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## Developing an enduring role for NATO's fight against terrorism

Seth Loertscher, Connor Ingleson, Andrew Fonseca, Tova Norlen, Thomas Renard, Alex Gallo and Rob Stephenson

### ABSTRACT

As NATO drafts its next Strategic Concept, it faces a persistent and more diverse threat from terrorism than when the 2010 Strategic Concept was written. In addition, the Alliance faces greater threats from geopolitical competition, leading to its member states shifting resources away from the fight against terrorism. In drafting of the next Strategic Concept, NATO must continue to prioritize the development of an enduring and sustainable approach to maintain its focus on terrorist threats. This essay argues that a sustainable and enduring approach to fighting terrorism requires NATO to adopt three key tasks (1) improving the Alliance's defensive capabilities, (2) maintaining its ability to respond to crises and (3) focusing on intelligence sharing. In order to ensure this approach is sustainable for the Alliance, NATO must implement these key tasks by focusing on and integrating terrorism within NATO policy and increasing collaboration with allies and multinational partners.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Since 2010 when NATO last drafted its Strategic Concept, the threat from terrorism has both persisted and become more diverse. At the same time, concerns about geopolitical competition have diluted the resources allocated against the terrorist threat. As NATO drafts the 2022 Strategic Concept, it will have to address this dichotomy and, ultimately, develop an enduring approach to fighting terrorism. To do this, NATO should adopt three key tasks (1) improving the Alliance's defensive capabilities, (2) maintaining its ability to respond to crises and (3) focusing on intelligence sharing. In order to ensure this approach is sustainable for the Alliance and its member states, NATO must implement these key tasks by focusing on and integrating terrorism within NATO policy and increasing collaboration with allies and multinational partners.

### The persistent and diverse threat from terrorism

When the 2010 Strategic Concept was written, the primary terrorist threat came from a single, largely diminished, jihadi threat network: al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. Despite operating in numerous conflict regions, these jihadi groups were under pressure from Western-led counterterrorism efforts and relatively few safe havens existed (Szrom and Harnisch 2011). Despite the continued aspirations of jihadi groups to attack the West, relatively few attacks occurred within NATO member states. Two attacks that year

directed or supported by these groups<sup>1</sup> failed from poor execution or disruption (Savage 2010; EUROPOL 2011). Individual actors motivated by jihadism, were marginally more successful, carrying out three explosive attacks in Western countries, but no one was killed, aside from one of the perpetrators (EUROPOL 2011). Furthermore, extreme far-right and far-left groups were not considered a significant threat at the time (EUROPOL 2011).

As the 2022 Strategic Concept is being drafted, the situation has changed significantly. While terrorist attacks within the West are currently at relative lows, the threat from terrorism persists. Jihadi threats have diversified, with two global jihadi networks, led by al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State, still aiming to strike the West (Clark 2021). As pressure from Western-led counterterrorism efforts ebbs, some al-Qa`ida and Islamic State affiliates are gaining strength, especially in conflict regions (Bacon and Warner 2021; Lister 2021). The areas controlled by jihadi groups have expanded, increasing the risk for safe havens where plots against the West can be formed (Lister 2021). In addition to directed attacks, NATO's member states are also now vulnerable to attacks conducted by "home-grown" groups inspired or facilitated by transnational groups or ideologies (EUROPOL 2021). Additionally, since 2017 the threat from far-right and far-left groups has risen to levels higher than that of jihadi groups (Institute for Economics & Peace 2022).

Finally, the long-term consequences of conflict, economic inequality, displacement, and climate change have worsened the global conditions and increased risk factors that make societies and communities more vulnerable to terrorist radicalization and recruitment. Some of the most vulnerable societies are fragile or conflict-affected states, including the Sahel, Central Asia/Afghanistan, and the Horn of Africa.

### **A dilution of resources**

Geopolitical competition is a larger threat today than it was when the 2010 Strategic Concept was written, and as a result, many of NATO's member states have begun shifting resources from counterterrorism toward these priorities (Jenkins 2020). These shifts in defense priorities will have major impacts on the fight against terrorism. First, as mentioned above, there has been a reduction in Western-led counterterrorism campaigns. The U.S. withdrawals from Afghanistan and Somalia and the French withdrawal from Mali indicate that in the current climate Western nations are no longer willing to bear the brunt of the fight against terrorism (Jenkins 2020). Efforts to maintain counterterrorism pressure from "over the horizon" have led some to worry that efforts to contain jihadi groups are "backsliding" (Demirjian 2022). Second, shifts in resources away from counterterrorism are also likely to impact the intelligence communities of NATO's member states, potentially decreasing their ability to detect plots, attacks, and emerging threats against their national security and overseas interests. Finally, the reduction of focus on terrorism within defense spending is also likely to reduce the infrastructure and capabilities required for NATO military forces to respond to overseas crises.

