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NATO AFTER THE MADRID AND VILNIUS SUMMITS: IN SEARCH OF SHADES

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This article seeks to dissect the contemporary developments surrounding the concept of 'strategic competition' by examining the outcomes of two successive NATO summits in Madrid and Vilnius. During these summits, the Allies not only exhibited a unified front in their support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia but also reaffirmed their commitment to honour mutual defence guarantees should the Alliance itself come under attack. This article delves deeper into the evolution of the concept of strategic competition following the Madrid and Vilnius summits, where the Allies sought to formulate effective responses to the turmoil wrought by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Introduction

In this era of democratic unrest and global instability, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization sees its role as reaffirming its values and principles. NATO's Madrid and Vilnius summits attempted to respond to the current challenges towards the East, in particular defining the priorities of the Allies.

NATO's newly adopted strategy¹ (2022) encompasses the idea that allied security

will hinge both on Russia's threat to Europe and China's high stakes in the Indo-Pacific region. It delves deeply into the concept of '**strategic competition**', within our 'contested and predictable' world. Moreover, many of the NATO allies followed this trend in 2022 and reviewed or elaborated their security and/or defence strategies: the US National Defence Strategy², the UK's 2023 Integrated Review³, Germany's first-ever post-Cold War National Security Strategy⁴, the National Strategic Review in France⁵, the Danish Foreign and Security Policy,⁶

1 NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted by the Heads of State during Madrid Summit 2022, 29.06.2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

2 US National Security Strategy 2022. White House. October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

3 Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world, presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of His Majesty, 13.03.2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>

4 Integrated Security for Germany. National Security Strategy 2023, June 2023, <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf>

5 National Strategic Review, France. 2022, <https://www.sgdns.gouv.fr/files/files/rns-uk-20221202.pdf>.

6 Foreign and Security Policy Strategy, Regeringen, May 2023, <https://um.dk/en/foreign-policy/foreign-and-security-policy-2023>

as well as the Defence White Paper in the Netherlands⁷.

Following the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, NATO's focus underwent a transition towards non-conventional threats, prompted by Russia's increased aggression targeting NATO and its members, albeit remaining below the threshold for invoking Article 5. These tactics are commonly referred to as hybrid warfare, but they can also be categorised as activities within the 'grey zone', covert actions weaponizing energy and commodities, and nuclear threats, not to mention the information space and the environment⁸. Moreover, the rise and return of the strategic competition between the US and China, as well as the US and Russia has started to challenge the Euro-Atlantic space simultaneously. The present article attempts to delve deeper into the evolutions of the strategic competition concept after the subsequent Madrid and Vilnius summits, where the Allies tried to respond effectively to the turmoil caused by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Strategic Competition as a US-Originated Concept

The developments sketched above, culminating in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, make it urgent to launch a serious inquiry into a potential revision of the NATO role in Europe and, in particular, its geo-strategic importance in the European security

architecture. In a world characterised by different kinds of globalisation and anti-globalisation, where security is a continuum in the absence of a stable international system, it is imperative for Europe as a continent to positively contribute to regional and trans-continental stability. In this regard, NATO is recognised for its pivotal position in framing and then promoting effective international security mechanisms.



the rise and return of the strategic competition between the US and China, as well as the US and Russia has started to challenge the Euro-Atlantic space simultaneously

It has been observed that strategic competition as a notion was used to mark the US's evolving rivalry with China⁹. In general, it represents a long-lasting endeavour involving those vested in upholding the established international framework of rules and norms that goes back to the period after World War II, alongside the efforts of revisionist powers, aiming to disrupt or reconfigure this very framework¹⁰. Living in times of high stakes, strategic competition is also compared or referred to by some scholars as 'strategic hedging'¹¹. Coming from the world of finance, it has appeared to

7 Defence White Paper 2022, Ministry of Defence of the Netherlands, 19.07.2022, <https://english.defensie.nl/downloads/publications/2022/07/19/defence-white-paper-2022>.

8 NDC Research Paper 28: *War changes everything: Russia after Ukraine*, edited by Marc Ozawa, NATO Defence College Research Paper #28, 13.02.2023, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1798>

9 Stephanie Christine Winkler, Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2023, p.9.

10 Paul, Christopher, Michael Schuille, Michael Vasseur, Elizabeth M. Bartels, and Ryan Bauer, The Role of Information in U.S. Concepts for Strategic Competition. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022. p. 2. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1256-1.html

11 Bruni J. Strategic Hedging: The Growing International Competition for Influence in the Indo-Pacific. <https://www.interregional.com/en/strategic-hedging/> 05.09.2023; Didier, Brice. "Reacting to the Decline of the West? The European Union's Embrace of Strategic Hedging." *European Review of International Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2021, pp. 191–220. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27142375>

be used in international relations mostly to indicate Indo-Pacific military dynamics¹² or US-China developments¹³.

However, there is still a lack of an all-encompassing understanding of what the toolkit is for the 'strategic competitors' to use. There is no consensus about what the competition is mostly about, its priority framework, where it leads to, or how countries succeed in this area.

