

# The Evolution of NATO: Strategic Adaptation in a Changing Security Landscape

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## Abstract

*NATO's relevance stems from its political and military instruments of power. The longevity and success of the North Atlantic Alliance stem from its significance and cohesion, which are rooted in its core values and capacity for adaptation and transformation.*

*Since its inception, adaptability has been a key quality of NATO. The Alliance adapts its tasks, mission, organisation, and military capabilities. Moreover, since 2003, with the formation of the Allied Command Transformation, the alliance has systematically transformed its military instrument of power to improve its effectiveness.*

*The article examines NATO's continuous transformation as a comprehensive and continuous process of adaptation, identifying patterns and trends that reflect its thorough change and evolution. It employs a three-pronged analytical lens: historical, institutional, and future-oriented. Through document and policy analysis, the study identifies six core trends of transformation.*

*This article contributes to the understanding of NATO's evolving strategic culture by highlighting its shift toward proactive planning, institutional foresight, and innovation as tools for resilience.*

## Keywords:

*NATO, transformation, adaptation, security environment*

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## Introduction

NATO's relevance is generally measured by its military power, materialised in its defence capabilities and forces. It is also revealed in the coherence of its members' values and goals. However, the longevity and success of its mission are significant due to its power to adapt and transform its missions, tasks, and capabilities. For over seven decades, NATO has been a cornerstone of global security, transforming from a Cold War-era defence pact into a dynamic, interconnected security alliance. The Alliance has consistently demonstrated its ability to adapt in response to evolving geopolitical, technological, and military challenges. NATO's ability to adapt its missions, structures, and doctrines has been critical to its longevity and effectiveness in a changing security landscape.

The need for transformation has never been more urgent than in the 21st century, where emerging security threats, including cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, hybrid conflicts, and strategic competition with adversaries, require greater interoperability, rapid decision-making, and multi-domain operational capabilities. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war have further highlighted the critical need for continuous strategic adaptation. As NATO expands its reach with new members such as Finland and Sweden, it must ensure that its political cohesion, military capabilities, and strategic vision remain aligned with contemporary threats and challenges.

This article argues that NATO's strategic adaptation has evolved from a predominantly reactive model to a more proactive approach, particularly in the post-2014 security environment. This shift has been driven by the institutionalisation of foresight mechanisms and the adoption of innovation as a core strategic tool. The analysis explores how NATO's structures and strategies reflect this evolution and what it means for the Alliance's long-term resilience.

## **Paper's objectives, methodology and data**

The article examines NATO's capacity for strategic transformation and its ability to adapt to an evolving security environment. The research pursues two primary objectives: (1) to identify key changes that NATO has undergone since its founding, along with their causes and strategic context, and (2) to identify patterns and trends that reflect the scope and quality of NATO's adaptation and transformation efforts over time.

The analysis is guided by the hypothesis that NATO's adaptation model has increasingly adopted a proactive approach to strategic transformation, one that aims not only to respond to contingencies and crises but to actively shape and influence the future security environment before destabilising factors materialise.

Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative document analysis, focusing on official NATO policy documents, strategic concepts, planning frameworks (e.g. NDPP, NWCC, SFA), and relevant academic and institutional publications. The primary sources include materials from NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT), NATO headquarters, and publicly accessible strategic guidance issued between 2000 and 2024, with particular emphasis on developments following the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. These sources support not only the institutional and foresight-oriented analysis but also the historical analysis of NATO's transformation over time, allowing for the identification of key inflexion points and adaptation phases.

The research covers the period from NATO's founding in 1949 to 2024, with a particular emphasis on the post-2014 strategic environment marked by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The article applies a three-pronged analytical approach:

- A historical lens to trace NATO's evolution across defined strategic phases (Cold War, post-Cold War, post-2014, etc.);
- An institutional lens to assess policy mechanisms, planning structures, and capability development;
- A foresight-oriented lens to examine NATO's use of strategic anticipation, innovation, and long-term transformation planning.

This approach enables a structured assessment of how NATO's adaptation has evolved from a reactive posture to one driven by foresight and innovation embedded within institutional frameworks.

## **Transformation – theoretical framework**

Military transformation aims to equip the armed forces with the capabilities to protect the nation from unpredictable threats. It is important to recognise that transformation is not a simplistic idea or a fixed formula for change. Instead, it represents a commitment to innovative approaches to warfare and support for war-making forces (Asch & Hosek, 2004).

In the broadest sense, defence transformation includes the following areas (Williams, 2001):

- The transformation of military culture (patterns of behaviour and action) refers to the armed forces' leadership, management, administrative ethics, value systems, and the traditions upon which they are based. Some examples of this dimension of transformation include a stronger orientation towards modern technologies (informatics) in implementing business processes (e.g., the distribution of official documents and orders), as well as decentralisation of decision-making.
- Transformation in human resources - the composition of the military organisation according to the necessary competencies, skills, and training. It includes, for example, the development of leaders and intellectual capital and is most often related to education, training, and personnel management.
- Organisational transformation - typically a technocratic process that regulates the organisation's size, tends to achieve an optimal structure and optimises management processes.
- Capability transformation is generally part of long-term defence planning and must represent a thoughtful and analytical process that ultimately ensures the essential function of the armed forces.
- Doctrinal transformation implies creating and adopting new doctrinal and conceptual documents.

