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NATO's Year of Deterrence

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2024 is a pivotal year for the NATO Alliance. With the Ukraine War continuing into its third year, Russia likely does not see a need to end the conflict until it achieves its political objectives. Hamas' attack last October signifies that the Middle East remains unstable. China's rise and threat of war in the Western Pacific, along with North Korea's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons and threatening the United States with war, shows that the Alliance needs a robust deterrent in an increasingly dangerous and unstable world. As NATO celebrates its 75th anniversary, NATO Heads of State and Government need to take stock of the Alliance's ability to deter aggression and maintain peace along its borders.

In 2014, my friend and former teaching partner at the Naval War College penned an article on deterrence. In his article, Jim Holmes discusses the late Henry Kissinger's formula for deterrence. For deterrence to succeed, friendly forces must have the capability and political resolve to use force against an aggressor, and the adversary must believe in that capability and resolve.¹ Dr. Holmes also clarified that deterrence would fail if any aspects of the equation were absent. Here, one can examine NATO's means to deter Russia or any other aggressor from harming the Alliance.

First, NATO states that its deterrence posture relies on combining conventional and nuclear forces.² If one compares NATO's overall conventional force structure to Russia, NATO is vastly superior. In 2023, NATO had an overall three-to-one advantage in conventional forces.³ Furthermore, NATO has a five-to-one advantage in air forces and a three-to-one advantage in



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naval forces. To reinvigorate NATO's ability to respond to threats quickly, Allies agreed at the 2022 Madrid Summit to create a new force model that could deliver more than 100,000 troops within ten days and up to 500,000 in 30 days.⁴ Allies continue to demonstrate resolve through NATO Air Policing along its Eastern Flank, maritime patrols, and deterrence exercises scattered throughout Allied territory. While European Allies are doing more to demonstrate their capabilities, the United States is adding means to the deterrence equation. Russia offsets its inferior conventional force structure through its vast arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW), with reports of up to 2,000, if not more, warheads at Putin's disposal.⁵ Moreover, Putin's nuclear modernization of his NSNW forces will provide Russia with the ability to deliver a variety of these weapons if Putin believes that his regime's survival is in jeopardy or if battlefield conditions in Ukraine warrant their use.⁶

According to the Department of Defense, the United States will spend another \$3.6 billion as part of its European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) that aims to increase U.S. presence, promote exercise and training, enhance U.S. prepositional stocks, improve U.S. and Allied infrastructure, and build Allied capacity.⁷ Since EDI's inception in 2014, responding to Russia's invasion of Crimea, the United States has spent over \$37 billion⁸ to deter Russian aggression and assure NATO allies. On paper, NATO possesses a highly capable conventional deterrence force, yet this is only half of NATO's deterrence strategy.

The Alliance also maintains a robust strategic and non-strategic nuclear force to complement NATO's conventional deterrent. NATO's strategic deterrent relies on the combination of U.S. and UK nuclear forces, with the independent French nuclear arsenal contributing to Alliance security.⁹ This adds further complexity to any Russian decision towards conflict. The United States is undergoing a modernization of its nuclear triad that supports its extended deterrence strategy.¹⁰ Moreover, the U.S. B61 modernization effort supports NATO's nuclear strategy and the Alliance nuclear sharing agreement as Allies begin to transition to newer dual-capable aircraft platforms.¹¹ The British are also undergoing a nuclear modernization program that will see its Dreadnaught submarine program become the backbone of the United Kingdom's nuclear strategy by 2030.¹² Allies, minus France, participate in NATO's nuclear sharing agreement, the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), and partake in numerous deterrence drills, such as Steadfast Noon, which in 2023 saw 60 Allied aircraft participate to demonstrate NATO's credible nuclear capabilities.¹³ While NATO possesses tremendous conventional and nuclear capabilities, Allies must demonstrate the political will to employ these forces.

Statements from Secretary General Stoltenberg and President Biden claim that the Alliance will defend every inch of NATO territory, indicating NATO's resolve.¹⁴ Moreover, the Allies continue to showcase Article 5 that an attack on one ally is an attack on all. This is a powerful political statement that bolsters NATO's deterrence. The combined statements from NATO leaders emphasizing that any attack on any NATO ally would generate a response should give President Putin and the rest of the Russian leadership pause. Indeed, one would argue that deterrence should hold with the NATO force structure and Russia's depleted weapons stockpile due to its aggression against Ukraine. However, there is one final aspect of the



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question to consider, and that is whether or not Putin believes in NATO's capability and resolve.

One of Putin's likely goals for invading Ukraine was to fracture the NATO Alliance's unity.¹⁵ Indeed, ever since NATO's voluntary membership grew eastward, including invitations to Ukraine and Georgia, Putin sought to reshape the world order that would eliminate NATO and the European Union (EU) as perceived threats and reestablish a sphere of influence subservient to Moscow's demands. Even though the invasion has not gone to plan, Putin can look west to see that there are cracks in the Alliance that he could exploit.

First, not all allies have the same view of Russia as others. Interestingly, citizens in Hungary view the United States unfavorably and lean toward favoring Russia.¹⁶ Like in Hungary, Slovakia appears to align more with Russia and desires to maintain friendly relations with Moscow.¹⁷ Türkiye's balancing strategy aims to place Erdogan at the center of his version of "triangle diplomacy" between the United States, the European Union, and Russia, which often appears to be at odds with projecting NATO unity.¹⁸ Of course, there is France's pursuit of strategic autonomy, though Macron's more aggressive and bellicose support for Ukraine places France at odds with NATO's conservative approach. France's refusal to participate in the NPG and maintain its independent deterrent outside of the Alliance emanates from its historical distrust of the United States and freedom to ensure its security outside of NATO.¹⁹ Indeed, looking at France's passionate independent streak, one can conclude that its nuclear deterrent is only for France rather than supporting its treaty allies.

