

Resetting NATO's Defense and Deterrence

The Sword and the Shield Redux

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THE ISSUE

There is a saying: "If you want a new idea, read an old book." For the authors of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) new strategic concept looking for a new approach to its core task of defense and deterrence, the best "old books" to consult might be the seven strategic concepts NATO has published since 1949. The first four of these were classified and made public in 1997.¹ Since 1991, three concepts have been published openly, the latest in 2010.

This paper examines NATO's first seven strategic concepts to chart the progress of the alliance's approach to defense and deterrence. The main purpose of doing so is to give today's leaders and planners a better understanding of their forebearers' efforts, to learn their lessons, and avoid their mistakes. The analysis also reveals three broad insights that can be applied today: plan against Russia's maximum intentions; revitalize the sword and the shield; and modernize the sword and the shield.

CREATING A POWERFUL DETERRENT: NATO'S FIRST TWO STRATEGIC CONCEPTS

THE FIRST STRATEGIC CONCEPT (1949)

Deterrence has been central to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) strategic concepts since the beginning. The first such concept, "Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Area," known as DC 6/1 and approved in December 1949, declared as its main objective: "To coordinate, in time of peace, our military and economic strength with a view to creating a powerful deterrent to any nation or group of nations threatening the peace, independence and stability of the North Atlantic family of nations."²

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The primary mechanism through which NATO sought to deter Soviet aggression was deterrence by punishment through the threat of American atomic weapons.³ Yet NATO's focus on atomic weapons was not just about deterrence—it also strengthened its ability to defend itself if deterrence failed.⁴ NATO's early emphasis on nuclear weapons stemmed from its assessment of the vast numerical superiority of Soviet forces in comparison to its own. As MC 14, the detailed strategic guidance that accompanied the first strategic concept, stated: "special emphasis must be laid on the necessity for developing methods to compensate for numerical inferiority."⁵ MC 14 also assumed any war with the Soviet Union would be total in nature, which justified the strategic concept's reliance on nuclear deterrence.⁶

NATO's first strategic concept also introduced a second pillar of deterrence: deterrence by denial through positioning adequate forces to defend allied territory against invasion.

In other words: if you want peace, prepare for war. This approach complemented the threat of nuclear punishment but would require NATO to develop sizable military forces. An early estimate in 1950 called for at least 90 land divisions, over 7,000 fighter aircraft, and over 2,000 warships of various sizes.⁷ The focus of this defensive effort was on the European “couverture facing east of the North Atlantic Treaty area.”⁸

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In other words, NATO’s denial strategy was one of forward defense designed to “arrest the enemy advance as far to the East as possible.”⁹ It was also strengthened through active opposition to peacetime aggression “by all measures short of war.”¹⁰ Rather than denying territory, these efforts were aimed at denying Soviet freedom of action to target the political function and cohesion of NATO nations through political warfare.¹¹

THE SECOND STRATEGIC CONCEPT (1952)

The substance of NATO’s second strategic concept mirrored the first.¹² It retained and built upon the two pillars of deterrence outlined in its predecessor: deterrence by punishment (through strategic bombing and conventional military power) and by denial (through forward defense and measures short of war). The Korean War had also impressed on NATO the need to press forward with its defense plans to counter further potential Soviet (or Soviet-sponsored) aggression—not least to avoid divided Germany meeting the same fate.¹³

As a result, this concept strengthened the denial pillar through what it referred to as a “forward strategy” for the defense of Europe “to hold the enemy as far to the east in Germany as is feasible, using all offensive and defensive means available to deny or limit his freedom of action to the maximum extent.”¹⁴ The detailed strategic guidance aimed at “having the maximum forces available at the very outset or at least ready to come into action in the first few weeks.”¹⁵ This policy raised the level of ambition for NATO’s deterrence by denial strategy, aiming to convince Soviet decisionmakers that any attempt to take territory would incur severe costs. This element of NATO’s deterrent strategy would take on an even larger role in future

strategic concepts as allies developed the forces required to implement it.

THE SWORD AND THE SHIELD: NATO’S THIRD STRATEGIC CONCEPT (1957)

NATO’s third strategic concept reiterated the centrality of deterrence to NATO’s mission: “Our chief objective is to prevent war by creating an effective deterrent to aggression.”¹⁶ This concept was the first to refer to nuclear weapons by name and the first to advocate using them for what became known as “massive retaliation”—including the possibility of their first use in response to conventional Soviet aggression.¹⁷

It built upon both of NATO’s established pillars of deterrence: the forward strategy of denial and the threat of punishment by strategic bombing. Taken together, the two pillars became known as NATO’s “shield” (forward-deployed forces) and “sword” (the U.S. strategic bomber force).¹⁸ The concept, therefore, required two kinds of forces: “There are powerful nuclear retaliatory forces, composed chiefly of long-range strategic air striking forces mainly under national command. There are also the land, sea, and air shield forces which by their deployment and by their defensive capabilities demonstrate that aggression, no matter what the form, will be effectively opposed.”¹⁹

THE SWORD

The formal adoption of NATO’s “massive retaliation” doctrine in 1957 built on the deterrence by punishment pillar established in 1949. This evolution occurred for both economic and strategic reasons. First, NATO needed to counter much larger conventional Soviet forces—and their growing nuclear arsenal—with more sustainable levels of defense spending that would not threaten economic growth.²⁰ Following the United States’ “New Look” defense policy—which considered “nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions”—NATO also developed a so-called “New Approach” to integrate nuclear weapons into its strategy amid allies’ concerns over the expense of meeting their own force goals.²¹