Deepening rivalries between the US and China, and the US and Russia have scaled up the new episodes of the strategic competition era. In such a way, during the years of the Biden administration, competitive strategy is being viewed as a challenging option for the great powers to co-exist, taking into account their diverse visions of global order¹⁴. Over the last two decades, China, Russia, and Iran have manifested steadfast efforts to systematically modify the prevailing regional arrangements in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East¹⁵.

Following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, NATO's discernible emphasis on

fostering partnerships with non-allies and a focus on collective defence reached a new level. It directed its energies towards the imperative task of maintaining trust with its partners after NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Since then, there has been an observable trend whereby the United States and other NATO allies have increasingly chosen to circumvent the conventional NATO framework, an option for more pliable and adaptable collaborative formats¹⁶. In the context of the United States, the prospect of a confrontation with Russia due to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine is coupled with escalating tensions vis-a-vis China. It has propelled the pressing consideration of close vicinity to the two-front war as a simultaneous challenge¹⁷.

Strategic Competition and its Implications for NATO Since 2022

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought a new intensity to the competition, but the long-term implications of the war remain unclear¹⁸. In this context, the North Atlantic Council has convened twice,¹⁹ both at the level of heads of state/governments as well

12 Hu, Weixing. "The United States, China, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Rise and Return of Strategic Competition." *China Review*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2020, pp. 127–42. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26928114>

13 Tessman, Brock, and Wojtek Wolfe. "Great Powers and Strategic Hedging: The Case of Chinese Energy Security Strategy." *International Studies Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, pp. 214–40. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23017154>

14 Stephanie Christine Winkler, Strategic Competition and US–China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2023

15 Gilli, Andrea, et al. "NATO from 2010 to 2022: What Has Changed?" *Strategic Shifts and NATO's New Strategic Concept*, NATO Defense College, 2022, pp. 5–10. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep42156.8>

16 Lisa Aronsson, Brett Swaney, Priorities for NATO Partnerships in an Era of Strategic Competition, INSS Strategic Perspectives 40, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/3252474/priorities-for-nato-partnerships-in-an-era-of-strategic-competition>

17 Mark Webber, NATO and strategic competition: time for Allies to step up, NDC Policy Brief 04–2023, p. 2.

18 Stephanie Christine Winkler, Strategic Competition and US–China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2023, p. 2.

19 Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Russia's attack on Ukraine, NATO official website, 24.02.2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_192404.htm?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=smc&utm_id=220224%2Bukraine%2Bnac%2Bstatement; Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government on Russia's attack on Ukraine, NATO official website, 25.02.2023. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_192489.htm; Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government, NATO official website, 24.03.2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_193719.htm

as ministries,²⁰ to condemn “in the strongest possible terms Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine” and reassure their allies that they are committed to use “Article 5 of the Washington Treaty” when it is necessary to ‘protect and defend all the Allies’²¹.



The ineffectual approach undertaken by NATO to curtail Russia’s actions, stemming from the resolutions adopted at the Bucharest Summit of 2008, should have ideally catalysed the Alliance to undertake reciprocal supplementary measures at the Vilnius Summit, thereby advancing Ukraine’s trajectory towards potential membership

Within the framework of the NATO Strategic Concept, formulated and endorsed during the proceedings of the Madrid Summit in June 2022, the consensus among members of the alliance was unequivocally established²². It was collectively affirmed that, notwithstanding NATO’s inability to regard Russia as a potential partner, the Alliance persists in its willingness to uphold unfettered lines of communication with Moscow, a stance consistent with its prior position. This deliberate continued

engagement with Moscow serves multifarious objectives, encompassing the domains of risk oversight and mitigation, the forestalling of potential escalatory scenarios, and the augmentation of overall transparency. Moreover, “pervasive instability, rising strategic competition, and advancing authoritarianism” are considered the biggest threats to the Alliance space²³.

The ineffectual approach undertaken by NATO to curtail Russia’s actions, stemming from the resolutions adopted at the Bucharest Summit of 2008, should have ideally catalysed the Alliance to undertake reciprocal supplementary measures at the Vilnius Summit, thereby advancing Ukraine’s trajectory towards potential membership. Perhaps NATO’s ‘naiveté’ towards Russia started to decrease there. The summit communique signified the onset of a discernible alteration in global power dynamics, as NATO aligned itself against Russia and China²⁴. Moreover, it expands the conventional understanding of the word ‘security’ to encompass space, water, technology, and cyberspace, with precaution in mind²⁵. It demonstrates that the Alliance was trying to sound more solid and proactive in the strategic environment, with the understanding that it is not only European security that is under attack, but that the threats being faced are “ global and interconnected”²⁶.