Another potential divide Putin could benefit from is that some allies may lack the will to defend other NATO members in case of attack. Indeed, a poll by NATO indicates that the general population of eight allies lean more towards not supporting other allies rather than upholding their Article 5 commitments.²⁰ Some European states do not trust in the United States' willingness to defend its Allies in case of Russian aggression. Many Europeans fear the outcome of the 2024 election would see the United States retrench. While Congress has made efforts to restrict future presidents' ability to withdraw from NATO, that does not mean the next President cannot deemphasize or deprioritize NATO in the future. Besides, since the return to Great Power Competition, some in the United States views Europe as a secondary theater, with China as the primary threat. To prevent Putin from exploiting any of these perceived divisions within the Alliance, NATO leaders must work hard this year to patch up internal relationships.

Another area of concern is NATO's readiness. There appears to be a significant disconnect between the ambition to create the new force model and Europe's ability to fulfill this ambition. Indeed, the United States has the preponderance of NATO forces, with over 1.1 million active-duty personnel. Depending on the United States to rapidly respond to a crisis along NATO's borders is unrealistic. Moreover, NATO's Eastern Flank remains vulnerable due to numerous bureaucratic and infrastructure problems.²¹ Allies should no longer worry about the NATO-Russia Founding Act or the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) agreement; considering Russia's actions in Ukraine and withdrawal from CFE and other arms control agreements, NATO must do more regarding its force posture to protect its vulnerable regions by denying



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Russia the opportunity to attack NATO vice relying on a deterrence through punishment strategy.²² One approach might be to place more NATO forces east, increasing their numbers and visibility and conducting more readiness exercises along the Eastern Flank.

There are solutions for NATO leaders to pursue that will shore up the deterrence equation. By the July Summit in Washington D.C., Allies must agree to demonstrate their ability to assemble NATO's new force model. As part of the Summit Communique, Allies should announce that the Alliance will assemble its New Force Structure in 2025, with the 500,000-man force within 30 days as stated in its construct.²³ Allies should agree to demonstrate NATO's ability to reinforce its Eastern Flank through Exercise Defender with the majority of the troops from the European Allies so that there is little doubt in NATO's ability to quickly muster a response force capable of defeating any threats.

Next, NATO must continue to support Ukraine. Demonstrating the Alliance's resolve with a potential future ally will show Putin he cannot bully NATO or revise the international system to favor authoritarianism. Moreover, continuing to support Ukraine demonstrates the Allies can adjust to the realities of today's geopolitical environment to remain resilient in the face of aggression.

Third, NATO must work hard to resolve political rifts that divide the Alliance. Allies must figure out how to woo Hungary, Slovakia, and Türkiye away from Moscow. Also, the Alliance must quell any hint that the United States lacks commitment to NATO through more messaging of NATO successes. Indeed, NATO can showcase how all Allies are meeting their 20 percent major equipment purchases and how the Alliance had record defense spending, with the vast majority of allies surpassing their 2014 defense spending levels, coupled with how the United States continues its deterrence activities through the Alliance and via domestic interests.²⁴ There will always be differences within the Alliance. For deterrence to succeed, however, requires that NATO leadership find ways to resolve or minimize those differences when faced with more pressing problems. There can be no avenue that Putin can perceive as exploitable to his advantage.

Finally, NATO must rethink its nuclear posture and strategy. Fortunately, the United States and Great Britain are modernizing their nuclear forces. However, NATO's nuclear deterrence messaging has not changed since Russia's 2022 invasion, nor has NATO's nuclear strategy. While nuclear weapons are unique and aim to preserve the peace, Russia's openly threatening NATO with nuclear weapons indicates that Putin may be willing to employ nuclear weapons in the future. Thus, NATO needs to reintroduce a piece of Cold War deterrence that would see additional nuclear capabilities on land, sea, and air beyond the current reliance on strategic systems and a few tactical weapons employed by aircraft. Moreover, NATO should disperse its tactical nuclear forces throughout Europe to complicate Putin's strategic thinking and encourage additional burden sharing.²⁵ Finally, it is time to encourage France to join the NPG. No one is suggesting that France would give up its independent nuclear deterrent or lose its strategic autonomy. But having Paris actively involved in the NPG and committed to NATO's nuclear deterrent will show Alliance unity and total commitment to deterrence.²⁶ These



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additional measures may provide the substance that would make NATO's deterrent more credible in the minds of the Russians.

Deterrence in 2024 remains NATO's primary mission. The Alliance does not want war with Russia. But Allies must be ready to confront Putin in unison if he decides to engage NATO in a conflict. To convince Putin that any attack on NATO would lead to a severe response, NATO must fill the gaps in its capabilities and unify politically to demonstrate Alliance resolve.

There is a fine line between deterrence success and failure. NATO's military strength and political cohesion are crucial elements of the deterrence equation. With 2024 seeing increasing global insecurity, NATO requires an approach to deterrence that makes the Alliance's military capability and political resolve clear in Putin's mind, and there are no gaps he can exploit. In other words, NATO can leave nothing to chance.

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