The strategic necessity of massive retaliation stemmed from “the advent of nuclear weapons systems [which] has drastically changed the conditions of modern war.”²² NATO concluded, that however, a general war came about, whether initiated by the Soviets or via inadvertent escalation due to miscalculation, the threat of Soviet total war and “the rapid overrunning of Europe” would require NATO to “first ensure the ability to carry out an instant and devastating nuclear counter-offensive by all available means.”²³

Table 1: Defense and Deterrence in NATO’s Seven Strategic Concepts

Strategic Concept	Planning Guidance	Defense and Deterrence Policy
Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Area (DC 6/1), December 1, 1949	Strategic Guidance for the North Atlantic Regional Planning (MC14) March 28, 1950; NATO Medium Term Plan (DC 13), April 1, 1950	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rely on deterrence by punishment through the threat of American atomic weapons. ▪ Develop forces to defend Europe as far east as possible. ▪ Oppose political aggression by measures short of war.
The Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Area (MC 3/5), December 3, 1952	Strategic Guidance (MC 14/1), December 9, 1952	Same as DC 6/1, but with more emphasis on forward defense.
Overall Strategic Concept for the Defence of the NATO Area (MC 14/2), May 23, 1957	Measures to Implement the Strategic Concept (MC 48/2), May 23, 1957	<p>A balanced strategy of deterrence that rested on two pillars:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A forward strategy of denial implemented by forward-deployed “shield” forces; and ▪ The threat of “massive retaliation” by the “sword” of U.S. strategic bomber forces.
Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area (MC 14/3), January 16, 1968	Measures to Implement the Strategic Concept for the Defence of the NATO Area (MC 48/3), December 8, 1969	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Builds on MC 14/2, but replacing “massive retaliation” with “flexible response” through three levels of “graduated escalation”: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Direct defense; ○ Deliberate escalation; and ○ General nuclear response. ▪ Emphasis on reinforcement and rapid augmentation of shield forces.
Alliance’s New Strategic Concept, November 7–8, 1991	N/A (still classified)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A “broad approach to security” that deemphasized deterrence and focused on wider tasks such as crisis management and cooperative security.
The Alliance’s Strategic Concept, April 24, 1999		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The “sword” and “shield” were replaced by a focus on disarmament, arms control, and dialogue. A “balanced force mix” was developed across the new core tasks.
Strategic Concept 2010, November 19, 2010		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Forward defense was replaced with a smaller forward presence in NATO’s new member states, with a greater emphasis on deterrence by reinforcement.

Source: Adapted from Gregory W. Pedlow, ed., *NATO Strategy Documents 1949–1969* (Brussels: NATO, October 1997), xxii, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a491201a.pdf> and author’s own research and analysis.

THE SHIELD

The development of NATO’s shield forces complemented its nuclear sword as an insurance policy against limited war and other hostilities. As U.S. general Lauris Norstad, then supreme allied commander Europe, put it in 1958: “For if our line is not defended throughout, the enemy might trump up a pretext for crossing it.”²⁴ The basic task of NATO’s shield forces was to

deter Soviet aggression by denying their freedom of action, defending “as far forward as possible in order to maintain the integrity of the NATO area”—including Scandinavia.²⁵

Shield forces also formed part of NATO’s integrated nuclear deterrent and early warning and alert system.²⁶ They also reinforced the doctrine of massive retaliation. As General Norstad explained: “if our line is being held in reasonable

strength, and if the enemy knows this beyond doubt, then any inclination on his part to cross the line makes him face the terrible decision of detonating World War III, with a sure prospect of his own annihilation. The defensive forces deployed on our eastern boundary thus become an essential part of the deterrent.”²⁷

Yet NATO’s shield forces were not seen as merely a “tripwire” for massive retaliation.²⁸ As Malcolm Hoag of RAND argued in *Foreign Affairs* at the time: “why maintain land forces to serve as a ‘trip-wire’ to trigger retaliatory air blows?”²⁹ Moreover, the shield forces’ vulnerability to nuclear attack may render them pointless.³⁰ Yet Hoag, and many others, would also argue against relying on massive retaliation, which was “a frightful risk to run.”³¹ These debates led to NATO’s fourth strategic concept.

FLEXIBLE RESPONSE: NATO’S FOURTH STRATEGIC CONCEPT (1968)

The main idea behind NATO’s fourth concept was a shift away from relying on “massive retaliation” toward a policy known as “flexible response” that would provide NATO with a graduated response to a non-nuclear crisis, rather than the blunt instrument of massive retaliation.³² This approach added a “flexibility which will prevent the potential aggressor from predicting with confidence NATO’s specific response to aggression and which will lead him to conclude that an unacceptable degree of risk would be involved regardless of the nature of his attack.”³³

The main idea behind NATO’s fourth concept was a shift away from relying on “massive retaliation” toward a policy known as “flexible response.”

This change in policy came about toward the end of the 1950s for two main reasons. The first was the growing nuclear parity between the Soviet Union and the United States.³⁴ Now that the United States could be targeted by Soviet nuclear weapons, many Europeans feared this undermined the credibility of NATO’s American nuclear sword and argued NATO should give more weight to non-nuclear deterrence.