### *Defence transformation*

The common denominator of defence transformation is that it refers to a specific example of defence reform, which includes military innovation, emphasises changes in military organisation (structure, communication, command and control), technology or doctrine, and changes in orientation at the strategic level (e.g., expansion of operational domains, nation building vs. interventions, partnership establishment, etc.).

Transformation may also be considered a discontinuous change in defence policy not limited to a specific period or set of technologies. Its more important dimension is that it describes far-reaching changes in the country's defence policy and approach to the military. Transformation, as defined here, involves managing a series of changes in the defence sector, aiming to enhance the compatibility and relevance of the military instrument to achieve the objectives of the state's foreign and security policy in response to significant shifts in the international security environment.

Not all changes within the armed forces qualify as transformation. The transformation of military instruments of power is a unique phenomenon. It includes a policy change that promotes changes in the military organisation's goals, strategies and structure. This highlights the fundamental nature of the implemented change. Transformation refers to discontinuous, profound change (as needed), sometimes referred to as evolutionary change in military instrumentation. Unlike incremental (gradual) change, which only improves existing processes and systems, transformation represents qualitative changes in strategies, organisation (structure), procedures and efficiency measures for performing critical tasks (Stulberg & Salomone, 2016). At the same time, transformation does not only include developing and using new technologies. It represents fundamental and far-reaching changes in the military organisation's policies, concepts and functioning.

### *NATO specific transformation*

In NATO, the concept of transformation refers to a process of change aimed at gaining and maintaining a competitive advantage against potential adversaries, including eliminating deficiencies that are created by evolving challenges and threats in the future (NATO ACT, 2015).

In addition to structural change, which occurs only at the end of the process, transformation encompasses modernisation (capabilities), readiness improvement, interoperability, and sustainability. The significance of transformation for NATO members is already evident from the fact that the primary mission of one of the two strategic NATO commands, Allied Command Transformation, is to serve as the “architect” of the military capabilities that the Alliance needs to conduct ongoing operations and build readiness for responding to future security challenges.

However, there is no “collective” understanding of transformation. As a result, the change strategies of NATO member states varied considerably. In 2002, NATO member states committed to institutional reform to ensure the Alliance’s continued existence, which had been in place for over 50 years. This was in a changing security environment. Moreover, although all NATO member states agreed to implement the transformation, these defence reform initiatives were primarily shaped by changes in threat perceptions within the security environment and national strategic cultures.

NATO’s concept of transformation is not a singular goal but rather a continuous process. Transformation is perceived as imperative because, in a constantly evolving security environment, defence systems must adapt to change to remain relevant. Transformation within NATO is also crucial because it represents the fundamental means by which the Alliance strives to maintain cohesion and develop collective capabilities to address shared security threats.

Ideally, the defence transformation process should have provided an improved foundation for alliances in the 21st century. Instead, the diversity of transformation trajectories has become an expression of the fundamental difficulties that NATO faces in order to maintain alliance solidarity, especially in an age when NATO faces security threats that come from beyond the territorial borders of the Alliance and in other domains (cyber, space) rather than only “at home” (such as terrorism). For NATO, the beginning of the 21st century marked a growing trend of irregular warfare, followed by a period of hybrid warfare after 2014 (the Ukrainian crisis) and a return to interstate war after February 2022.

### *Active vs reactive strategic paradigms*

Traditional models of strategic adaptation tend to emphasise reactive responses to geopolitical shifts, strategic shocks, or emerging threats. This reactive paradigm has historically defined how military alliances, including NATO, adjust to changes in the security environment. However, in recent years, there has been a deliberate shift within NATO toward a more anticipatory approach to strategy. This evolution is grounded in the institutionalisation of strategic foresight and the integration of innovation-driven capability development into core strategic planning processes. Such developments support the hypothesis that NATO's adaptation model has increasingly adopted a proactive approach to adaptation, aiming not only to respond to crises but also to actively shape and influence the future security environment before destabilising factors materialise.

Strategic foresight initiatives, such as NATO's Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA), as well as frameworks like the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept and the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), illustrate this trend toward a forward-looking strategy. These internal shifts parallel broader trends seen across global institutions, where the practice of strategic foresight has gained significant traction. Organisations such as the United Nations, OECD, and the European Commission have adopted comprehensive foresight frameworks that align closely with NATO's approach.

For example, the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) defines strategic foresight as "*an organised, systematic way of looking beyond the expected to deal with uncertainty and complexity.*" It highlights its role in enabling "*effective emergent strategic planning in volatile and rapidly changing environments*" (UN CEPA, 2021). The OECD describes foresight as a method for "*exploring different plausible futures that might emerge, and the opportunities and challenges they might bring*". to make better decisions and act now. Similarly, the European Commission presents foresight as "*the discipline of exploring, anticipating, and shaping the future to help build and utilise collective intelligence in a structured and systematic way to anticipate developments*". It is, they argue, essential for "*preparing the EU to withstand shocks and shape the future we want*" (EU EC, 2022).

