Modernize the Kit and the Message

by H.E. Dame Karen Pierce DCMG

NATO will only remain successful over the next seventy years if it modernizes its capabilities, takes command of emerging technology, and harmonizes its strategic messaging.
Over the last few years NATO has been called many things, from obsolete, to brain-dead, to warmongering. So we must be doing something right. In truth, built on the common values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, NATO is an unparalleled defensive Alliance which has kept the Euro-Atlantic region and beyond safe for more than seventy years. It has played a crucial role in bringing security and stability to Europe and its neighborhood, as its role in the Balkans showed. The importance of this can’t be underestimated in this seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. NATO continues to act as a platform for shared values and interests, now with partnerships across the world. The world is growing more dangerous. Technological advances have the potential to transform warfare as significantly as nuclear weapons did after WW2. We need to be clear with our publics what NATO does now and needs to do in the future. Tellingly, a lot of Russian energy still goes into trying to undermine the North Atlantic Alliance every day. NATO is fit for the challenges of today. But it will only remain successful over the next seventy years if it continues to modernize its capabilities and its message.

New Threats and Complex Challenges

The threats NATO faces today are much more multifaceted than those faced by the Alliance when it was first established. Great power dynamics are making the world more unpredictable. Russia and China seem to see the current situation as a competition to re-set the rules of international affairs and their actions are getting more dangerous in this respect.

Russia continues to pursue hybrid warfare and to develop new ways to destabilize Europe and the Alliance with the United States, using everything from disinformation to new missile systems. The Skripal poisonings in Salisbury, an English city, in 2018, underscored the seriousness of the threat we face from Russia. As the United Kingdom’s permanent representative to the United Nations at the time, I saw Russia making light of a reckless and dangerous attack in which a British citizen died and many more were endangered. In leaving the Novichok agent in a public place, Russia’s GRU played dice with the lives of British citizens.

After this attack, the UK and our allies ensured that Russia paid a heavy price for breaking international law, including through the expulsion of 153 intelligence officers from NATO members and other European countries. But two years later, a banned chemical weapon has again been used, this time against leading Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny. This is little short of gangsterism. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council have a special duty to uphold international law on the prohibited use of chemical weapons.

Meanwhile China is also investing heavily in new capabilities, global infrastructure, cyberspace, nuclear weapons, and long-range missiles that could reach NATO nations. China’s actions in the South China Sea and use of malicious cyber activity for criminal ends risk a wider security effect. The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased uncertainty and accentuated trends. It has sharpened the focus on the challenge Beijing increasingly poses, and shown that China, as well as Russia, is quite capable of spreading disinformation to advance its own interests.

NATO members want to use new innovations to benefit their citizens and to bolster open societies. But we need to be alive to the risk that state adversaries will utilize technological developments to undermine our traditional strengths, and even against their own citizens as we have seen with China’s use of artificial intelligence in Xinjiang. And we cannot be confident that we can prevent such technologies reaching malign non-state actors.
Keep on Modernizing

The good news is that NATO has a track record of adapting fast to new priorities. Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the Alliance has transformed. It has established enhanced Forward Presence on its eastern flank, adapted its command structure, increased the readiness of its forces, and agreed a new military strategy. It has recognized cyber and space as new domains of operations, acknowledged that cyber and hybrid attacks could lead to the invocation of Article 5, and introduced a counter-hybrid strategy. It has also adapted to address Russia’s deployment of new intermediate-range missiles, including by strengthening air and missile defenses and adapting exercises; built new partnerships (40 and counting, including in the Indo-Pacific); and is playing a constructive role in countering the global pandemic by delivering personal protective equipment and medicine. And it has welcomed new allies—Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia this year, whilst giving Ukraine the privileged status of enhanced opportunity partner.

Now, NATO is readying itself for artificial intelligence and autonomous weapons, quantum computing which could render current encryption obsolete, and new weapons such as hypersonic missiles that have global reach and could reduce allies’ decision time in the face of attack. There has already been some impressive progress, including the agreement in London of a clear roadmap for “Emerging and Disruptive Technologies,” which describes the complex security environment which allies will navigate together.

In the UK, we are already thinking through how best to reshape the armed forces and modernize capabilities through our Integrated Foreign, Security and Defence Review. NATO will remain the bedrock of the UK’s collective security. Our defense budget will keep increasing above the rate of inflation. We will continue to see the two percent of GDP target as a floor, not a ceiling.

At the heart of the UK’s renewed offer to NATO will be a set of capabilities which demonstrate the value of agility and speed of response, readiness, and our status as a framework nation. Innovation, as well as science and technology, will be central to our capability strategy. Underpinned by the commitment of our number one strategic asset, our Continuous At Sea Nuclear Deterrent, we will bring leading capabilities across air, sea, land, space, and cyber.