A second reason for NATO to take non-nuclear options more seriously was provided by the crises in Berlin (1958–62) and Cuba (1962), which led U.S. secretary of defense Robert McNamara to conclude: “our great nuclear superiority for general war does not solve all our problems of deterring and dealing with less than all-out direct assault.”³⁵ Relying

on massive retaliation undermined deterrence because it required NATO to decide whether to initiate general nuclear war, a step that Soviet leaders knew the West would be unwilling to take in all but the most extreme circumstances.³⁶ This left a deterrence gap that McNamara expected the Soviets to exploit further: “The Berlin crisis exemplifies a type of threat that we should expect to face elsewhere in the NATO area. In such a crisis the provocation, while severe, does not immediately require or justify our most violent reaction.”³⁷

McNamara argued “a stronger non-nuclear posture would confer large political benefits on the Alliance.”³⁸ NATO’s shield would force the Soviets to think twice, not its sword. He claimed this was the case in Berlin and Cuba, where “non-nuclear forces were our sword, our nuclear forces were our shield.”³⁹ In the years that followed, this reasoning was reflected in the alliance’s fourth strategic concept, which aimed to deter aggression using three types of flexible response:

- “Direct defence,” which “rests upon physically preventing the enemy from taking what he wants. A capability for direct defence in any contingency is a deterrent to that contingency”;
- “Deliberate escalation,” through non-nuclear force or selective nuclear strikes; and
- “General nuclear response,” or massive retaliation.⁴⁰

To bolster the credibility of NATO shield forces, the fourth concept emphasized “rapid augmentation of its forward posture” through “appropriate echeloning in depth in suitable tactical locations,” logistic support, tactical mobility, supplementing local forces with those of allies, and a fully trained, equipped, and ready NATO reserve force.⁴¹

Nearly two decades of planning and refinement had resulted in a balanced strategic concept founded on two pillars of deterrence: the threat of punishment through overwhelming nuclear response to Soviet invasion or nuclear use—“massive retaliation” using NATO’s “sword”—combined with the denial of Soviet freedom of action short of war through a forward-deployed “shield” force that NATO could rapidly reinforce. This approach to deterrence underpinned NATO’s strategy for the next two decades and played a crucial role in ending the Cold War. As Hans Binnendijk points out, “the effect was to greatly lessen NATO’s vulnerability to surprise attack and political intimidation, to reduce undue reliance on nuclear escalation, and to raise legitimate doubts about

the Soviet Union's ability to prevail over NATO in a conventional war."⁴²

A BROAD APPROACH TO SECURITY: NATO'S THREE POST-COLD WAR STRATEGIC CONCEPTS

The new era in European security also triggered a new phase of thinking about NATO's strategic concept. While the four Cold War strategic concepts were mostly concerned with the balance between nuclear and conventional deterrence—the sword and the shield—the three concepts adopted since the end of the Cold War moved away from deterrence as the sine qua non of NATO's purpose and strategy.⁴³ They focused instead on balancing a wider range of core tasks, including dialogue, cooperation, consultation, collective defense, crisis management, conflict prevention, partnerships, and cooperative security.⁴⁴ This new approach was captured in the 1991 concept under the rubric: "A Broad Approach To Security."⁴⁵

Although the threat of "Soviet military capability and build-up potential, including its nuclear dimension" remained present, "the Allies concerned agreed to move away, where appropriate, from the concept of forward defence towards a reduced forward presence, and to modify the principle of flexible response to reflect a reduced reliance on nuclear weapons."⁴⁶ In other words, the strategy that had served NATO since 1957 had now changed. The "forward defense" that formed NATO's shield and the doctrine of "massive retaliation" and "flexible response" that made up NATO's sword were now all but gone—or at least reduced in scope and ambition to the point where they were substantively different.

Instead, alongside a much reduced "forward presence" among eastern allies, NATO would come to rely on an approach that had surfaced in its fourth strategic concept in 1967: deterrence by reinforcement.⁴⁷ As the new concept made clear, "the maintenance of a comprehensive in-place linear defensive posture in the central region will no longer be required."⁴⁸ Instead, "capabilities for timely reinforcement and resupply both within Europe and from North America will be of critical importance."⁴⁹

NATO's post-Cold War strategic concepts also placed a new emphasis on the ability to project power out of area through expeditionary operations.⁵⁰ Diego Ruiz Palmer described this shift: "during the Cold War, NATO's guiding operational paradigm was Forward Defense, from northern Norway, across West Germany, to eastern Turkey; in the post-Cold War era . . . the operational paradigm became NATO's

capacity to conduct expeditionary operations of varying purpose and scale."⁵¹

This added up to a substantial change in NATO's strategy. During the Cold War, this had required NATO to arm itself, under the rubric of the sword and the shield, with the most powerful set of forces the world had ever seen. In contrast, after the Cold War, NATO's strategy was to disarm itself, hoping to hang up the sword and the shield for good, replacing them with a "balanced mix of forces" to implement the new broad approach to security.⁵² As the new concept declared: "The Allies seek, through arms control and disarmament, to enhance security and stability at the lowest possible level of forces consistent with the requirements of defence."⁵³

After the Cold War, NATO's strategy was to disarm itself, hoping to hang up the sword and the shield for good, replacing them with a "balanced mix of forces" to implement the new broad approach to security.

NATO's sixth and seventh strategic concepts, in 1999 and 2010, took this transformation further, aiming for "an optimum balance" between high readiness crisis response forces and those capable of gearing up for "the worst case — but very remote — scenario of large scale operations for collective defence."⁵⁴ These two concepts also doubled down on deterrence by reinforcement and refocused on the Article 10 provision for enlargement, adding significant new political and military power to its ranks to strengthen deterrence.⁵⁵

THE RETURN OF DETERRENCE: THE POST POST-COLD WAR ERA

"We, the Heads of State and Government of the member countries of the North Atlantic Alliance, have gathered in Wales at a pivotal moment in Euro-Atlantic security. Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace." — Wales Summit Declaration, September 5, 2014⁵⁶