These shared definitions underscore a common understanding: that the future, while neither entirely predictable nor predetermined, can and should be systematically explored to reduce vulnerability to strategic shocks and support resilient, adaptive policymaking. NATO's incorporation of foresight into its long-term strategic planning reflects a broader recognition among international actors that proactive anticipation, rather than mere reaction, is essential to maintaining security and stability in an increasingly complex world.

### **Analysis of nato's transformation in perspectives**

This analysis examines how NATO has responded to challenges, threats, and opportunities in the evolving security environment. In the historical perspective paragraph, we examine NATO's evolution over time, primarily in response to geopolitical and security challenges. The strategic perspective examines NATO's strategy development and its characteristics in relation to the current and future security environment. Finally, in the context of strategic foresight, we analyse how NATO approaches scanning future horizons and shaping the future.

A critical dimension of transformation in NATO is that it extends beyond the military instruments of power. More importantly, transformation also occurs within the "political NATO." Since 2022, the security landscape in the Euro-Atlantic region has seen a resurgence of armed conflict in Europe alongside a range of disruptions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. The instabilities and challenges affecting Western economies, particularly in Europe, primarily stem from the lockdowns and supply-side disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The liberal world order, with its globalisation, allowed many nations to escape poverty and crises. However, it proved to be vulnerable in periods of crisis, such as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, due to the high interdependence of nations in the economy, particularly in sectors like energy and food. These developments also affect NATO as a security provider for almost 1 billion people in Europe and North America. However, this has not been the first time NATO has needed to adapt.

NATO evolves in response to new contexts and over time. It adjusts to changed circumstances by outlining its missions, tasks, strategies, concepts, and policies, consequently transforming its structure, organisation, and capabilities. NATO's cohesion, which is its central focus, stems from its core values of individual liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. However, relations among allies have not always been idyllic. The primary source of internal disagreements stemmed from differing transatlantic perspectives on strategic priorities, burden sharing (see Cornish, 1997; Cornish, 2004), and the transatlantic capability gap. Disagreements have occasionally escalated significantly. The first significant shock to alliance cohesion occurred in 1966 when President Charles de Gaulle withdrew France from NATO's integrated military command structure. De Gaulle sought to enhance France's military independence, particularly in relation to the United States. Nonetheless, NATO has consistently faced its internal challenges (Thies, 2009).

Furthermore, NATO has faced challenges defining its role in a post-Cold War world. Its member nations have often clashed over the extent of the alliance's commitments and individual responsibilities, which involved contribution to aggregate capabilities via national defence budgets. Accusations went against the USA for "*Washington's arrogant unilateralism that weakened NATO*" with the US intervention in Iraq in 2003 (Brzezinski, 2009) to European allies' lack of credibility, such as former US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates' warning of "*a dim if not dismal future*" for NATO unless more member nations scale up their participation in the alliance's activities (Shanker, 2011). The criticism also included narratives such as French President Emmanuel Macron's warning of Europe that NATO was becoming brain-dead (The Economist, 2019).

Despite its vigorous internal dynamics, NATO has always stayed resilient due to its core principles of solidarity, freedom, and democracy. That was not the case with its antagonist, the Warsaw Pact. As Angela Stent noted in her article published in *Foreign Affairs*, "*The Warsaw Pact was an alliance that had a unique track record: it invaded only its own members,*" referring to the Pact's interventions in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Stent, 2022).

NATO's relevance as a security provider is based on its deterrent capacity, stemming from its political and military instruments of power, as well as its collective defence pledge. Its strength also lies in its cohesion due to shared values and its ability to adapt through transformation.

### *Historical perspective*

NATO's political and military leadership has frequently hailed it as the most successful military alliance in history. Its success stems from its capacity to adapt and evolve in response to changes in its strategic context (Vergun, 2020) and overcome internal conflicts. Since 1949, NATO has consistently demonstrated this through the evolution of its mission and capabilities.

The history of NATO's transformation can be examined using several criteria and distinguished by the drivers of change that led to adaptation. We began by considering NATO's initial mission, "to keep Russia out, Germany down, and Americans in," which focuses on Russia (and the former Soviet Union). This approach seems particularly valid because NATO's destiny and purpose have been, and continue to be, in significant measure, closely tied to Russia.

For that purpose, we borrow Strobe Talbott's division of the three major phases: (1) the morphing of World War II into the Cold War, (2) the prospect of "Europe whole and free"; and (3) Russia's return to its predatory and authoritarian past (Talbott, 2019).

**1. The Cold War period.** Diego Palmer (2019) provides a detailed description of different NATO periods. He divides the Cold War period into five phases: (1) First steps (1949-1954), (2) Strengthening NATO (1954-1957), (3) The Berlin crisis: transition to Flexible Response (1957-1967), (4) False start: NATO's lost decade (1965-1975), and (5) NATO's strategic and operational renaissance (1975-1987).

During the Cold War, NATO concentrated primarily on collective defence and shielding its allies from potential threats posed by the Soviet Union. The nuclear arms race and large standing armies characterise this era. For example, when NATO leaders convened in Lisbon in 1952, the Alliance aimed to have 50 divisions ready to deter a Soviet attack (Time, 1952). By the

conclusion of the Cold War, NATO maintained approximately 170 divisions compared to 295 belonging to the Warsaw Pact (TFMD, 1988).