We believe that this will, increasingly, become the direction of travel for the whole Alliance as it implements its new deterrence and defense concept. Future armed forces will be measured not by the number of
platforms in our inventories, but by our ability to out-
match any adversary, wherever and however they fight, 
even if those fights are gray zone efforts to under-
mine our security in other ways. Deterring a growing 
range of threats from a larger range of state and non-
state actors will require a broader range of capabilities 
from across our governments, and from our collective 
Alliance.

**Invest in Our Message**

As NATO continues to adapt, so too do we need to 
demonstrate and communicate the value it holds 
to our citizens. When NATO allies see things differ-
ently, as all good friends sometimes do, the press and 
media work overtime to highlight our differences. That 
is their job. When NATO is quietly getting on with its 
day-to-day work, its one billion citizens hear much less. 
Communicating this positive message was one rea-
son the UK was so proud to host the NATO Leaders’ 
Meeting last year in London, the home of NATO’s first 
headquarters, where we marked the seventieth anni-
versary of the signing of the founding Washington 
Treaty.

We invited politicians and military officers, along with 
think tankers and academics, to join the celebrations, 
but we also wanted younger generations to take pride 
in the Alliance’s successes. Reaching new audiences 
is a key goal of the NATO Engages Consortium, and 
these scene-setting events, held on the sidelines of for-
mal NATO meetings, have fast become one of the live-
iest parts of the NATO calendar.

The audience at the NATO Engages event in London 
reflected the contemporary makeup of the societ-
ies the Alliance is designed to protect, with a major-
ity under the age of thirty. In my experience, that age 
group wants to be talked with, not at, and they want 
more from pilots and aid workers, not just 
politicians. They want to hear from people their own 
age as well; people like 16-year-old Olivia Seltzer from 
Santa Barbara, California, who founded ‘The Cramm’ 
newsletter, which now reaches readers in seventy 
countries around the world.

The British Embassy in Washington DC, where I am 
now based, works to amplify such activity and reach 
new generations of Americans. For thirty-five years, 
embassy officials have enjoyed talking to univer-
sity students participating in the annual International 
Model NATO Conference. Investment in our students is 
an investment in our future security.

As the strategic context has evolved, so too has pub-
lic perception. NATO’s work should not only reflect the 
challenges we face today but cater to the modern-day 
concerns of its citizens, and we need to tell this new 
chapter in the NATO story with confidence and clarity. 
NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg’s launch of 
#NATO2030 demonstrates his understanding of this 
challenge—we hope all NATO allies will follow.

Governments have a duty to be honest and open with 
our citizens—a duty we NATO members discharge, 
in stark contrast to our adversaries. This is critical for 
the public support we need to make investments and 
adaptations. No single ally, including the United States, 
can face the growing threats alone. It is recognition of 
these threats that brought the increases to defense 
spending agreed at the London Leaders’ Meeting, with 
an additional $400 billion due to be spent on defense 
by non-US allies between 2016 and 2024. Whilst the 
post-COVID-19 economic challenge will be huge, secu-
rity investment remains crucial: collective defense 
is also cost-effective defense and it is what ensures 
peace. By taking on more of the burden of securing 
the US’s Western flank, the UK and other NATO allies 
are helping the United States respond to the grow-
ing challenge of China. China’s expanding influence 
and international policies present both opportunities 
and challenges that we need to address together as an 
Alliance.

As UK ambassador to the United States, I want to get 
across the concept that our continued strength and 
security comes from Euro-Atlantic unity. All of NATO’s 
citizens, American or otherwise, should recognize that 
the Alliance is critical for all our national security. NATO 
stood in solidarity with the United States and invoked 
Article 5 of the Washington Treaty for the first and 
only time in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on 
the United States. Since then, thousands of European 
and Canadian servicemen and women have joined the 
fight against terrorism alongside their American allies 
around the world. I saw this myself when I was the UK’s 
ambassador to Afghanistan: NATO means that the 
United States doesn’t have to fight alone.
Look To The Next Seventy Years

NATO is bound to be called more names over the next seventy years. That’s fine—scrutiny, openness, and challenge are important and powerful antidotes to authoritarianism. And our freely-enjoined Alliance represents a contribution to security and stability everywhere as well as to our ability to project our power, our influence, and our values for good around the world.

Over the next seventy years, NATO will continue to adapt in the face of emerging challenges and technologies. The most powerful and successful Alliance the world has seen will not ossify. We’ll continue to call out attacks on our values and our open societies, wherever and whoever they come from. And we will do so from a position of strength, a position underpinned by capabilities adapted to tackle a changing threat. The capabilities of NATO will modernise and change; the strength of NATO will remain the power of its allies and their ability to share burdens.

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