The opening words of the Wales Summit declaration captured the moment, in 2014, when reality overtook NATO's post-Cold War strategic concepts. Russia's annexation of Crimea and sponsored conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine fatally undermined the approach

to deterrence NATO had pursued to maintain stability in Europe since 1991.⁵⁷

NATO's initial reaction to the events of 2014 was to strengthen its strategy of deterrence by reinforcement combined with forward presence, before adding "an enhanced forward presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland" of four multinational battlegroups at the 2016 Warsaw summit.⁵⁸ This "tripwire" posture would be underpinned by the ability to "rapidly reinforce any Ally that comes under threat, when needed, to counter all contingencies."⁵⁹ It would also be complemented by a new commitment to treat "cyber" and "hybrid" attacks as armed attacks under Article 5.⁶⁰ This policy extended deterrence by denial through a whole-of-society approach to "total defense," expanding NATO's shield beyond the military domain to that of civil society and even individual citizens.⁶¹

Although it may have been a fragile equilibrium, NATO's post-2014 adaptations to its defense and deterrence posture seemed to be holding the strategic balance in Europe intact. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, shattered this illusion. Even though Russia's armed attacks were not made against a NATO member, the ramifications of Russia's brutal attempt at armed conquest were clear: Europe was not whole, free, and at peace, and NATO was now in Russia's sights.⁶²

In hindsight, the "same but different" approach to NATO's post-Cold War strategic concepts did not survive reality. The authors of the 1991 strategic concept drew two parallel conclusions: "The first is that the new environment does not change the purpose or the security functions of the Alliance, but rather underlines their enduring validity. The second, on the other hand, is that the changed environment offers new opportunities for the Alliance to frame its strategy within a broad approach to security."⁶³

Although presented as harmonious, these two assertions turned out to be contradictory. Thanks to Russia's evolution under the Putin regime, the undeniable validity of NATO's purpose—that of, first and foremost, deterring armed aggression—prevented it from realizing any new opportunities to move beyond its *raison d'être*. For a while, it seemed like this might not be the case, as the alliance played crucial roles in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. Yet it has since become clear NATO did not have the capacity to both maintain sufficient deterrent forces while managing out-of-area crises and develop a broader approach to security.

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In reality, the "same but different" approach required a trade-off between the forces and posture required to deter Russia and the "balanced mix of forces" required to broaden NATO's approach to security.⁶⁴ Reductions in defense investment by allies while Russia increased funding to modernize its forces compounded the fundamental problem: the strategic balance shifted in favor of Russia to the point where NATO's basic assumptions were no longer valid, and a reset would be required to maintain deterrence.⁶⁵

In the long run, the "new environment" hailed in 1991 was not so new after all.⁶⁶ Like the Soviet Union before it, the Russian Federation continued to define itself in opposition to NATO, both in zero-sum security terms and with respect to the liberal democratic values of its members.⁶⁷ Whether this was inherent to Russia's geopolitical situation or down to the decisions of the Putin regime did not matter to NATO—either way the result was a reversion to the Cold War mean and the requirement to open yet another chapter in its approach to defense and deterrence.

RESETTING NATO: THE SWORD AND THE SHIELD REDUX

"What we are looking for from NATO in this next phase is long-term planning for how it will contain Russia post Ukraine and provide resilience and reassurance to countries that cannot do that on their own. That could be permanent basing or it could be rapid readiness—being able to deploy quickly, instead of being stuck in a big base in one place. That is all up for development, which I think is incredibly important." – Ben Wallace MP, UK Defence Secretary, May 19, 2022⁶⁸

NATO's defense and deterrence reset will begin in Madrid when its leaders open the next chapter of their alliance with its eighth strategic concept. Like its predecessors, the

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concept will set the vision and basic principles that will guide NATO through this testing time.⁶⁹ But the devil will be in the detail. As Britain's defense secretary Ben Wallace stated recently, the finer points of NATO's new strategy, such as whether it will rely on deterrence by reinforcement or through permanently forward-based forces, will require development by NATO's military planners in the weeks and months after Madrid. What can they learn from the history of NATO's strategic concepts?

1. Plan against Russian "Maximum Intentions"

The guidance that accompanied NATO's first strategic concept advised that for defense planning purposes: "Precise Soviet intentions are not known and cannot be predicted with reliable accuracy. For military planning purposes, however, it is essential to consider maximum intentions and capabilities."⁷⁰ This is sound advice considering the inherent uncertainty in estimating adversary intentions and plans.⁷¹ It is also best practice for military planning.⁷² Moreover, in light of Russia's current actions, NATO's 1956 assessment of Soviet intentions and their implications are strikingly resonant today. Beyond the following highlights, the assessment is worth reading in full.⁷³

Circumstances may develop, however, in which the Soviet leaders may harden their attitude and be prepared to take greater risks than theretofore. They have indulged in the use of threats, including the threat of war and even of nuclear attack, as blackmail to attain their ends.

The Soviets are thus not likely to launch such [conventional] attacks, provided that the West maintains its defence commitments, such as the stationing of overseas troops in Western Europe, its firm purpose to

defend itself, appropriate nuclear retaliatory strength and adequate conventional forces to ensure that local armed intervention by Soviet or satellite forces does not offer a prospect of easy success.

However, the following possibilities of action . . . must be included among those requiring consideration:

- a. General attacks against NATO. The USSR might launch general attacks with conventional weapons against NATO if the Soviet leaders estimated that the Alliance would be deterred from employing nuclear weapons . . . for example:
 - because of assumed Western reluctance to be the first to use nuclear weapons.
 - because [the West feared] it was more vulnerable than the Soviet Union to nuclear attack.
 - because of assumed Western division or demoralisation.
- b. Local attacks against NATO. If the Soviets believe that NATO . . . were not able to defend itself against all types of limited aggression . . . [they] might initiate, instigate, support or condone such aggression.
- c. Attacks against peripheral non-NATO countries. If . . . the Soviet leaders thought that a non-NATO country on the periphery of the Soviet Bloc would not or could not receive effective support of the Western powers, the Soviets might be tempted to use their preponderance in conventional forces either for armed intervention in the country in question or to exert pressure on it in order to influence it towards alignment with the Soviet camp.⁷⁴

2. Revitalize the Sword and the Shield

The second insight logically follows the first. The assessment of Soviet intentions set out above led to NATO adopting its strategy of the sword and the shield in its 1957 strategic concept—a combination of strategic nuclear forces to deter attack through the threat of massive retaliation, alongside the forward defense of NATO's eastern front through the basing of significant forces as far east as possible.⁷⁵ If NATO's assessment of Russia today

is anywhere close to that made by NATO's planners of the Soviet Union then, the option of revitalizing this strategy must be on the table.