**2. The prospect of “Europe whole and free” (1990-2014).** This post-Cold War period could also be examined in several phases.

After the Cold War, NATO experienced its first significant transformation. Its centre of gravity shifted from confrontation to cooperation, from a military Alliance to a political one, from deterrence to protection against risks and the guarantee of stability, and from peacekeeping to peacebuilding. Furthermore, it transitioned from a US-led Alliance to a genuine partnership where Europeans played an equal leadership role.

In the immediate post-Cold War period following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, NATO faced a significant existential crisis. Scholars of realism and neorealism posited that NATO’s primary purpose of counterbalancing the Soviet threat had vanished, leading them to argue for its disbandment. Conversely, liberal scholars contended that NATO remained essential, even after the end of the bipolar world. They claimed that NATO embodies the shared values of the transatlantic community, enhancing the benefits of transatlantic cooperation. While seeking to address emerging threats, NATO evolved into an alliance dedicated to promoting values, principles, and democracy – elements that were urgently needed on the European continent at the time.

Former NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner expressed concern that removing nuclear weapons from European soil “*would not provide more security but less*” (Wörner, 1990). Nevertheless, he feared that the elimination of atomic weapons would render Europe vulnerable to nuclear blackmail and make conventional warfare feasible again.

During that period, some considered NATO a relic of the Cold War. Stanley Hoffmann wrote in 1981 in *Foreign Affairs* that the history of the Atlantic Alliance is a history of crises. He claimed it resulted from “*not simply an inevitable divergence of interests but dramatically different views of the world and priorities*” (Hoffmann, 1981). NATO Public Diplomacy published a series of debates from 2003 to 2004, discussing the pros and cons of Euro-Atlantic

security options (NATO PD, 2004). The pessimism was apparent and went so far that some scholars like François Heisbourg (in the debate with Steve Larrabee), sensing a general loss of unity and purpose in NATO, said that *“invocation of Article 5 would be difficult to recreate, so great has been the growth of transatlantic disaffection”* (NATO PD, 2004:p.33).

In the early 1990s, NATO’s function evolved, transforming into a framework for stabilising an unexpectedly volatile geopolitical landscape in Central and Eastern Europe (Brzezinski, 2009). Additionally, NATO contributed to resolving the ethnic conflicts in the former Social Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, marking the first instance of NATO’s involvement outside its territory.

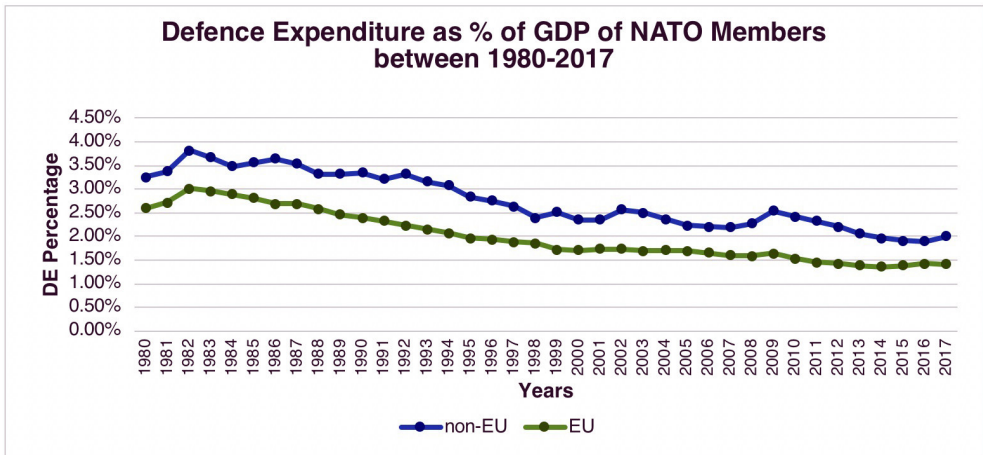


Figure 1: Information on Defence Expenditures (Source: SIPRI, 2018).

The post-Cold War period was also one of “strategic optimism” that highly impacted defence expenditure among NATO members. Allies generally decreased their defence expenditures in favour of peace dividends<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> “The peace dividend is the economic benefit that was expected in the world after the end of the Cold War, as a result of money previously spent on defence and arms becoming available for other purposes.” (Collins English Dictionary, 2024)

**The post-9/11 period** was marked by NATO almost completely engaged beyond Euro-Atlantic territory. This period is characterised by the flexibility to deploy forces as and where required, whether for operations in the Sahel or Afghanistan, combating forest fires, or constructing emergency hospitals for COVID-19 patients locally.

A strong focus on coherence in capability development characterises this period. In April 2009, NATO adopted the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) framework model, and in June 2009, defence ministers approved its implementation and transition plan. The NDPP (NATO, 2022) provides a defined methodology to link the political and military strategic levels into a standardised, functionally cohesive defence planning approach. This process follows an integrated five-step method over a four-year cycle. The NDPP is designed to help NATO meet its ambitious capability development objectives and ensure all necessary resources are available. Thus, step 3 of five is crucial, as it entails allocating commitments among allies. In this distribution process, the political principles of equitable burden sharing and reasonable challenge are applied to determine each ally's Capability Target package.

