



PISM

POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

POLICY PAPER

NO. 6 (192), APRIL 2021 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski, Patrycja Sasnal, Wojciech Lorenz

Keeping Collective Defence the Main Priority in NATO's New Strategy

Wojciech Lorenz

In NATO's new strategy, the allies should include a description of the threat posed by Russia and bolster collective defence as the main priority of the Alliance. At the same time, they will have to strengthen other areas of Alliance policy to ensure the ability to respond to new types of threats that affect public support for NATO and political cohesion of the Alliance. It will be crucial to formulate the strategy in such a way that broadens the political dimensions of NATO and its functions but does not weaken the importance of collective defence and the allies' determination to support it with necessary resources.

PISM POLICY PAPER

At the next meeting of NATO leaders this year, probably in June, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg will present recommendations on updating the Alliance's strategy. The main task will be to adapt the organisation to new threats in a way that strengthens NATO political cohesion. The Alliance's previous strategy from 2010 indicated a low risk of military aggression against NATO and prioritised the fight against terrorism, which helped concentrate allies' efforts on the mission in Afghanistan. Russia's increasingly aggressive policy has created direct military threats to NATO, which means it is high time for the allies to restore the priority of collective defence in the treaty (Euro-Atlantic) area.

The Practical and Political Importance of the Strategy

The main task of the NATO strategy (formally referred to as its "strategic concept") is to identify threats, indicate possible responses, and enable the development of the necessary Allied resources for multinational, joint missions. While the North Atlantic Treaty sets out the overall legal and political framework for NATO, the strategy identifies priorities and enables the development of Allied policy in different areas. Although, Art. 5 of the treaty forms a basis for collective defence in the Euro-Atlantic area, Art. 4, which enables consultations whenever states feel threatened, makes it

Agreeing on a strategy is always a challenge for NATO as it requires determining what its role should be in fighting other threats in addition to its ability to defend its own territory.

possible to respond to threats that are not directly related to military aggression and have no geographical limits. Agreeing on a strategy is always a challenge for NATO as it requires determining what its role should be in fighting other threats in addition to its ability to defend its own territory.

During the Cold War, NATO operated on the basis of secret military strategies developed by the Alliance's military structures. They pointed to the threat posed by the USSR and the Warsaw Pact and focused on collective defence and deterrence. However, even at that time changing threat perceptions and political tensions between the allies prompted them to expand the scope of consultations and coordinated activities through NATO. After the end of the Cold War, NATO's role in providing security and political importance increased significantly. Instead of military strategies, the Alliance began adopting public strategies designed to explain to the public and policymakers NATO's role in a completely different strategic situation. The allies pointed to the diminishing risk of a military attack against NATO and the increasing risks related to instability in the Alliance neighbourhood, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. They emphasised the importance of collective defence, but also expanded the scope of common actions to include the ability to conduct crisis-response missions and develop partnerships. Such an increase in the functions of the Alliance facilitated NATO's enlargement, engagement in the Balkans, and after the 9/11 attacks, a concentration of efforts and resources on the fight against international terrorism, mainly through the mission in Afghanistan.

In its recent 2010 strategy, the Alliance reaffirmed that collective defence remains NATO's primary task, but has included crisis-response and cooperative security among its main (therefore, three) missions. The document referred to the importance of the partnership with Russia and stated that the threat of an attack on the territory of the Alliance was extremely low. On the other hand, it considered terrorism to be a direct threat and underlined other threats of a global nature. The Alliance recognised that instability or conflict outside NATO territory could directly affect its security. Such a definition of threats and priorities, combined with the low risk of an armed attack on NATO territory and declining defence spending, encouraged most of the allies to prioritise the fight against terrorism and the mission in Afghanistan. Although Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008, massive modernisation of its military potential, and intensified exercises raised new threats to NATO,

PISM POLICY PAPER

the allies failed to meet their targets for military capabilities and the size of the forces necessary for collective defence.

NATO's Adaptation to Changes in the Strategic Environment

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the NATO allies recognised that Russia posed a threat to international security and began to strengthen the capabilities necessary for defence and deterrence. NATO member states have agreed a two-track policy towards Russia based on deterrence and dialogue. At the same time, the Alliance has retained and in some areas even enhanced its ability to respond to other threats. NATO decided to strengthen its defence policy in the cyber domain and in [space](#). It strengthened cooperation with the European Union, especially in the area of combating hybrid threats. It has defined areas crucial for increasing the resilience of civil and state structures, necessary to support the Alliance mission in a crisis or conflict. Although the Alliance began to reduce the mission in Afghanistan, it increased support for Iraq and joined the international coalition fighting ISIS. At the same time, the allies announced that NATO would maintain a "global perspective", pointing out that crisis management and cooperation with partners would remain important tools for shaping international security. In 2019, NATO adopted the first military strategy in more than half

While the arrangements made so far have partially adapted NATO to the new challenges, it is crucial how the balance between different responsibilities will be described in the Alliance's new strategy.

a century (the document has not been released). Under pressure from the Trump administration, it has also begun to adapt to the threats posed by China's policy, stating that the country represents both "a challenge and an opportunity".

