Revitalize NATO's Grand Strategy

by Amb. Timo Koster and Ivanka Barzashka

Collective strategic analysis is the pathway to a more inclusive, transparent, and systematic process for creating NATO's next strategic concept.

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NATO needs "a grand strategy" that draws on "all the tools at its disposal—economic, political, diplomatic as well as military" to counter emerging security threats, NATO's deputy supreme allied commander, General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, told the BBC months before he stepped down from his role in 2017.[1] Three years later, the problem has gotten worse as a global pandemic challenges nearly every aspect of our societies, Russia has become even more belligerent, and China has emerged as a competitor in a number of areas. Allies still lack, but badly need, a grand strategy to address current and emerging challenges together. While all allies acknowledge this gap in theory, they see the development of a collective grand strategy as politically risky in practice.

A new NATO grand strategy should ideally be reflected in an update to its 2010 Strategic Concept (SC), the political document that outlines the security challenges facing the Alliance and its responses. Allies view SC development, which relies predominantly on political negotiations among NATO's now thirty members based on their respective local and regional threat perceptions, as Pandora's box. They have tacitly agreed that kicking the can down the road is preferable to confronting political differences about the role of the Alliance in a changing world. But delays only perpetuate the doubts of those who think NATO is not doing enough and those who worry it is not focusing on the right priorities. The result is an organization struggling to remain fit for purpose in an increasingly dangerous world and that could find itself preparing for yesterday's war.

To make progress on grand strategy, allies should rethink the process for SC development. NATO can inform political debate with a new inclusive, transparent, and systematic process for collective strategic analysis (CSA). This process will help advance allies'

understanding and build consensus on what success could look like in a complex security environment and what it would take to achieve it.

Piecemeal Adaptations Are No Longer Enough

The strategic environment has changed considerably since the adoption of NATO's most recent SC in 2010. The Alliance has addressed emerging security challenges largely through bottom-up, piecemeal adaptations to its policies, structures, and posture. For example, in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has been incrementally adapting toward deterrence and defense to deal with a potential conventional force-on-force conflict with a single state adversary. Leaders have formally endorsed new military initiatives, like enhanced Forward Presence and an expanded exercise program, which were seen as achievable within the established political consensus.

While deterring Russian overt conventional military aggression remains important, the Alliance is prepared only for some of the security challenges that would likely require a collective response. Individual allies are preparing for long-term competition with Russia and China and have been developing whole-of-government responses to aggressive hybrid campaigns below the threshold of armed conflict. However, the Alliance does not have the remit to effectively respond to emerging challenges short of war. Similarly, allies will face a difficult set of dilemmas if Russia prepares for limited nuclear use to escalate out of failed conventional aggression against a NATO member.

How NATO Makes Grand Strategy

NATO leaders have recognized that a top-down holistic strategic approach is needed to respond to the

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1   Beale, Jonathan. "NATO Needs a Grand Strategy for Russia, Says UK General." BBC News. March 3, 2017. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-39151192.

General Raymond
A. Thomas III at
the United States
Special Operations
Command
(USSOCOM) War
Game Center
(Source: NATO
Flickr)

full spectrum of security challenges. At the London Summit in 2019, they agreed to a "forward-looking reflection process under the auspices of the Secretary General," which "will offer recommendations to reinforce Alliance unity, increase political consultation and coordination between Allies, and strengthen NATO's political role."[2] NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has appointed a Reflection Group, co-chaired by Wess Mitchell and Thomas de Maizière, that will outline the main challenges facing the Alliance in a report by the end of 2020. He will then propose next steps to the North Atlantic Council (NAC), which may include opening formal SC negotiations.

These activities follow the steps of the 2010 SC development process but are unlikely to produce the needed results. The establishment of a Reflection Group is an effort to start managing political consensus within the Alliance until the US presidential elections in November, after which actual work on a SC will likely begin. However, the group has a much more difficult task than its predecessors in 2009. The divide in threat perceptions among allies has grown, resulting in differences in priorities, levels of defense investments,

and even in the appreciation of the continued relevance of the Alliance. The Reflection Group will represent the private assessment of ten individuals, not the views of all thirty governments. To help build consensus, NATO needs a bridging step between the informal, exclusive reflection process currently underway and the formal, inclusive, but potentially divisive political negotiation at the NAC level.

Collective Strategic Analysis Can Support Grand Strategy

NATO should establish a new systematic, inclusive, and transparent process for collective strategic analysis (CSA) to inform political negotiations on a new SC. In practice, this means designing a novel process within established NATO structures that clearly connects premises to conclusions, incorporates the views of all thirty allies, and does so in an auditable way that allows for external review. CSA should be forward-looking and focus on strategic decision making in a dynamic security environment characterized by both military and nonmilitary threats across all domains.

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2   NATO, Secretary General appoints group as part of NATO reflection process, press release, March 31, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_174756.htm.

To meet these criteria, the main organizing concept for CSA should be a NATO theory of success. CSA should be based on a strategic net assessment that develops and tests national and collective theories of success in different scenarios, including peacetime, crisis, and war, using a range of analytical methods, including wargaming.

