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NATO's Evolving Modern
Deterrence Posture: Challenges
and Risks

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NATO's Evolving Modern Deterrence Posture: Challenges and Risks

Post-Workshop Report¹

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The 2016 Warsaw Summit underlined NATO's commitment to maintaining a deterrence posture vis-à-vis Russia. But while the Alliance's primary task of preventing conflict by deterring aggression against NATO territory is arguably being achieved successfully every day, pressing questions remain. Is the Alliance's approach credible, sustainable and optimal? Are the risks inherent in the current NATO and Russian deterrence constructs and postures properly identified and mitigated? What practical challenges remain to be addressed?

In late March 2017, the European Leadership Network (ELN) convened a closed-door workshop in Brussels to address the main challenges to and risks in NATO's evolving "modern deterrence" approach. This workshop brought together senior NATO officials, serving and former diplomats and military leaders, as well as selected think tank and academic experts from NATO member states.

This brief draws on the discussion's main points in order to inform NATO and its leaders as they prepare for their Brussels meeting. While the ELN is grateful to all participants for their participation and contributions, the ELN team alone is responsible for the conclusions of this report, which do not necessarily reflect the views of participants, NATO or any of its member states.

1. What is NATO deterring?

The Alliance has made remarkable efforts since 2014 to design and implement 'modern deterrence'. Nevertheless, NATO is still in many ways inadequately prepared for effective deterrence in the 21st Century. The challenges and asymmetries with which the Alliance must deal are very different from the Cold War, whilst the understanding of deterrence, including its ultimate purpose of preventing war, is not well understood by the publics or perhaps even the leaders of the Alliance's member states.

In many member states, NATO's deterrence narrative is difficult to fit into discussion of national security, as other elements appear of greater relevance and importance. Public

¹ This report is based on deliberations at a private meeting of NATO Alliance officials and experts in Brussels on 27 and 28 March 2017. This report is however the sole responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the position of an individual participant or the European Leadership Network.

perceptions are focused above all on terrorism, not on the sort of existential catastrophe that NATO chiefly exists to deter. Moreover, the workshop noted difficulties within the narrative about the boundaries of what NATO is deterring.

Modern deterrence is (de facto) mostly about Russia. The clearest deterrence mission of the Alliance is the prevention of an attack by the Russian Federation, although not all NATO countries are comfortable with describing Russia as a potential adversary. The Russian threat fits NATO's history and sense of purpose, namely the deterrence of a powerful state adversary and the reassurance of alliance members in its direct vicinity.

The threats of state collapse, actions by non-state actors, mass migration of people, and international terrorism are outside NATO's original purpose and original deterrence roles. These more southern threats require new thinking that the alliance is still struggling with; it remains to be determined how far they fit within NATO's deterrence framework. Differing sets of priorities among the NATO member states is not a new issue, but in a period of multiple threats it is proving challenging to alternate the Alliance's attention between the Eastern and Southern flanks.

NATO 'deterrence insurance' and its possible upgrades. NATO deterrence and defence policy has been likened to basic 'burglary and fire insurance', i.e. protection against catastrophe. It does not cover 'health insurance' challenges such as protecting internal cohesion, the political processes or the strength of the economy. These remain outside NATO's focus but could be crucial in a confrontation with an actor wishing to exploit the weakest point within the Alliance, and in every member state. Expanding NATO's mandate might be a solution, but better cooperation and coordination with the EU plus investment in resilience at the national level appear better responses. What responsibilities fall to NATO remains somewhat unclear in this respect also.

Focus on deterring specific actions. Even when concerned with a state adversary, NATO faces an increasingly uncertain environment, in which state-on-state aggression has become much harder to define and deter. Effective modern deterrence is multifaceted - a fact that NATO has begun to acknowledge, as reflected, for example, in its recognition of cyber as a new domain of operation. For modern deterrence, NATO must build on this adaptive approach and address not only the threat of 'traditional' armed attack, but also a new mix of kinetic and non-kinetic actions.