NATO also strongly emphasised innovation as the decade of the 2010s ended. NATO focused on the institutionalisation of innovation and its adoption into organisational culture. Institutionalisation comprises different efforts, from establishing the Innovation Hub and Lab in NATO ACT and the NATO Innovation Board at NATO HQ to the Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA). NATO also changed the organisation's culture and mindset towards looking at novel ideas and fostering their adoption. It also secured support for changes that would help NATO innovate. This aspect of innovation is specific as it aims to inspire innovation from the bottom up, in addition to a defence industrial innovation that goes top down, from producer to customer.

### **3. Russia's return to its predatory and authoritarian past.**

**The post-Ukrainian crisis 2014 period** (2014 - 2022) signalled the need to develop "hard power" (i.e., conventional warfare) defence capabilities. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, along with the emergence and

decline of ISIL (RAND, 2024), highlighted the urgent need to sustain robust conventional military capabilities. However, hybrid warfare and “grey zone warfare” also continued to play a significant role. These notable shifts in the strategic landscape prompted the Alliance to enhance its deterrence and defense posture. Consequently, in 2006, NATO member states agreed to allocate at least 2% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defense, aiming to meet this target by the decade’s end.

**The Russian invasion of Ukraine 2022-? period** (currently underway) reaffirmed Carl von Clausewitz’s principles of war (the nature of war) and made them relevant again today. This also increased the importance of NATO’s military side. NATO Military Authorities and military leadership are vital in strategic and defence planning. They provide their best military advice to the political level, ultimately allowing NATO to maintain its advantage.

During the varied historical periods, NATO adapted its capabilities and expanded its mission from purely collective defence to crisis response and collaborative security. These adaptations also included different mechanisms, such as partnering with non-NATO members and non-governmental organisations.

NATO is still the strongest political-military alliance in the world. It remains attractive to “newcomers,” comprising four out of six former Yugoslav Republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia), with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia currently not members, as Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the Membership Action Plan phase. Finland and Sweden became full NATO members in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

### *Institutional perspective*

NATO transformation is institutionalised. Although the NATO Defence Planning Process is the most tangible driver of transformation, it is consistently guided by policy-level decisions and documents. The development of Strategic Concepts, NATO summits, NATO defence and foreign affairs ministers’ meetings (e.g., DEFMIN, FORMIN), and sessions at the Military Committee level comprise NATO’s “battle rhythm,” which drives and guides adaptation coherently.

From 1949 to the present, NATO has adopted eight strategic concepts. The first four were adopted during the Cold War and were primarily based on deterrence and collective defence. As the Cold War waned, there was an increasing emphasis on dialogue and détente. From 1991 to the present, four strategic concepts have been adopted in 1991, 1999, 2010, and 2022. They responded to the geopolitical and security context in which the Alliance found itself at a specific historical juncture. The institutional character of developing strategic concepts, approximately every 10 years since 1991, has not necessarily been aligned with the reality of what happened on the ground.

The most “dramatic” challenge emerged in 2014, with the so-called Ukraine crisis, where aggressive Russian behaviour and a potential threat to Europe’s east had become apparent. Along with the challenges of the high-intensity conflict, the NATO environment has been characterised by some other features:

- Blurred lines of conflict between peace, crisis and war and the blurring of the reality of forward and rear (hybrid warfare, war in grey zone). Additionally, there is a systemic competition that compels NATO to be on the front line at all times<sup>3</sup>.
- The extension of conflict into new domains where physical borders become irrelevant, such as Cyber,
- Space or Information sphere, but also the cognitive warfare;
- Combination of effects in these domains;
- Multiplication of non-state actors in the theatres;
- The acceleration of time in the infosphere directly influences decision-making.

The challenges described above suggest that the myth of “strategic stability” must instead give way to the recognition of a perpetual “real-time corrected instability” or what Sean McFate calls “durable disorder” (McFate, 2019).

Regarding Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, NATO’s main challenge was to eliminate concerns about its strength and dedication to

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3 See, for example, the concept of unrestricted warfare at: Liang & Xiangsui, 1999.

collective defence. This is addressed in the Strategic Concept 2022, which sets the strategic direction for the alliance until 2030. NATO's response to the military threat posed by Russia reflects the need to address challenges arising from China's strategic activities. The threat from China stretches US military resources, while its technological capabilities expose vulnerabilities. This highlights the need for European NATO members to bolster their defence commitments. However, the effectiveness of this initiative, which relies on the support of European allies, is hindered by the pressures on European defence and resilience due to backing Ukraine.

NATO is a composite of nations and allies because they provide forces, and the aggregation of their capabilities form NATO's capabilities. However, NATO also has its headquarters and a permanent command and Force Structure. This unique organisation allows for a focus on two main domains: operations (warfighting) and transformation (warfighting development). Allied Command Transformation is among NATO's two strategic commands, tasked with shaping the Alliance's long-term military capabilities. This vision is articulated through the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC). The Concept outlines an aspirational "North Star" vision that guides NATO Allies in evolving their militaries to ensure superiority over the next two decades (NATO ACT, 2021).