CSA could help support the development of a NATO grand strategy by advancing understanding and creating consensus among allies. Take for example one of the most controversial issues for the Alliance—characterizing the overarching political relationship with Russia. While relations between Russia and many NATO allies are becoming increasingly competitive and could turn adversarial in some circumstances, there remain shared interests even in crisis and war. As Thomas Schelling wrote, "'winning' in a conflict does not have a strictly competitive meaning; it is not winning relative to one's adversary. It means gaining relative to one's own value system; and this may be done by bargaining, by mutual accommodation, and by the avoidance of mutually damaging behavior."[3]

Seeking to counter Russian aims in every circumstance is not feasible and may be counterproductive. A strategic net assessment can help allies understand what they are competing over in the short to long term and under what circumstances competition could transition to war. Unlike a military threat assessment produced by the intelligence communities that focuses on Russian capabilities (and possibly intentions), a strategic net assessment would reveal how NATO is likely to measure up to Russia in the broader geopolitical competition over time.

This is not simply a matter of comparing military balances; it entails comparing evolving national and collective theories of success in different contexts to measure the balance of strategic advantage. Theories of success are the principles and logic that describe, explain, and evaluate how NATO allies can achieve strategic objectives in peacetime, crisis, and conflict, taking into account the interactions with other actors. These theories are not strategies; they reflect a fundamental understanding of underlying phenomena in a competitive environment, and their logics of interaction to allow allies to act strategically to change.[4]

How could this assessment be done? Theories about future conflict cannot be reliably tested only against real-world historical cases. To have predictive power, these theories should also be tested against collective human judgment about future events.[5] Here, novel analytical wargaming methods hold potential.[6] These methods can be used to crowdsource subjective judgments on political and military strategic decisions and outcomes in complex contexts involving multiple actors.

For example, a wargame could involve a realistic gray-zone scenario involving Russia.[7] This would set the context for individual allies to develop national and collective strategic objectives and courses of action based on their own values and perceptions. Policy makers and experts can systematically identify and evaluate a range of possible impacts on allied decision-making, and potential consequences of action and inaction in different circumstances. Repeating the wargames multiple times with a range of stakeholders and different scenarios could help allies better anticipate when their national and collective strategic objectives are likely to conflict or align with those of other stakeholders. The outcome would be a better understanding of the possibility space and the logic of strategic interactions with Russia that can provide a common baseline for political discussions among allies.

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3   Thomas Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

4   On the difference between strategy as a plan and acting strategically, see: Lawrence Freedman, "Strategic Theory" in *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

5   Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York, NY: Random House Books, 2016).

6   Wargaming is beginning to emerge as a social science and is highlighted as one category of methods of inquiry that involves collecting and analyzing human judgment about the future. Other categories of methods include decision and risk analysis, structured analytical techniques, and futures methods originally developed for engineering, intelligence, and business applications, respectively.

7   See, for example, Ivanka Barzashka, *Crisis in Southeast Europe 2023* (London, UK: Centre for Science and Security Studies, School of Security Studies, King's College London, 2018).

Who would do this analysis? CSA fits closely with the remit of NATO Allied Command Transformation, but should be an allies-driven process, closely connected to headquarters in Brussels. NATO staff have begun conducting net assessments intended to look at competition with Russia in the Euro-Atlantic region, but this initiative is still in its infancy and is not yet an inclusive collective endeavor.

Building a Political Bridge

For political reasons, allies are unlikely to reopen the SC before a new US administration settles into office in 2021, if at all. The Alliance should use this time wisely to set up a new systematic, inclusive, and transparent process of CSA.

This process can serve as a political bridging device in three ways. First, it will connect the reflection process that is underway with the actual drafting of the SC. A new SC will need to marry the various security challenges with national preferences and perceptions. CSA will allow all thirty allies to start owning the security assessment presented by the Reflection Group.

Second, it will bridge the military and political sides of NATO by conceptually linking military threat assessments to political negotiations. CSA based on developing and testing theories of success will allow allies to craft a strategic approach that meets their own goals and values rather than one that counters the unknown or uncertain behavior of potential adversaries alone.

Such an analytical baseline would allow the Alliance to build negotiations on a transparent collective process that is explicit about core assumptions and trade-offs to serve as reference points throughout the discourse. Military planners sometimes find political documents that are based on compromise difficult to operationalize into a military strategy. CSA can improve strategy implementation by providing the necessary understanding and background going forward.

Third, an inclusive CSA could build capacity across the Alliance to advance strategic thinking at the national and Alliance levels. While the United States has had an advanced net assessment capability since the 1970s, the United Kingdom created a Strategic Net Assessment Unit in 2019. Some allies, including the United States, the UK, Canada, and the Netherlands, are increasingly using wargames to improve "understanding of complex, uncertain environments and the changing character of warfare" and "identify how to exploit new opportunities, hedge against discontinuities and craft long-term strategies."[8] Yet these methods remain out of reach for many Alliance members.

Of course, CSA is not a silver bullet that will make all differences among allies disappear, but it could yield political benefits and help cement the various building blocks of a NATO fit for purpose for the twenty-first century. CSA could be a powerful tool to reinforce Alliance unity and strengthen coordination between allies for years to come.

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8   *USNI News*, "Document: Memo to Pentagon Leadership on Wargaming," March 18, 2015, https://news.usni.org/2015/03/18/document-memo-to-pentagon-leadership-on-wargaming.