

Research Briefing

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NATO's Strategic Concept

The NATO Heads of State and Government Summit takes place in Madrid on 28-30 June 2022. At that summit NATO leaders are expected to adopt a new Strategic Concept for the Alliance.

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What is NATO's Strategic Concept?

NATO's Strategic Concept is the official statement of NATO's values and purpose and its fundamental tasks and roles. It has been described by the NATO Secretary General as the "[most important to document next to the founding treaty](#)".

The Strategic Concept provides an assessment of the international security environment, and the Alliance's approach to addressing the issues and challenges it faces, including any guidance for the adaptation of military forces.

The Strategic Concept is reviewed periodically to take account of changes to the global security environment and subsequent threat assessment, and "to ensure the Alliance is properly prepared to execute its core tasks".¹ Since the end of the Cold War the Concept has been reviewed approximately every ten years.²

¹ NATO, [Strategic Concepts](#), June 2021.

² The text of the 1991 and 1999 Strategic Concepts are available in NATO, [Towards the new Strategic Concept: a selection of background documents](#) (PDF), 2010

What does the current Strategic Concept say?

The [current Strategic Concept](#) was agreed in 2010. It outlined three core tasks for the Alliance: collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security and identified the proliferation of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons, terrorism, cyber-attacks and environmental issues as specific threats. It states that the Euro-Atlantic area “is at peace” and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low. It refers to Russia as a “strategic partner” and maintains NATO’s “open door” to enlargement.

NATO as a nuclear alliance

The Strategic Concept is the document in which NATO sets out its role as a nuclear alliance. The 2010 document commits NATO:

to the goal of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons – but reconfirms that, as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance.³

The fundamental purpose of NATO’s nuclear forces is for deterrence and the 2010 Strategic Concept confirms that the “supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States...”. The nuclear forces of the UK and France also contribute to the overall deterrent posture of NATO.⁴ The Concept goes on to acknowledge that “the circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote”.⁵

NATO’s nuclear posture is set out in greater detail in the 2012 [Deterrence and Defence Posture Review](#).

2

A new Strategic Concept in Madrid

The international security environment has changed significantly since 2010 and NATO has been forced to respond to it. Prior to the current Ukraine crisis, the Alliance had already adopted a renewed focus on Russia following its annexation of Crimea in 2014, undertaken a counter terrorism role and focused on new threats to security such as offensive and defensive cyber operations and the militarisation of space.

³ NATO, [Strategic Concept 2010](#)

⁴ The UK’s nuclear forces are formally assigned to NATO, but French nuclear forces are not. France also does not participate in NATO’s nuclear planning mechanisms but is committed to strengthening the “alliance’s nuclear culture” ([Speech of the President on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy](#), 7 February 2020)

⁵ NATO, [Strategic Concept 2010](#)

Recognising NATO's need "to prepare for a more competitive and unstable world",⁶ at the Brussels Summit in June 2021 NATO leaders agreed to develop the Alliance's next Strategic Concept as part of its [NATO 2030 agenda](#), which seeks to make NATO "fit for purpose" in the next decade.⁷

Consultation on the new Strategic Concept has been ongoing. At the beginning of October 2021, [the NATO Secretary General confirmed](#) that internal consultations with Allies had begun, a series of seminars bringing together NATO leadership, officials and expert communities would be convened and that engagement with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly would take place.

A new document will subsequently be adopted at the forthcoming [NATO Summit in Madrid](#) at the end of June 2022.

2.1

What is it expected to say?

Speaking at a meeting with the Spanish Prime Minister on 8 October 2021, the NATO Secretary General said that the Madrid Strategic Concept will "reflect the new security environment, recommit to our values, and reaffirm our unity. Ensuring that our Alliance is fit for the future".⁸

Thinking on the new Strategic Concept has undoubtedly evolved following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and NATO's response to that crisis on its borders,⁹ which many have described as giving the Alliance a "new sense of purpose".¹⁰