Ambiguity versus clarity. Compounding the complexity around what the Alliance deters, NATO has to maintain a fine balance between ambiguity and clarity in its deterrence communication. Too much clarity would help an adversary to operate below critical thresholds, while too much ambiguity could end up undermining deterrence credibility. This perennial deterrence problem is clearest in alliance policy on cyber-attacks. Despite

NATO's Wales Summit affirmation that cyber-attacks on the Alliance could trigger Article 5, it is unclear whether this is sufficient to deter such attacks.

Deterrence 101. Worryingly, the knowledge gap about deterrence extends beyond the political leadership in most member states, and remains a problem for some NATO officials and military personnel. The lack of strategic knowledge among a generation of officers that have built their careers in expeditionary warfare and counterinsurgency, added to the paucity of education in national staff colleges regarding deterrence and national security, poses a real challenge. This knowledge gap also concerns the relationship between deterrence and arms control, with one workshop participant noting that civilian and military personnel now struggle to communicate the role that arms control plays in national security. Whilst an effort to educate NATO Ambassadors on deterrence over the past two years has raised the level of understanding among this group, this is not yet an institutionalised process.

2. How is NATO deterring?

In the recent past, NATO has frequently discussed the optimal 'deterrence mix', understood as the most effective employment of elements such as conventional and nuclear forces, missile defence, cyber capabilities and so forth. Such an approach, however, is not well-suited to the contemporary environment of cross-domain threats, creating problems with the coherence and synergy of NATO's response and feeding an organisational culture at NATO which favours the compartmentalization of issues.

An alternative approach would accept that the conception of deterrence remains fluid, as it adapts to address new strategic issues and changing adversaries. It would require thinking less in terms of components and more in terms of influencing potential adversaries across continuous spectrums of deterrence measures.

Conventional aspects of deterrence are the most improved element on the spectrum. The forward deployment plans decided at the Wales and Warsaw Summits remain significant, as they address the threat of a sudden land attack aimed at creating a *fait accompli*. Yet, even here, major problems remain. NATO must address significant challenges in resuscitating the military science of reinforcement, follow-on forces and infrastructure, both physical and organisational, which has atrophied since the end of the Cold War. And in order to deter, this aspect of NATO's modern deterrence must be well-resourced and exercised.

Nuclear aspects of deterrence have remained the most unchanged part of NATO's deterrence spectrum, with only slight adaptation of both doctrine and practice. Managing the linkage between conventional and nuclear components remains controversial, but cannot be left undefined. The Alliance may not be the subject of nuclear attack, but is likely to operate under the "nuclear shadow" in any confrontation or crisis with a nuclear-armed opponent.

Counter-hybrid and cyber. NATO responses to so-called 'hybrid' methods or cyber-attacks are the most underdeveloped components of the alliance's posture. NATO has a 'hybrid' strategy but this has yet to be well-integrated. Whilst the Warsaw Summit included provisions on improving national resilience against hybrid attack, this depends primarily on mostly nascent work by national governments and institutions such as the EU.

There is uncertainty within the Alliance on cyber issues. The development of offensive cyber capabilities is likely to be an important element of modern deterrence. But this has yet to be effectively incorporated into NATO's thinking. One suggestion from the workshop was to view this capability in a similar way to the strategic nuclear forces of the US, UK, and France: not as a shared Alliance capability but as a national asset that can be used in an Alliance framework. Beyond cyber, NATO usage of special forces should be viewed as a key linkage between hybrid and conventional warfare.

Understanding the adversary. In order to use a spectrum of deterrence measures effectively, a deep understanding of an adversary's thinking is crucial. For example, Russian methods must be accepted as unique and profoundly different from how NATO thinks. The Russian way of war does not seek to mirror the West. Modern Russian strategy is also markedly different from its Soviet predecessor, focusing increasingly on stand-off capability rather than a model based on the occupation of territory. The alliance is continually debating Russia, but it is unclear whether NATO is making a sustained, institutionalised effort to read Russia better.

