept and Deterrence and Defence Posture Review, and neither is likely in current circumstances.
35. Both bottom-up and top-down approaches are, in practice, useful for the Alliance. We should also appreciate the role of future crises in clarifying the new challenges and pointing to the needed solutions, just as past crises have done. We should also understand that the official formulation of war plans helps to develop an understanding among political and military leaders of new threats, new contingencies, and new problems. This will help to motivate the development of operational solutions and the enabling capabilities.

36. The technical community can make important contributions to the strengthening of the Alliance's deterrence posture and to the improvement of competitiveness. The nuclear community has the central responsibility in ensuring that the nuclear deterrent remains safe, secure, and effective so long as it is needed. It also has unique capabilities that inform the development of arms control options for the Alliance. The broader technical community can also help to stimulate the strategic thought that is widely recognised as essential to the Alliance's solutions to the new problems in front of it.

On balancing deterrence, competition and cooperation

37. NATO does not labour in isolation and context matters to this question of balance. The world has changed in ways that make it increasingly challenging and increasingly unpredictable. Domestic politics have also changed in fundamental ways, with significant impact on the core premises of the North Atlantic Treaty. Economic factors also play a role, including the Trump administration's turn to trade wars. These challenges are compounded by NATO's lack of agreement and lack of strategy.
38. The Alliance's strategy and posture can only be sustained over time if they enjoy public support in member countries. This requires a greater willingness than has hitherto been evident to make NATO's case publicly. Its soft power is its real asset, and this requires mobilisation. It must again craft a long-term vision that balances deterrence and dialogue so that Western publics understand that there is a possible pathway to escaping from the burdens of deterrence and defence.
39. The Alliance must also engage Russia in a meaningful way. Dialogue plays an important role in establishing predictability. This is a lesson from the Cold War which needs to be remembered. Positive engagement of Russia also requires good allied communication beforehand. While we engage, we must also beware of Russian information warfare strategies that aim to manipulate us.
40. NATO has plenty of reasons to think it can compete successfully over the long term, and should say so. Its members have put in place significant new defence modernisation programs. Its military arm has made major strides in recent years to improve, exercise, and display strong conventional deterrence capabilities. Its operational concepts are being updated as part of a comprehensive re-thinking of military plans. Russia behaviour provides regular impetus to efforts to strengthen and adapt the Alliance's deterrence posture. It provides a reminder of the need for political dialogue with Russia and for a Western diplomatic strategy that may, at some point in the future, help to resolve major political differences, and thus renew the peace. As an Alliance, we cannot allow the momentum generated by recent progress to peter out. Continued strengthening of NATO's deterrence posture is necessary even if it is difficult. More innovation within NATO, and more analysis of the means and ends of deterrence, are necessary before we can be fully confident that the next sets of adaptations will bring NATO even closer to a posture it considers fit for purpose.

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