20 Statement by NATO Foreign Ministers, NATO official website, 29-30.11.2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_209531.htm?selectedLocale=en

21 Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Russia’s attack on Ukraine, NATO official website, 24.02.2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_192404.htm?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=smc&utm_id=220224%2Bukraine%2Bnac%2Bstatement

22 NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted by the Head of States during Madrid Summit 2022, NATO official website, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_files2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

23 NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, p. 1

24 Vilnius Summit Communiqué, articles 11, 12, 13. NATO official website, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm

25 Hasim Turker, NATO’s Vilnius Summit: Hints of a New Cold War, Geopolitical Monitor, 14.07.2023, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/natos-vilnius-summit-hints-of-a-new-cold-war/>


26 NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. p. 3.

However, the NATO response to strategic competition is marked by a more future-oriented agenda, and via regional defence planning and expenditures, enhancing the alliance's capacity to deter and its own self-defence. The adoption of the new NATO Force Model during the Madrid Summit, represents a transformative development, bolstering alliance capabilities to deploy up to 300,000 troops at a high readiness level. Together with the Allied Reaction Force, designed to swiftly address the emerging threats, NATO is continuing its process of realignment and restructuring²⁷.

Endeavouring to respond to the strategic threat after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO has reasserted its unwavering support for that country which, in reality, is being seen mostly as a presumed European NATO member-state; individual assistance military packages have been provided, with US 'backup' as a final instance. Although NATO has reconfirmed Ukraine's future in NATO, the alliance member-states have gone far beyond believing in it as a possibility. The *communiqué* further delineated the establishment of a collaborative NATO-Ukraine Council, continued non-lethal assistance via the Comprehensive Assistance Package, and presented a NATO-EU Staff Coordination mechanism, aimed at strengthening NATO's support for Ukraine²⁸. While this summit did provide a degree of clarity regarding Ukraine's prospective role within the alliance, it was found lacking in two significant respects: firstly, it failed to furnish the comprehensive security assurances sought by President Zelenskyy in the months leading up to the summit,

and secondly, it fell short in furnishing a precise and defined timeline for Ukraine's membership.

Indeed, during the Vilnius Summit 2023, the assurances of new armaments and a coalition for training Ukrainian pilots hit the ground, but in the final communiqué of the summit, there was no mention of a specific timeline for Ukraine's NATO membership. Instead, there were general statements emphasising the need for additional reforms before an invitation was extended.



the NATO response to strategic competition is marked by a more future-oriented agenda, and via regional defence planning and expenditures, enhancing the alliance's capacity to deter and its own self-defence

Encouragingly, there exist noteworthy accomplishments within this framework. Notably, the G7 nations have collaboratively formulated assurances of collective security for Ukraine²⁹. This collaborative declaration, slated for endorsement on the periphery of the summit, is poised to delineate the structure through which allied support for Ukraine will be extended in the forthcoming years.

To sum up, we can say that the ongoing strategic competition is already resulting in an expansion of NATO's influence, not

27 Jason C. Moyer, Henri Winberg, NATO Vilnius Summit 2023: A Summit for Implementation, 11.07.2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/nato-vilnius-summit-2023-summit-implementation>

28 Vilnius Summit Communiqué, articles 11, 12, 13, 2023, NATO official website, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm

29 Alberto Nardelli, Jennifer Jacobs, Natalia Drozdziak, G-7 Nations to Give Individual Security Pledges to Ukraine, Bloomberg, 11.07.2023. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-07-11/g-7-countries-to-offer-individual-security-assurances-to-ukraine>

necessarily solely through the process of enlargement. Thus, the scope of enlargement has evolved to encompass broader global partnerships³⁰. One such example is NATO's partnership with the Indo-Pacific region, strengthened after the Vilnius Summit³¹. Moreover, it was also presented in the format of enhanced partnerships. In particular, in the aftermath of the Partnership Interoperability Initiative, NATO extended customized "enhanced opportunities," designed to foster deeper collaboration with specific partner nations. Presently, the Enhanced Opportunities Partners encompass Australia, Georgia, Jordan, Sweden, and Ukraine³².

Conclusion

NATO's unwavering commitment to safeguarding its interests within the evolving global order, marked by multifaceted competition across various domains, underscores its enduring dedication to principles of collective defence, shared values, and adaptability. The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept provides a comprehensive roadmap for securing the success of the Alliance. Its updated strategy reflects a keen awareness that the security of its member states is contingent not only on addressing Russia's threat to Europe but also, increasingly, on

navigating the complex challenges posed by China's ascension, particularly in areas such as emerging technologies and climate change. As NATO continues to adapt and strengthen its posture in response to contemporary security dynamics, it remains a cornerstone of stability and security in an ever-evolving global landscape.

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30 Interview mit Generalsekretär Jens Stoltenberg: "Ich bin für eine globalere Nato", RND, 13.07.2020, <https://www.rnd.de/politik/nato-generalsekretar-jens-stoltenberg-im-interview-ich-bin-fur-eine-globalere-nato-JQ4PZWC6XZFFQ7KCTSFK5HZHESE.html>

31 Relations with partners in the Indo-Pacific region, NATO official website, updated 17.08.2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_183254.htm

32 Partnership Interoperability Initiative (updated 25.04.2023), NATO official website, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132726.htm#:~:text=The%20Enhanced%20opportunities%20Partners%20currently,%2C%20Jordan%2C%20Sweden%20and%20Ukraine

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