Communicating deterrence. Deterrence happens in the mind of the adversary. Yet, communicating deterrence and assessing its effectiveness does not so far seem to be a concern of NATO's or indeed of its member states. The alliance does not know and does not seek to measure the deterrent effect of its behaviours. Nor does it have much grip over the "body language" conveyed by, for example, NATO and member state military exercises, and accompanying rhetoric.

Making a difference. It is difficult to fully assess the success of any deterrence policy. How does one prove a negative – the absence of unwanted action? How can NATO be sure that the particular posture presently adopted is in fact deterring an adversary's actions better than the previous posture? Workshop participants acknowledged the difficulties but also the importance, extensively addressed during the Cold War, of measuring deterrent effect.

3. NATO-Russia: Avoiding Uncontrolled Escalation

The workshop considered some of the stabilising - and potentially destabilizing - elements within NATO's modern deterrence construct.

Escalation is not a dirty word. In discussion of the notional 'new Cold War', escalation is often presented as an ultimate failure of crisis management, to be avoided at all costs. However, escalation and counter-escalation need to be re-claimed as tools of crisis management and deterrence to be used by the Alliance. Theories of escalation need to be revisited in search of elements that may have relevance today. NATO's behaviour during a crisis should be regularly tested through realistic table-top exercises, to identify political and military moves up and down the escalation ladder. The Alliance should not be self-deterred from taking necessary steps to increase its own security by outside criticism or ill-grounded concerns about provoking Russia.

But there is also reason to be cautious about applying the notion of escalation control. NATO needs to take into account the risk of a miscalculated response by the opponent and over-reaction, especially at present, when deterrence signalling may not be correctly read against the background noise of posturing, 'maskirovka' and propaganda.

Restraint is not weakness. NATO's approach so far (including a light forward presence, the option of rapid reinforcement and a high degree of transparency) can be seen an appropriate compromise between the need to strengthen deterrence and defence and the wish to avoid threatening Russia with a build-up of offensive capabilities. Russia has no objective grounds for seeing the forces which are being currently forward deployed as a move aimed as escalating tensions. There seems to be space to add further elements, such as air defence, while remaining in line with the general tenets of NATO's modern deterrence and the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Periodic, transparent exercising of major reinforcement along the Eastern flank should be introduced as a standard part of NATO deterrence.

However, if the Alliance were to decide to go further, for example by introducing additional substantial combat forces to the border areas or adding significant offensive strike capabilities, that would be a major departure from the current model of restraint. Such a move would be strategically justifiable only as response to Russian moves dramatically changing the balance of forces in Europe or any of its sub-regions.

Key role of transparency and predictability. While NATO needs to maintain some secrecy about its defence arrangements and some ambiguity about how it would respond to an actual challenge, transparency and predictability are major assets in the Alliance's deterrence posture. They help signal NATO's resolve while reducing the risk of accidents, misperceptions or misunderstanding. Transparency is the best way to counter accusations

of irresponsibility and provide credible information, not least to NATO publics. NATO should seek reciprocity on transparency from Russia, but should not make reciprocity a pre-condition for providing more information about its own plans and actions.

Disciplined dialogue with potential adversaries is also a deterrence tool. NATO should use flexibly the existing and available channels of communication, including the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) and the Pavel-Gerasimov channel. Some more ambitious ideas, including working-level meetings below NRC Ambassadors' level, or the return of Russian officers to SHAPE, still appear to be politically premature.

4. Broader challenges to effective deterrence

The workshop at earlier stages had identified the problems of lack of basic understanding of deterrence; lack of clarity about the objects, scope and complexity of modern deterrence; the underdeveloped nature of NATO thinking about and implementation of modern deterrence; and the weaknesses in understanding Russia and other potential adversaries, communicating deterrence coherently and effectively, and measuring effect.

Participants touched on a number of further challenges to NATO's effectiveness in delivering its modern deterrence, many of them inter-linked.