NWCC is a new concept endorsed in 2021. It is unique because no similar concepts of this type have existed before in NATO. NWCC, together with the 2020 Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area, represents a tool to operationalise the NATO Military Strategy, which was endorsed in 2019. It is also unique in that it does not reflect a fixed future vision but a concept of how NATO should proceed to achieve its strategic military objectives. In terms of its adaptability and flexibility, it is designed to respond to changes in the strategic environment as it evolves. This flexibility is exercised through the Concept's implementation plan, the Warfare Development Agenda (WDA).

The NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept is informed by threats that are based on both risk and opportunity. This enhances the NATO Defence Planning Process, ensuring cohesion and coherence in the development of

Alliance capabilities. As a living document, the Concept promotes continuous practical application. Its implementation benefits from drawing lessons daily, conducting experiments, harnessing data and new technologies, and developing an ecosystem—a network—of partners, including nations, academia, and industry. With this approach, NATO experts can gain a deeper understanding of the operating environment, enabling them to anticipate challenges and opportunities while maintaining their technological edge.

With NWCC (NATO ACT, 2021), NATO changes the paradigm of the security context from “peace-crisis-conflict” (i.e., linear escalation) to “shaping-contesting-fighting” (i.e., proactive and anticipatory response to threats). NATO considers itself a defensive alliance, viewing armed conflict as a last resort. That is what NATO adversaries are trying to avoid; that is why hybrid warfare emerged—to circumvent NATO’s conventional military superiority. Competition occurs in the shaping and contesting dimension, and hybrid warfare could be seen as a tool adversaries use to shape the security context. Even though NWCC is forward-looking, the war in Ukraine did not undermine its assumptions and guidelines. However, it seems rather compelling to implement it as soon as possible. The institutionalisation of foresight through ACT’s Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA) represents a turning point in NATO’s strategic culture, shifting from a reactive approach to past threats to one of anticipating future challenges. This supports the hypothesis that NATO’s adaptation model is increasingly proactive and innovation-driven.

Finally, the “institutional” NATO is intended to reflect the “NATO of values.” No structure can keep an alliance together without the glue of values. Cohesion is and will remain the Alliance’s centre of gravity. Therefore, as far as the Alliance’s future is concerned, it will depend heavily on the USA. Any future US administration may opt for one of three options: withdrawal (of the USA), the status quo, or a genuine internal rebalancing of the Alliance that puts the Europeans at the centre. Still, they would have to want it and try to get it. Although less likely than not, the potential US withdrawal exists. The US President, Donald Trump, considered that possibility during his first presidential campaign and, later, privately (Barnes & Cooper, 2019). The EU has an appetite for building its strategic autonomy, which entails reducing

its dependence on other countries, particularly the USA, in strategically significant policy areas (EU EP, 2022).

### *Future anticipation perspective*

One specific challenge that emerged after the Cold War was the phenomenon of strategic surprise. The events in the global security environment after 2001 compelled NATO's leaders, particularly its military authorities, to recognize that simple adaptation in a reactive mode was insufficient. NATO began to require greater anticipation and involvement in shaping the future environment to maintain peace in the Euro-Atlantic area.

NATO Military Authorities introduced strategic foresight as a systemic effort relatively recently. NATO Allied Command Transformation published the first Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA) Report in 2013, with updates provided in 2015, 2017 and 2023 (NATO ACT, 2024), resulting in wholly revised versions. The SFA is envisaged as an iterative process that is updated regularly.

The SFA report identifies trends shaping the future strategic context by analysing five broad themes: Politics, People, Technology, Economy/Resources and Environment. This analysis aims to derive defence and security implications for the Alliance. Although each impact is identified under a single theme, they are not mutually exclusive. The SFA assumes that several accelerating trends could interact unpredictably, increasing complexity with unknown consequences and implications.

The development of the Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA) is based on the understanding that the future is neither entirely predictable nor predetermined. Nevertheless, foresight serves as a critical tool for anticipating potential disruptions and reducing the likelihood of strategic surprises. NATO member states recognise the importance of continuous monitoring and analysis of the global security environment in order to build a shared understanding of emerging trends. This collective awareness forms the foundation for coordinated planning and action, enabling the Alliance to shape its strategic posture in a proactive manner.

It is not surprising that NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT) initiated the SFA process. NATO is responsible for leading the military transformation of the Alliance and developing capabilities to meet future defence and security challenges. ACT needed to create an enduring ability to provide future military assessments, perspectives, and advice to accomplish this task. Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA) directly supports and informs the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) and other forward-looking processes in the ACT's portfolio. The SFA builds on the principles described in the Strategic Concept NATO to pave the way for Alliance security in the future. The SFA is developed through the collective effort of all Allies. By sharing their perspectives, they aim to achieve a shared understanding of future challenges and opportunities.