While the arrangements made so far have partially adapted NATO to the new challenges, it is crucial how the balance between different responsibilities will be described in the Alliance's new strategy. Recent

arrangements do not remove all the points of contention. The U.S. has traditionally demanded that its NATO allies maintain adequate spending to be able to conduct both collective defence and crisis-response missions at the same time, while the U.S. contribution should not exceed 50% of total resources. Countries that feel directly threatened by Russia would like a new policy based on defence and deterrence to be consolidated. Some allies fear that this will hinder dialogue with Russia and weaken NATO's ability to perform other missions. Most European NATO nations also fear that the U.S. will focus on the Chinese threat at the expense of Europe. They are also afraid that Allied policy towards China can make it difficult for them to cooperate with this country. Additional tensions are caused by different interest perceptions of NATO's role in stabilising Europe's southern neighbourhood. For example, according to France, the weakening interest of the U.S. in the Middle East and Africa requires that European Union develops independent capacity in the framework of the so-called "strategic autonomy".

Strengthening the Cohesion and the Debate on the Goals of the Alliance

The attempts by some allies to exert pressure so NATO responds to their security needs have led to strong political tensions. Therefore, at the 2019 London summit the leaders of the Alliance announced a period of "strategic reflection" and commissioned the NATO Secretary General to submit recommendations on strengthening the Alliance's political cohesion and consultation mechanisms. At the beginning of 2020, Stoltenberg launched the NATO2030 initiative, which consisted of two major political lines of effort. The first was the creation of a group of experts from 10 member states who prepared the report ["NATO 2030. United for a New Era" containing over a hundred recommendations](#). The second was a series of public "SecGen's statements", meetings

PISM POLICY PAPER

and consultations with experts, academia and students on the future role of NATO in dealing with different security challenges. Part of this line was also the establishment of a group of 14 “young leaders”, who produced their own report on NATO’s future.

Both reports emphasise the importance of a credible defence and deterrence in times of increasing competition between superpowers.

Both reports emphasise the importance of a credible defence and deterrence in times of increasing competition between superpowers. They recommend maintaining a two-track policy towards Russia based on deterrence and dialogue to facilitate the negotiation of new arms-control agreements. They emphasise that the Alliance should not rule out a return to cooperation with Russia, but only if it begins to abide by international law and changes its aggressive policy. They recommend maintaining the “open door” policy and the ability to respond to threats from all geographic directions (the “360-degree” rule). At the same time, they indicate that expanding the scope of NATO’s activities is necessary for the Alliance to remain capable of fulfilling its main mission, which is collective defence. According to the recommendations, the Alliance should increase its influence on global security by working more closely with like-minded countries. The reports emphasise the need to develop a common policy towards China to limit its ability to exert a negative influence on NATO and recommend closer consultations and cooperation with partners from Asia and the Pacific—Australia, South Korea, Japan, and New Zealand. It is also necessary to strengthen Allied policy in several areas, especially respecting common, democratic values, resilience of state and civil structures of key importance for military security, combating climate change and developing new technologies.

The NATO Secretary General announced that at the next meeting of Alliance leaders he would recommend the update of strategy. If leaders decide to do so, both reports can make it much easier to agree the Alliance’s new priorities. The first report was created after consultation with all governments and largely reflects the interests of allies and sets the framework for a possible compromise. The report of young leaders, inclusion of various groups in the discussions and taking into account their main recommendations will provide additional justification for changes in the strategy and should increase its legitimacy.

Recommendations

As Russia poses a direct military threat to NATO, the new strategy should restore the priority of the collective defence mission.

- As Russia poses a direct military threat to NATO, the new strategy should restore the priority of the collective defence mission. To this end, it will be necessary to clearly identify Russia as the source of threat. It should not be controversial to include the already agreed language on the two-track policy towards Russia in the strategy. It should be noted, however, that dialogue does not mean a return to cooperation, which should be possible only after a change in

Russian policy. The Alliance has already adopted a secret military strategy that is likely to unequivocally describe the threat from Russia and the need to develop the necessary capabilities for defence and deterrence. However, how the threats are described in the public strategy and how different missions are prioritised may determine whether the allies fulfil their collective defence obligations. Credible collective defence will increase chances that allies decide to support NATO out-of-area activities and agree to enhance the functionality of the Alliance in other dimensions.

- The strategy should include the already agreed language on China, which was described by the Alliance as “a challenge and an opportunity”. However, Allied policy towards China

PISM POLICY PAPER

should be limited to areas where that country may have a negative impact on NATO's ability to conduct missions, for example, by attacking NATO in the cyber domain and space, taking control of critical infrastructure, or exploiting a technological advantage. Strengthening policies in these areas, including through closer cooperation with partners from Asia-Pacific region, will be essential from an operational point of view, but also politically to strengthen the transatlantic link. At the same time, the references to China may create a risk that countries with the potential to conduct global missions will receive a justification to limit their involvement in collective defence in the Euro-Atlantic area. To reduce such risk, the strategy may include a statement that expanding NATO's functionality should contribute to strengthening its main mission, which is collective defence in the treaty area. An additional safeguard would also be a statement that the security of the Euro-Atlantic area and the credibility of collective defence are based on the permanent presence of U.S. forces in Europe.

- The strategy should support closer cooperation with the EU in responding to, among other things, hybrid threats, resilience, crisis response, and the development of capabilities necessary for multinational missions. Increasing the capacity to operate in the EU framework or as a coalition of the willing may reduce the pressure to engage NATO out of area. The strategy should underline, however, that the EU's security policy should complement NATO's activities and not be developed as an alternative to the Alliance and strong transatlantic ties.