Collective defence and security of the Euro-Atlantic area is expected to become the priority as Russia's assertiveness and growing strategic ambition poses longer term challenges to the Alliance, both in Eastern Europe and increasingly in the High North where Russia has been building up its military presence for several years. At the Copenhagen Democracy Summit on 10 June 2022, NATO's Deputy Secretary General, Mircea Geoană, said that the new Strategic Concept will "reflect an era of great power competition" and identify Russia as "one of the most important challenges to our security in Europe and also beyond".¹¹

However, analysts have also pointed to the need to look beyond the current crisis and the challenges Russia poses for NATO and "take stock of the

⁶ NATO, [Strategic Concept](#)

⁷ NATO, [Brussels Summit Communiqué](#), 24 June 2021, para.3

⁸ [NATO press release](#), 8 October 2021

⁹ For further detail of NATO's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, see House of Commons Library, [The crisis in Ukraine](#)

¹⁰ Financial Times, "Renewed tensions with Russia inject new lease of life into NATO", 4 February 2022

¹¹ NATO, [News release](#), 10 June 2022

“We risk being reactive, whereas the Strategic Concept is an exercise that should be proactive and provide a space for transatlantic partners to share broader common security concerns”.

Alice Billon-Galland,
[The World Today](#), 27
May 2022

broader shift in global power from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific¹² and specifically the strategic rise of China. There is also concern that a shift in NATO's centre of gravity toward eastern Europe and the north, with the accession of Sweden and Finland, could leave ongoing issues of instability on NATO's southern borders unaddressed. Transnational threats emanating from emerging and disruptive technologies such as cyber and space and the impact of climate change on international security must also feature in NATO's thinking.

Balancing these competing issues will be at the heart of the new Strategic Concept.¹³

- Russian assertiveness on the world stage and the impact of the Ukraine crisis on Euro-Atlantic security.
- Changes in the global balance of power and the rise of China. At the NATO Summit in Brussels in June 2021, Alliance leaders officially addressed, for the first time, the security challenges that are posed by China, including China's close relations with Russia.¹⁴
- Offensive and defensive cyber operations and the overall resilience of the Alliance.
- Hybrid and other asymmetric threats.
- The Arctic/ High North, emphasised by the likely accession to NATO of Nordic nations, Sweden and Finland.
- The Indo-Pacific and the importance of partnerships in the region.
- Instability on NATO's southern borders.
- The security implications of climate change.
- Militarisation of space.
- Emerging and disruptive technologies that are changing the character of warfare– including cyber, quantum computing and artificial intelligence.
- Terrorism, specifically the rise of Islamist groups in the Sahel.

¹² NATO Review, Professor Luis Simón “[The Madrid Strategic Concept and the future of NATO](#)”, 2 June 2022

¹³ US Department of State, [Secretary Anthony Blinken and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg at a Joint Press Availability](#), 1 June 2022; [Joint Press Conference: NATO Secretary General and the President of Finland](#), 25 October 2021; [NATO Secretary General Press Conference](#), 21 October 2021; [Press statement of the Chair of the Military Committee](#), 18 September 2021; [Brussels Summit Communique](#), June 2021

¹⁴ [Brussels Summit Communique](#), June 2021, para. 55 and 56

- The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the erosion of the arms control architecture.
- The commitment of NATO as a nuclear alliance.

The Strategic Concept is also expected to underline the importance of democracy and the rule of law, partnerships and a commitment to NATO's open-door policy.

Out of the new Strategic Concept are likely adjustments to NATO's longer-term deterrence and defence posture.¹⁵

1 Further reading

- NATO, [Strategic Concepts](#). This examines the evolution of NATO's Strategic Concept since the Alliance was formed in 1949.
- NATO, [2022 Strategic Concept](#)
- NATO, [NATO's nuclear deterrence policy and forces](#), May 2022
- NATO Review, [Beyond Ukraine? The Madrid Strategic Concept and the future of NATO](#), 2 June 2022
- The World Today, ["Reshaping NATO for an uncertain future"](#), 27 May 2022
- Carnegie Europe, ["NATO's new \(old\) mission: Territorial defence"](#), 22 March 2022
- Center for Strategic and International Studies, [NATO's road to Madrid](#)

¹⁵ US Department of Defense, [Press release](#), 2 June 2022

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