NATO ACT develops strategic foresight by identifying trends (i.e. threats and opportunities) and defence and security implications identified through in-depth academic studies and extensive stakeholder consultations. This community comprises representatives from NATO and partner nations, NATO headquarters, NATO command structures and agencies, NATO centres of excellence, universities, think tanks, and research centres. The process is generally open to a broader community and individuals with expertise and interest in future trends and their implications for the security environment and the development of the future military power tool. The fundamental principles guiding these meetings are inclusivity and transparency, achieved through open collaboration and discussion.

Strategic foresight represents a significant shift in NATO's strategic culture, making the Alliance more determined to anticipate the future rather than react to it. This "future orientation" is reflected in the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (preparation for future wars) and the NATO Defence Planning Process (capability development).

Regarding SFA methodology, two traditions of future studies can be distinguished in the West. The first is the American school from which the term Strategic Foresight was derived, and the second is the French school called *La prospective*. The two traditions share the principle that "*humans have the will and capacity to influence the future to favour the desirable*" and that

*“this capacity creates a moral obligation to reflect upon the future and its possible paths”* (Godet & Durance, 2011). The difference between the two schools lies in the fact that the French integrate more critical actors into shaping the future, such as society, politics, and management. In contrast, due to their different roots, Americans focus primarily on technological changes and forecasting methods, which were developed mainly in a military milieu. In that regard, NATO’s SFA reflects more principles of the French school. That is unsurprising because most allies are European, and Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (who heads NATO ACT) has been a post occupied by the French general since 2009.

## Discussion and synthesis

*“So a military force has no constant formation, water has no constant shape: the ability to gain victory by changing and adapting according to the opponent is called genius.”*

Sun Tzu, “The Art of War” (Tzu, 2000)

The findings of this paper support the hypothesis that **NATO has undergone a strategic evolution from a reactive security alliance to a proactive and future-oriented organisation**. Through foresight mechanisms like the SFA and capability frameworks such as the NDPP and NWCC, NATO is not merely responding to emerging threats but actively shaping the future security environment.

Evidence from the analysis of the historical perspective:

- Cold War: NATO responded to the Soviet threat through collective defence and deterrence.
- Post-Cold War: Shift to crisis management and peacebuilding (e.g., Balkans).
- Post-9/11: Operations beyond the Euro-Atlantic area (Afghanistan, Sahel).
- Post-2014: Focus on resilience, hybrid warfare, innovation, defence planning.
- Post-2022: Return to conventional warfare, along with enhanced foresight and coordination.

These phases demonstrate that NATO evolves in response to systemic changes; however, the period post-2014 marks a qualitative transformation. The shift is no longer just about reacting to crises but about building capacity and political will to anticipate threats and maintain strategic cohesion across domains, including cyber, space, and hybrid. The addition of Sweden and Finland further proves NATO's continued relevance and strategic appeal amid geopolitical uncertainty.

Evidence from the institutional perspective:

- Establishment of NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) in 2009.
- Alignment of capability targets among Allies.
- Use of NWCC to set a "North Star" vision of future capabilities.

NATO has institutionalised coherent and collective defence planning, moving beyond national silos. Through the NDPP and NWCC, the Alliance defines future operational requirements before the threats fully materialise. This underscores NATO's shift to a proactive strategic culture, aiming to shape capability development in a unified, forward-looking manner.

Evidence from strategic foresight and innovation initiatives are the following:

- NATO established Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA) starting in 2013, regularly updated in 2015, 2017 and 2023, led by Allied Command Transformation (ACT).
- Introduction of NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC) in 2021.
- Creation of innovation-focused structures like the Innovation Hub, DIANA, and the NATO Innovation Board.
- Emphasis on bottom-up innovation culture, not only top-down industrial innovation.
- Use of foresight to shape rather than react to the security environment.

These initiatives demonstrate an explicit institutional commitment to long-term, anticipatory planning. Rather than waiting to respond to emerging threats, NATO now systematically scans the strategic horizon and builds capabilities to prepare for plausible future scenarios. This reflects a paradigm shift from reactive adaptation (post-crisis) to proactive shaping (pre-crisis).

It also demonstrates that NATO's transformation is no longer *ad hoc* but rather embedded in formal structures and planning cycles. The summary of key indicators are shown below (Table 1)

**Table 1. Key indicators supporting the hypothesis of NATO's proactive strategic transformation**

<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Interpretation (in supporting hypothesis)</b>
SFA, NWCC, ACT-led foresight efforts	NATO is embedding foresight to anticipate rather than react.
Strategic concepts, phases of adaptation (from Cold War to post-Ukraine war)	NATO evolves both structurally and conceptually in response to changing threats.
NDPP and capability development frameworks	Proactive, integrated planning replaces fragmented national responses.
Innovation structures (DIANA, Innovation Board)	NATO promotes innovation as a core enabler of strategic agility.
Expansion with Finland & Sweden	NATO remains adaptive and attractive in times of threat.