Several questions for NATO defense planners flow from this insight. For example:

- What force posture—in terms of location, scale, and capabilities—is required to meet the basic aim of shield forces: “To make it credible to a potential aggressor that he will have to contend with an immediate and effective response by NATO?”⁷⁶
- What is the optimum balance between the sword and the shield, or deterrence by punishment versus denial?⁷⁷
- How can shield forces and NATO members in Eastern Europe best support NATO's strategic nuclear forces?
- What is the utility of a revitalized “flexible response” or “graduated deterrence” doctrine for deterring a range of Russian aggression? What levels of response should this doctrine consist of?⁷⁸
- To what extent should out-of-area operations drive NATO defense planning?⁷⁹

3. Modernize the Sword and the Shield

The third insight builds on the second: if NATO revitalizes its sword and shield, both must meet the demands of the contemporary strategic and operational context. Further defense planning questions stem from the need to modernize NATO's sword and shield. For example:

- Are NATO's strategic nuclear forces resilient to threats from emerging technologies?⁸⁰
- What opportunities do emerging technologies present for enhancing the capability—and therefore deterrent effect—of shield forces?⁸¹
- What is the contribution of “total defense” (through national and whole-of-society resilience and civil

preparedness) to the aim of deterring conventional and hybrid aggression by denial?⁸²

- How does assistance to non-NATO partner nations support deterrence?⁸³

FINAL WORD: POLITICAL COHESION AND MILITARY STRENGTH

NATO is the world's largest, most powerful, most successful, and preeminent military alliance of nations. One reason for its longevity is continuous adaptation. The main mechanism for this process has been the alliance's most important document: its strategic concept. NATO's new concept will guide its latest evolution as the alliance resets to deal with a situation it has never faced in its history: a full-scale land war in Europe.

Yet resetting NATO's defense and deterrence posture is not simply a military-strategic matter. It is above all a political one, requiring unity and solidarity. In facing this crucial task, the allies of NATO must recall one of the basic principles from its founding strategic concept, taken from the North Atlantic Treaty itself: “They are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defense and for the preservation of peace and security.” Or, in the words of NATO secretary general Joseph Luns from 1976, which resonate today: “our efforts can only succeed if they are based on political cohesion and on military strength of a scale sufficient to resist military or political pressures. Then we shall be able to face with confidence the constant challenges which we must expect to be our lot over the months and years ahead.”⁸⁴ ■