The unity challenge. Deterrence credibility in the eyes of potential opponents cannot be divorced from the quality of leadership and perceptions about the Alliance's political cohesion or lack thereof. In the two decades following the end of the Cold War, NATO has seen itself not just as an alliance of countries bound by common interests, but as a group connected by deeper bonds of common values of democracy, rule of law and a common, value-based approach to international politics. Fundamental disagreements about the relevance of these values or a sense that some major NATO members, for example the US and Turkey, may prefer purely transactional or selective engagement with other NATO partners, will be noted by opponents as evidence that the Alliance may be easier to divide during a crisis. Differing threat perceptions among allies, for example in the East and South, could also present challenges to alliance unity.

The image challenge. NATO has worked on adding some deterrence 'muscle' to the picture of an organisation focused primarily on peace building and regional stability, which was created in the process of out-of-area engagements in the Balkans and Afghanistan. At the same time, NATO stresses that it is not returning to the days of Cold War confrontation. As a result, the alliance talks more about deterrence, but projects a somehow unclear image of an organization still unsure about the return to deterrence and defence as its primary task. Various war gaming reports, in which "red" forces quickly overpower the Baltic States, have also fed an image of a weak Alliance, and were not credibly refuted.

It was argued that Russia's image, on the other hand, is of a state which is conducting a strategic destabilisation campaign on a Euro-Atlantic-wide scale, with an objective of undermining NATO. The perception is that Moscow's conventional and missile capabilities give them leverage over their neighbours and in neighbouring regions, whilst Russia's nuclear posture has led to an advantage overall. NATO deterrence should address these perceptions, not just Russia's actual capabilities.

The signalling challenge. The alliance needs not only to aspire to coherent deterrence signalling but must work proactively to achieve it. Doing so is complicated by differences between allies over relations with Russia. All subscribe to the basics of NATO's approach to Russia, but individual states and even officials may diverge on the exact relationship between deterrence signals and efforts to engage Russia. This complicates and potentially slows formulating and signalling the alliance's red lines, including on issues such as 'little green men', cyber-attacks, or the threat or use of nuclear weapons.

The capabilities challenge. While NATO has been able to assemble the 'trip wire' and the 'detonator' (forward presence and the spearhead force), these are not yet connected to the fully assembled deterrent 'device': a substantial set of forces with sufficient demonstrated capabilities, characteristics and command arrangements to be able to defend NATO territory against a major, sustained attack. Without these elements, NATO's modern deterrence is not fully credible and its sustainability as a deterrence construct is challenged. Yet these elements are vastly more expensive, complex and politically challenging than light forward presence.

Some of the most pressing capability gaps and issues include:

- Logistical management of reinforcement, including freedom of movement throughout NATO territory, availability of strategic transport and infrastructure in the transit and host countries, and pre-positioning along the flanks;
- Meeting the new national capabilities development targets set after the Warsaw summit - with the need to involve ministries of finance and economy in the process;
- Urgent adaptation of the NATO Command Structure, which remains ill-suited for preparation and managing of major defence operations and for maintaining permanent situational awareness in the areas important for the defence of the Alliance (the adaptation process has started and should be finished by 2018).

5. Risks in the NATO deterrence construct

Workshop participants considered that there were a number of risks which suggested that the present deterrence relationship with Russia might be very unstable. These risks centred on five main themes.

The risk of accidents. NATO's modern deterrence is about making its defences credible without resorting to a major build-up of forces to counter the existing and future capabilities of Russia or other potential opponents. This nevertheless requires NATO to adjust its force posture, including through forward-deployment of some troops, weaponry, aviation and maritime assets to the vicinity of Russia and conducting more frequent exercises. That creates friction with Russia. Several workshop participants noted the danger of accidents or incidents that could lead inadvertently to a clash between the two sides. The lack of mutual understanding, absence of dialogue and inadequacy of existing INCSEA and Dangerous Military Activities agreements between Russia and NATO Allies are therefore significant risks.