Source: own

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

It can be said that the success of NATO as a security provider over the past 75 years is mainly due to its adaptability. NATO has adapted, changed, and evolved. The most distinctive aspect of its adaptations is NATO transformations observable in the six following trends:

- from a predominantly military to a post-Cold War political-military alliance (e.g. enlargements, introduction of cooperative security in its mission),
- from reaction (to strategic shocks) to anticipation of challenges and threats (through strategic foresight introduced in 2013), i.e. the evolution from a reactive to a proactive paradigm,

- from status quo power (e.g., defending the post-war order) to shaping the environment (with partners that include nations that do not belong to NATO, industry, academia, etc.),
- from massive and robust (nuclear and conventional) to agile and resilient (e.g. multi-domain)
- from the contribution of national armed forces to coherent (i.e., “cross-alliance”) capability development (including interoperability and the introduction of the NATO Defence Planning Process in 2009),
- from a defence industry customer to an active innovation, science and technology, and capability development stakeholder.

Ensuring security in the Euro-Atlantic area necessitates ongoing and continuous adaptation by NATO. NATO’s evolution through transformation and adaptation exhibits increasing trends towards closer collaboration, the coherent development of the military instrument of power, outreach to broader types of partners (including industry and academia), and greater agility in shaping the future and anticipating its developments.

Transformation has not often been praised as a primary contributor to strategic brilliance (to paraphrase Sun Tzu), but its value cannot be underestimated. This capacity to adapt and change should also be maintained at the national level. The current strategic environment, which is complex and time-constrained and is expected to become even more complex, will pressure defence and security organisations to exercise enhanced agility, including the ability to adapt and transform. Continuous transformation requires not only well-designed processes and systems but also, often, cultural shifts focused on mindset change. As a result, transformation demands dedication, commitment, and solid intellectual capital. NATO dedicated one of the two strategic commands (i.e. Supreme Allied Command Transformation, Norfolk, VA, USA) to fulfilling a transformational mission.

As NATO (hopefully) continues to evolve into a more proactive and innovation-focused alliance, its member states will need to adapt their national policies and strategic cultures accordingly. The following implications highlight some of the practical considerations and adjustments that governments may take into account:

1. National defence strategies need to evolve alongside NATO's transformation. Member states should ensure that their own defence reforms and military planning align with NATO's broader strategic direction. This means moving beyond threat response approaches to build capabilities that anticipate and shape future security challenges. Greater interoperability, multi-domain readiness, and agility should be central to national defence strategies.
2. Investing in emerging technologies is no longer optional. Suppose NATO wants to remain relevant in maintaining a technological edge. In that case, member countries must contribute to this effort by prioritising investment in key areas, such as cyber defence, artificial intelligence, space technologies, and autonomous systems. These are not just future priorities - they are already shaping the current security landscape.
3. Foresight should be a shared responsibility. Strategic foresight, long seen as a NATO-level function, should be mirrored within national systems. Governments should consider developing dedicated foresight organisational units (teams) within their defence establishments that can engage directly with NATO's Allied Command Transformation and contribute meaningfully to collective horizon scanning and future planning.
4. Rethinking burden sharing. The 2% GDP target remains important (as proof of the political will), but it should not be the only measure of commitment. Contributions to innovation, leadership in planning initiatives, or support for new NATO projects, such as DIANA or the Innovation Board, are equally critical. A more nuanced understanding of "burden sharing" would allow for fairer and more effective contributions across the Alliance.
5. Tapping into civilian expertise and innovation ecosystems. NATO's approach to innovation increasingly involves collaboration with science and academia, private sector actors, and think tanks. Member states should facilitate similar partnerships in their countries, integrating civilian expertise into defence planning and capability development. This helps foster the kind of bottom-up innovation that can complement NATO's top-down frameworks.

6. Communicating NATO's evolving role to the public. As NATO expands its role into less traditional areas, such as hybrid threats, information warfare, and cognitive security, member states need to bring their citizens along. Clear, transparent communication about NATO's missions and the rationale behind defence investments will be essential for maintaining public trust and democratic legitimacy.

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## Sažetak

*Relevantnost NATO-a proizlazi iz njegovih političkih i vojnih instrumenata moći. Dugovječnost i uspjeh Sjevernoatlantskog saveza temelje se na njegovoj važnosti i koheziji, koje su ukorijenjene u temeljnim vrijednostima te sposobnosti prilagodbe i transformacije.*

*Od osnutka NATO-a, prilagodljivost je njegova ključna osobina. Savez prilagođava svoje zadaće, misije, organizaciju i vojne sposobnosti. Štoviše, od 2003. godine, s osnivanjem Zapovjedništva za transformaciju (Allied Command Transformation), Savez sustavno transformira svoj vojni instrument moći kako bi poboljšao njegovu učinkovitost.*

*Članak istražuje kontinuiranu transformaciju NATO-a kao sveobuhvatan i neprekidan proces prilagodbe, identificirajući obrasce i trendove koji odražavaju njegovu temeljitu promjenu i evoluciju. Koristi se trostrukom analitičkom prizmom: povijesnom, institucionalnom i orijentiranom na budućnost. Analizom dokumenata i politika, studija identificira šest ključnih trendova transformacije.*

*Ovaj članak doprinosi razumijevanju evoluirajuće strateške kulture NATO-a, naglašavajući njegov pomak prema proaktivnom planiranju, institucionalnom predviđanju i inovacijama kao alatima za otpornost.*

## Ključne riječi

*NATO, transformacija, prilagodba, sigurnosno okruženje*