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ENDNOTES

- 1 They were published as part of NATO's post-Cold War commitment to transparency and openness. See Javier Solana, "Foreword," in *NATO Logistics Handbook*, 3rd ed. (Brussels: NATO, October 1997), <https://www.nato.int/docu/logi-en/1997/foreword.htm>.
- 2 "Note by the Secretary to the North Atlantic Defense Committee on The Strategic Concept for Defense of the North Atlantic Area," NATO, 1949, 5, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a491201a.pdf> (known hereafter as "DC 6/1").
- 3 Although an official doctrine of overwhelming nuclear retaliation—what became known as "massive retaliation"—was not formalized until NATO's third strategic concept in 1957. *Ibid.*, 5. For the distinction between deterrence by punishment (which deters by imposing "war costs greater than the value of the gain") and denial (which deters by denying gains, or "by having military forces which can block the enemy's military forces from making territorial gains"), see Glenn H. Snyder, "Deterrence and Power," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 4, no. 2 (June 1960): 163–78, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/172650>.
- 4 As U.S. general and NATO supreme allied commander Europe Lauris D. Norstad put it in a 1961 speech: "defense as well as deterrence requires that our military posture be built upon a foundation of adequate strategic retaliatory forces." Lauris D. Norstad, "The Task of NATO," (speech, April 21, 1961), <https://www.ueberseeclub.de/resources/Server/pdf-Dateien/1960-1969/vortrag-1961-04-21General%20Lauris%20D.%20Norstad.pdf>.
- 5 "North Atlantic Military Committee Decision on M.C. 14 Strategic Guidance for the North Atlantic Regional Planning," NATO, March 28, 1950, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a500328c.pdf> (known hereafter as "MC 14").
- 6 The USSR's "maximum intentions" were assessed to include domination of the European continent and the employment of "all types of weapons, without exception." *Ibid.*, 6, 16–17.
- 7 "North Atlantic Defense Committee Decision on D.C. 13, A Report by the Military Committee on North Atlantic Treaty Organization on Medium Term Plan," NATO, April 1, 1950, 66, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a500328d.pdf> (known hereafter as "DC 13").
- 8 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 11 George F. Kennan, "The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare," Department of State, April 30, 1948, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320>.
- 12 "Note by the Secretary to the North Atlantic Military Committee on The Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Area," NATO, December 3, 1952, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a521203a.pdf> (known hereafter as "MC 3/5").
- 13 Gregory W. Pedlow, ed., *NATO Strategy Documents 1949–1969* (Brussels: NATO, October 1997), xv, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a491201a.pdf>. See also: "1949–1952: Creating a Command Structure for NATO," Supreme headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), <https://shape.nato.int/page14612223>.
- 14 "North Atlantic Military Committee Decision on M.C. 14/1, A Report by the Standing Group on Strategic Guidance," NATO, December 9, 1952, 17, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a521209a.pdf> (known hereafter as MC 14/1).
- 15 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 16 "Final Decision on M.C. 14/2 (Revised), A Report of the Military Committee on Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area," NATO, May 23, 1957, 13, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a570523a.pdf> (known hereafter as "MC 14/2").
- 17 Although, as Pedlow points out, this concept was initially put in writing three years previously, in the MC 48 strategic guidance issued in 1954. See "North Atlantic Military Committee Decision on M.C. 48, A Report by the Military Committee on The Most Effective Pattern of NATO Military Strength for the Next Few Years," NATO Archives, November 22, 1954, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a541122a.pdf> (known hereafter as "MC 48"); and Pedlow, *NATO Strategy Documents 1949–1969*, xviii. On first use: "Since NATO would be unable to prevent the rapid overrunning of Europe unless NATO immediately employed nuclear weapons both strategically and tactically, we must be prepared to take the initiative in their use." See "MC 14/2," NATO, 9.
- 18 Pedlow, *NATO Strategy Documents 1949–1969*, xix; and "Final Decision on MC 48/2, A Report by the Military Committee on Measures to Implement the Strategic Concept," NATO, May 23, 1957, 4, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a570523b.pdf> (known hereafter as "MC 48/2").
- 19 "MC 48/2," NATO, 9.
- 20 MC 14/2 "constitutes an important element of their [Allies'] security." See "MC 14/2," NATO, 5. As NATO's first political directive, CM(56)138, stated in 1956: "it should be assumed for planning purposes that in present circumstances, few, if any, NATO countries can be expected to make a substantial increase in the proportion of their resources devoted to defence." "Directive to the NATO Military Authorities from the North Atlantic Council," NATO, December 13, 1956, 7, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a561213a.pdf> (known hereafter as "CM(56)138").
- 21 New Look placed greater emphasis on nuclear weapons in order to meet the Soviet threat to U.S. security despite reduced growth in defense spending. See "NSC 162/2: Statement of Policy by the National Security Council," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954*, Volume II, Part 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1984), Document 101, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d101>. On "New Approach," see "MC 48," NATO. For example, the requirement for "96 NATO divisions after 90 days of mobilization, with almost half of the divisions to be ready at the start of hostilities." See Pedlow, *NATO Strategy Documents 1949–1969*, xvii.
- 22 As MC 14/2 pointed out: "The advent of nuclear weapons systems has drastically changed the conditions of modern war . . . instead of the gradually increasing rate of destruction prevalent in recent wars of prolonged mobilization and attrition, maximum destruction would occur within the first few days as both sides strove to exploit their nuclear stockpiles to gain nuclear superiority." "MC 14/2," NATO, 7–8.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 9, 13.
- 24 Malcolm W. Hoag, "Nato: Deterrent or Shield?," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1958, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1958-01-01/nato-deterrent-or-shield>. According to MC 14/2, "NATO must be prepared to deal immediately with such situations without necessarily having