Instabilities at low levels of crisis. NATO fears that, even at low levels of crisis, Russia would use its demonstrated ability to concentrate forces at speed and would target the seams of NATO decision making to slow alliance responses. This puts considerable pressure on alliance decisions very early in a crisis to mobilise forces and to reinforce, given the long lead times involved.

Participants noted that what would be intended by NATO as firm deterrence signalling through early decisions to reinforce or mobilise at low levels of crisis might not be well understood in the Kremlin or Russian General Staff. Russians might conclude that they should rapidly escalate in response to what they might see as a gathering NATO threat. There is thus the apparently high risk of significant instability in the deterrence relationship in the early stages of a crisis.

Nuclear disjunctures. Participants observed that traditional linear concepts of gradual escalation (including from conventional to nuclear) and the escalation ladder may be ill-suited to describe Russia's approach to a potential conflict in Europe, in which a threat of nuclear use might be issued at an early stage.

At the same time, the difficulty NATO currently has in describing how its nuclear capabilities would be brought to bear in a crisis. For example, where forward forces had been overwhelmed but reinforcement was not underway, might lead to miscalculation on Russia's part about how determined the nuclear component of NATO's modern deterrence posture actually was.

Russia's and NATO's very differing approaches to the nuclear dimension of the deterrence relationship pointed to potentially significant risks of instability and misjudgement in more developed stages of crisis. There also seems to be the absence of reflection on both sides about the well thought-through de-escalation pathways.

Asymmetric escalation. Faced by a rapid escalation of crisis or concentration of forces by a potential adversary such as Russia, a rational NATO response might be to 'escalate horizontally'. The threat would not be confronted head on militarily, or at least not immediately. Rather, the Alliance would seek de-escalation and resolution of the crisis through pressure in other spheres. These might be geographical (for example along Russia's borders) or functional (for example, in the economic or cyber domains).

NATO's modern deterrence concept does not appear yet to include much thinking about whether or how to conduct horizontal escalation nor much analysis of its potential consequences, including unintended ones. And although the Alliance has a crisis management framework and exercises it, it is unclear how far modern deterrence has been integrated with Alliance development of crisis management techniques. Thus NATO could find itself pitched into a crisis unprepared and be forced to improvise to a greater extent than necessary with consequent higher risks.

Technological drivers of instability. Military technologies in the Euro-Atlantic area are developing rapidly and have not been subject to systematic arms control discussion, let alone negotiation, for a decade. Russia's anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities are giving the Alliance significant pause for thought, including for the further design of modern deterrence. NATO's emerging missile defence capability is considered by Russia, however misguidedly, as a threat or potential threat to its own deterrence. Both the United States and Russia probably judge the other's highly accurate long-range conventional missile strike capabilities to be destabilising. Offensive cyber capabilities are evolving fast on all sides.

As always, technology development is challenging the stability of deterrence constructs, with risks that the Alliance has yet to assess.

6. Conclusions

The concept of modern deterrence at NATO was developed and adopted in early 2016 in reaction to a series of alarming new contingencies arising in the East and South. The Alliance has been successful and innovative in the process of adaptation to new threats. The mobilization of NATO structures and member states, as documented in the annual reports of the Secretary General, has been unprecedented.

Nevertheless, NATO's modern deterrence is not yet fully formed either in conception or in implementation. It faces challenges, diverse risks and apparent serious instabilities that deserve to be more squarely addressed.

It is in NATO's interest to move from the present highly unstable relations with Russia (with the possibility of unwanted and uncontrolled escalation from a minor incident to a major conflict) towards a **stable and sustainable mutual deterrence relationship**, in which there will be less incentive for either side to engage in risky behaviour and less risk of vicious spirals of confrontation. That requires the Alliance to shape its deterrence posture, plans and actions in ways that stabilise the relationship rather than prolonging the action-reaction cycle currently governing the adversarial military dynamic between Russia and NATO.

Without analysing the weak points and challenges (internal and external), there is a danger NATO's deterrence policy will turn into a Potemkin village: painted in bright colours and looking impressive at first glance but lacking substance behind the façade.

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