## **An enduring and sustainable approach**

To navigate the dichotomy between a persistent and more diverse threat from terrorist groups and a dilution of resources allocated toward counterterrorism, NATO must develop an enduring approach to continuing the fight against terrorism that is sustainable for the Alliance's member states. The 2022 Strategic Concept will be critical for that purpose. To do this, NATO should adopt measures to improve its defensive capabilities, maintain its ability to respond to crises, and focus on intelligence sharing as key tasks in the fight against terrorism. To implement them sustainably NATO should focus on and integrate responding to terrorism within NATO policy and increase partnership with allies and multinational partners.

### ***Improving NATO's defenses against terrorism***

Reductions in counterterrorism pressure and intelligence collection are likely make NATO's member states more vulnerable to terrorist attacks in the long-term. To mitigate this, the Alliance should seek to improve the Alliance's defenses against terrorist attacks. Defending against terrorist attacks is primarily a national responsibility and, thus, not a role that NATO has traditionally filled (Santamato, Stefano with Marie-Theres Beumler 2013). Despite this, shifts in the security situation require NATO to expand its involvement in strengthening the Alliance's defenses against terrorist attacks. Border security, screening and vetting, and information sharing between domestic law enforcement agencies are all areas where NATO should increase support.

In addition, NATO should increase the defense of its own forces against potential terrorist attacks. The rise of far-right and far-left extremism creates the possibility that NATO forces and installations within NATO member states will increasingly be targets for terrorist attacks (Roberts 2021). Radicalization of members of their armed forces, as well, have increasingly become an issue for NATO member states (Koehler 2019). To mitigate these threats, NATO should increase its investment in anti-terrorism, force protection, and against the threat of insider attacks as well as strengthening safeguards against extremism in the military.

### ***Maintaining NATO's ability to respond to crises***

The persistent and diverse threat from terrorist groups seeking to target NATO's member states will require the Alliance to maintain the capability to disrupt terrorist groups, respond to terrorist attacks and emerging threats, and recover citizens taken hostage by terrorist groups. While the 9/11 attacks and the resultant counterterrorism campaigns served as a catalyst for the development of special operations forces (SOF) within NATO's member states (Loertscher et al. 2021), a dilution of those capabilities will have a significant impact on the Alliance's ability to undertake its core task of crisis response. In light of the conflict surrounding geopolitical competition, NATO is likely to continue to advance the capabilities and interoperability of Allied SOF. While many SOF capabilities are applicable to both geopolitical competition and counterterrorism (Loertscher et al. 2021), some counterterrorism contingencies will require specialized

responses. Allied SOF and the NATO Alliance have the resources, capability, and capacity to address both geopolitical competition and counterterrorism crises. Despite the focus on geopolitical competition, NATO must continue investing in Allied SOF's counterterrorism capabilities to maintain its ability to respond to emerging counterterrorism crises.

### ***Focusing on intelligence sharing***

Developing effective counterterrorism intelligence is a resource-heavy endeavor (Duncan 2020). With diluted resources, NATO's member states may struggle to develop the intelligence required to assess which terrorist threats should be national security priorities. While NATO has developed a "seemingly unique strategic information-sharing role" in its response to the fight against terrorism (Bird 2015), it should redouble its efforts to support member states and partners by synthesizing the intelligence capabilities of its members to develop integrated threat assessments and better share the "burden" of counterterrorism intelligence across the Alliance.

In addition, NATO must also recognize that "you get the intelligence and warning you prepare for" (Duncan 2020). Previous efforts to strengthen information sharing and threat assessments as part of the fight against terrorism (Gordon 2017) may not be effective in today's vastly different security environment. NATO must ensure its intelligence capabilities are appropriately postured to meet the contemporary and emerging threat of terrorism.