- recourse to nuclear weapons.” See “MC 14/2,” NATO, 11.
- 25 “MC 48/2,” NATO, 4. Neither Sweden nor Finland were members of NATO, but supporting them was seen as vital to retaining control of the Baltic Sea passage, striking Soviet forces, and denying them forward positions. “MC 14/2,” NATO, 21.
- 26 “CM(56)138,” NATO, 6.
- 27 Hoag, “NATO: Deterrent or Shield?”
- 28 Pedlow, *NATO Strategy Documents 1949-1969*, xx.
- 29 Because a Soviet attack would not target European ground forces but American strategic air forces. Hoag, “Nato: Deterrent or Shield?”
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Final Decision on M.C. 14/3, A Report by the Military Committee to the Defence Planning Committee on the Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area,” NATO, January 16, 1968, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a680116a.pdf> (known hereafter as “MC 14/3”); and “Final Decision on MC 48/3, Measures to Implement the Strategic Concept for the Defence of the NATO Area,” NATO, December 8, 1969, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a691208a.pdf> (known hereafter as “MC 48/3”).
- 33 “MC 14/3,” NATO, 10.
- 34 In the mid-1950s, the Soviets deployed long-range jet bombers, launched the Sputnik satellite into orbit, and flight tested its first intercontinental ballistic missile, the R-7, in 1957.
- 35 “Address by Secretary of Defense McNamara at the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume VIII* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 101, 278, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d82>.
- 36 “In short, faced with the more likely contingencies, NATO, not the Soviets, would have to make the momentous decision to use nuclear weapons, and we would do so in the knowledge that the consequences might be catastrophic for all of us.” See *ibid.*, 277.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 277.
- 38 “Address by Secretary of Defense McNamara at the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume VIII* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 120, 444, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v08/d120>.
- 39 Where NATO’s addition of 4 divisions, 88 ships, and 19 air squadrons to its presence in West Germany “conveyed to the Soviets the right message about Berlin.” See “Address by Secretary of Defense McNamara at the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council,” *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 280; and *ibid.*, 441.
- 40 “MC 14/3,” NATO, 10.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 12-13.
- 42 Hans Binnendijk and Richard L. Kugler, “Toward a New Transatlantic Compact,” National Defense University, August 2008, 44, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Article/1227856/dtp-052-toward-a-new-transatlantic-compact/>.
- 43 The point of departure for the new concept was that “the security challenges and risks which NATO faces are different in nature from what they were in the past. The threat of a simultaneous, full-scale attack on all of NATO’s European fronts has effectively been removed and thus no longer provides the focus for Allied strategy.” See “The Alliance’s New Strategic Concept,” NATO, November 7-8, 1991, last updated August 26, 2010, para 7, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23847.htm (known hereafter as “91SC”).
- 44 This list comprises the various core tasks outlined in the three post-Cold War strategic concepts (1991, 1999, and 2010). The 2010 strategic concept lists three core tasks: collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security.
- 45 “91SC,” NATO, Part 3. The publicly released concept was accompanied by (still) classified strategic guidance “MC Directive for Military Implementation of the Alliance’s Strategic Concept (MC 400),” dated December 12, 1991.
- 46 “91SC,” NATO, 13, 38-39. For example, to meet the “significantly reduced level” of forces now assigned to NATO’s eastern front, American forces based in Europe plummeted from 330,000 to 100,000 troops. See: Binnendijk and Kugler, “Toward a New Transatlantic Compact,” 45.
- 47 “Forward presence” was a different concept to “forward defense” for which NATO’s Cold War “shield forces,” such as the British army on the Rhine, were designed for.
- 48 “91SC,” NATO, para 45b.
- 49 *Ibid.*, para 46b. Further: “This capability will include the ability to reinforce any area at risk within the territory of the Allies and to establish a multinational presence when and where this is needed.” See *ibid.*, para 52.
- 50 Following the Korean War, NATO’s third strategic concept sought flexibility “to meet limited military situations short of general war outside the NATO area.” But until now this was never a substantial focus for NATO strategy, defense planning, or forces. See “MC 14/2,” NATO, 14.
- 51 Diego A. Ruiz Palmer, “The Framework Nations’ Concept and NATO: Game-Changer for a New Strategic Era or Missed Opportunity?,” NATO, NATO Defence College Research Paper 132, July 2016, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=965>. Palmer suggests this shift was best summed up by the renaming of “Allied Command Europe” to “Allied Command Operations” in 2002 (see page 10, footnote 44).
- 52 “The Alliance’s Strategic Concept,” NATO, April 24, 1999, last updated June 25, 2009, 53(h), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27433.htm (known hereafter as “99SC”).
- 53 “91SC,” NATO, para 26.
- 54 “99SC,” NATO, para 5 and 54.
- 55 “This will include the ability to reinforce any area at risk and to establish a multinational presence when and where this is needed. Forces of various kinds and at various levels of readiness will be capable of flexible employment in both intra-European and transatlantic reinforcement.” See “99SC,” NATO, para 59. For enlargement: “99SC,” NATO, para 39; “Strategic Concept 2010,” NATO, November 19, 2010, last updated February 3, 2012, para 27, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_82705.htm (known hereafter as “2010SC”); and “The North Atlantic Treaty,” NATO, April 4, 1949, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.
- 56 “Wales Summit Declaration,” NATO, September 5, 2014, last updated August 30, 2018, para 1, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm.
- 57 The war in eastern Ukraine resulted in approximately 14,000 Ukrainians killed and 1.5 million displaced between 2014 and 2022. See: Tamara Qiblawi, Nathan Hodge, Tim Lister, and Ivana Kottasová, “Why Donbas is at the heart of the Ukraine crisis,” CNN, February 21, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/19/europe/donbas-ukraine-russia-intl-cmd/index.html>.
- 58 Through its Readiness Action Plan to “move rapidly” and “facilitate

- reinforcement of Allies located at NATO's periphery for deterrence and collective defence." Allies also committed to substantially increased defense spending. "Wales Summit Declaration," NATO, para 8, 14; and "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," NATO, July 9, 2016, last updated March 29, 2017, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.
- 59 "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," NATO, para 44.
- 60 "Wales Summit Declaration," NATO, 72; and "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," NATO, para 72.
- 61 See, for example, Stephen J. Flanagan, Jan Osburg, Anika Binnendijk, Marta Keep, and Andrew Radin, "Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance," RAND Corporation, 2019, doi:10.7249/RR2779. For civil society, see Sean Monaghan, "Hybrid CoE Paper 12: Deterring hybrid threats: Towards a fifth wave of deterrence theory and practice," European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, March 31, 2022, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-paper-12-deterring-hybrid-threats-towards-a-fifth-wave-of-deterrence-theory-and-practice/>.
- 62 The combination of written demands from Moscow for NATO to roll back its border and nuclear threats to its members made this abundantly clear. This has since been accompanied by indirect and direct threats to the territory of NATO members. See, for example, President Putin's recent thinly veiled threats to the Estonian city of Narva: "Estonia summons Russian envoy to protest Putin remarks," Reuters, June 10, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/estonia-summons-russian-envoy-protest-putin-remarks-2022-06-10/>.
- 63 "91SC," NATO, para 14.
- 64 "99SC," NATO, 53(h).
- 65 The period of austerity that followed the 2007–08 financial crisis, along with the so-called "peace dividend" following the Cold War, undercut defense investment across NATO. As one Estonian defense official put it: "Russia has been preparing for the last 20 years for large-scale military confrontation with NATO while the alliance's focus was partly elsewhere, particularly in Afghanistan." Robin Emmott and Andrius Sytas, "The Baltic states want more NATO. They won't get all they seek," Reuters, June 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/baltic-states-want-more-nato-they-wont-get-all-they-seek-2022-06-15/>. In particular, the 1991 and 1999 strategic concepts explicitly assumed that "with the radical changes in the security situation, including reduced conventional force levels in Europe and increased reaction times, NATO's ability to defuse a crisis through diplomatic and other means or, should it be necessary, to mount a successful conventional defence has significantly improved." The shift in strategic balance combined with the revisionist intent of the Putin regime ultimately invalidated this assumption. See "99SC," NATO, para 64; and "91SC," NATO, 56.
- 66 "91SC," NATO, para 14.
- 67 NATO's assessment of Russian intent declined steadily throughout its three post–Cold War strategic concepts, from wary in 1991 (para 13), to optimistic in 1999 (para 49), to resigned but pragmatic in 2010 (para 34). The high watermark may have been the NATO–Russia Founding Act, signed by both parties in 1997 (which had its roots in NATO's 1967 Harmel Report, which set the scene for détente and a more cooperative approach). The language used in NATO documents and statements since 2014 has increasingly restored Russia to the place of unreconcilable aggressor.
- 68 "NATO and International Security, Volume 714, debated on Thursday 19 May 2022," UK Parliament, May 19, 2022, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-05-19/debates/D190232B-3733-4708-B5AA-3EF5A40C2A24/NATOandInternationalSecurity>
- 69 Unlike its predecessors, the classified military planning guidance that supports the strategic concept has already been agreed in advance: "the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area focuses on force employment to deter and defend today, while the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept offers a vision to guide the Alliance's long-term warfare development to remain militarily strong now and in the future." See: "Deterrence and defence", NATO, last updated March 28, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_133127.htm.
- 70 "MC 14," NATO, 16.
- 71 Paul K. Davis and Christian Curriden, *Influencing Adversary States: Quelling Perfect Storms* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2021), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR100/RR161-1/RAND_RRA161-1.pdf
- 72 NATO's military planning doctrine, AJP-5, advocates planning based on "worst case" assessments and advises "the planning staff assesses the full range of the adversaries' possible activities and could evaluate them in terms of the most likely and most dangerous COA [course of action]." It also highlights the risk of "neglect of the most likely/most dangerous COA." See UK Ministry of Defence, *Allied Joint Publication (AJP)-5(A) Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations*, Edition A Version 2, UK Change 1 (Brussels: NATO Standardization Office, May 2019) 4-5, 4-10, 4-31, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/allied-joint-publication-ajp-05a-allied-joint-doctrine-for-the-planning-of-operations>.
- 73 It can be found in the 1956 political guidance that accompanied NATO's third strategic concept: "CM(56)138," NATO, 4–5, <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a561213a.pdf>.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 NATO deputy secretary general Mircea Geoană has already anticipated "a new generation of our presence in the East." See "Deputy Secretary General previews NATO's next Strategic Concept at Copenhagen Democracy Summit," NATO, June 10, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_196299.htm
- 76 "MC 14/3," NATO, 11–12. One recent study offers a thorough examination of this question in the context of the Baltic states, assessing the force implications of NATO moving from forward presence to forward defense of the region: Jan van Tol, Chris Bassler, Katherine Kjellström Elgin, and Tyler Hacker, *Deterrence and Defense in the Baltic Region* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, June 2022), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/deterrence-and-defense-in-the-baltic-region>. Similar studies will be required for NATO's other post–Cold War frontline states, including Sweden and Finland, who were prominent throughout NATO's Cold War strategic planning guidance. As they become NATO members, future guidance and military plans will benefit from their integration and no longer have to rely on assumptions about their role in the event of an attack.
- 77 Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 reinvigorated the sword vs shield debate. For example, RAND's 2016 wargame concluded "a force of about seven brigades . . . could suffice to prevent the rapid overrun of the Baltic states," while Michael Kofman argued (partly in response to RAND's findings) "the way forward is to shore up deterrence by punishment, which has been working just fine all these years." See David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html; and Michael Kofman, "Fixing Nato Deterrence In The East Or: How I

Learned To Stop Worrying And Love Nato's Crushing Defeat By Russia," *War on the Rocks*, May 12, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/fixing-nato-deterrence-in-the-east-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-natos-crushing-defeat-by-russia/>.

- 78 NATO's fourth strategic concept in 1968 distinguished between three levels: direct defense, deliberate escalation, and general nuclear response. See "MC 14/3," NATO, 10. As Michael Kofman has argued: "perhaps the best strategy is to make decisions that afford the most opportunities for managing escalation dynamics. That means a force posture oriented toward strategic flexibility, not entrenchment." See: Kofman, "Fixing Nato Deterrence In The East," 2016.
- 79 Out-of-area operations have been part of NATO's strategic concepts since at least the third concept in 1957. Out-of-area operations dominated NATO's agenda during the first two decades after the Cold War.
- 80 See, for example, Rebecca K.C. Hersman, "Wormhole Escalation in the New Nuclear Age," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2020), doi:10.26153/tsw/10220; Rebecca K.C. Hersman and Reja Younis, *The Adversary Gets a Vote* (Washington, DC: CSIS, September 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/adversary-gets-vote>; and Rebecca K.C. Hersman, Heather Williams, and Suzanne Claeys, *Integrated Arms Control in an Era of Strategic Competition* (Washington, DC: CSIS, January 2022), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/integrated-arms-control-era-strategic-competition>.
- 81 In particular, the promise of air and missile defense; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); guided rockets, artillery, mortars, and missiles (G-RAMM); and unmanned air systems (UAS). See, for example, van Tol et al., *Deterrence and Defense in the Baltic Region*.
- 82 Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty states allies "will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack." See "The North Atlantic Treaty," NATO, 1949. This has been extended in recent years: "Strengthened Resilience Commitment," NATO, June 14, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_185340.htm. For more on the contribution of societal resilience to deterrence, see: Monaghan, "Hybrid CoE Paper 12: Deterring hybrid threats," 2022.
- 83 Ukraine is a case in point: it is likely that the scale of military assistance now being provided by NATO allies would have changed Russia's calculus if it were delivered prior to the invasion. In other words, to deter aggression in Europe, it costs less (in terms of money and lives) to support non-NATO partners prior to armed attack.
- 84 Joseph Luns, "The Present State Of East-West Relations," *NATO Review*, January 1976, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2022/05/08/the-present-state-of-east-west-relations/index.html>.