### ***Focusing on and integrating terrorism across NATO policy***

In order to accomplish these key tasks, NATO must fully integrate its approach to fighting terrorism across its core tasks – collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security (de Maizière et al. 2020). In the 2010 Strategic Concept, terrorism was mentioned as part of the security environment and only in relation to the core task of collective defense (NATO 2010). To prevent increasing the Alliance's vulnerability to terrorism due to the current geostrategic shift, NATO must set the tone for its member states by continuing to focus on terrorism throughout the Strategic Concept. Supporting member state efforts to defend against terrorist attacks, mitigate the impact of those attacks, support partners to fight terrorism, and respond to emerging threats must play a key role throughout all NATO's core tasks. Policy alone, however, is not enough to reduce the threat from the contemporary terrorist environment (Estelle 2022). The policies outlined in the 2022 Strategic Concept must lead to action, whether in strengthening the Alliance's defenses, building robust information-sharing capabilities or enhancing partnerships. Especially important are efforts to stabilize fragile and conflict affected regions.

### ***Partnering with allies and multinational partners***

One of NATO's key principals in its concept for counterterrorism is the need to avoid duplication of existing efforts (NATO 2015). As resources are further constrained, this will become increasingly important. NATO must seek to partner with other allies and multinational bodies with aligned interests whose capabilities and resources can mitigate the Alliance's need to rebalance toward geopolitical competition.

In addition, many of the measures necessary to reduce the threat of terrorist attacks can be better accomplished in conjunction with other entities. Partnership with the European Union (EU), for instance, is critical for the Alliance to undertake efforts such as increasing border security or improving resilience, which are primarily national responsibilities (Santamato, Stefano with Marie-Theres Beumler 2013). While partnership with the EU on counterterrorism can be challenging (Kaunert and Wertman 2019), NATO should build on recent advancements in the relationship (Bird 2019) to develop robust partnership mechanisms. Similarly, NATO should increase investment in partnerships with other countries and regional multinational bodies engaged in the fight against terrorism within local contexts, especially in vulnerable regions. In order to avoid duplication, the Alliance should also seek to integrate the efforts of its member states in providing security and economic assistance to these regions, while also supporting conflict mitigation.

Despite the shift toward geopolitical competition, terrorism will remain a persistent threat to the NATO alliance, one that is more diverse than it was when the 2010 Strategic Concept was drafted. In drafting the 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO must ensure that the Alliance remains aware of the threat. This includes developing an enduring approach to fighting terrorism, centered on defending the Alliance from attacks, maintaining its ability to respond to crises, and sharing intelligence on terrorist threats across the Alliance. In order to ensure sustainability, NATO must focus on broad implementation across the Strategic Concept while also forging robust partnerships with allies and multinational bodies whose interests in the fight against terrorism align with that of the Alliance's. If NATO fails to address counterterrorism in the 2022 Strategic Concept it would signal to NATO's member states that the Alliance is no longer concerned with fighting terrorism, leading to a further dilution in counterterrorism resources that will ultimately increase the Alliance's vulnerability to future attacks.

Seth Loertscher is a Research Associate at the Combating Terrorism Center and an Instructor in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy.

Connor Ingleson is a former officer in the U.S. Army and a research intern at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

Andrew Fonseca is an officer in the U.S. Army and a former cadet in the Combating Terrorism Center's Terrorism Studies Minor.

Dr. Tova Norlen is the Professor of Counterterrorism and International Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Issues.

Dr. Thomas Renard is the Director of the International Centre for Countering-Terrorism (ICCT).

Mr. Alex Gallo is the Executive Director of the Common Mission Project.

Brigadier Rob Stephenson OBE (GBR-A) is the Deputy Commander of NATO Special Operations Headquarters.

## Note

1. In 2010, Faisal Shahzad, a Pakistani born naturalized citizen who was trained in a Pakistani Taliban camp, attempted to detonate a car bomb in New York City's Times Square. The bomb, however, failed to explode and was discovered and disarmed (Savage 2010). That same year, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula disguised two bombs in packages containing printer toner cartridges shipped to Chicago intending to detonate the bombs in midair over

the United States. The plot was uncovered through intelligence shared by Saudi Arabia before the bombs were enroute to the United States and both bombs were located and disarmed (Mark et al. 2010).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Seth Loertscher* is a Research Associate at the Combating Terrorism Center and an Instructor in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy.

*Connor Ingleson* is a former officer in the U.S. Army and a research intern at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Po

*Andrew Fonseca* is an officer in the U.S. Army and a former cadet in the Combating Terrorism Center's Terrorism Studies Minor.

*Dr. Tova Norlen* is the Professor of Counterterrorism and International Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Issues.

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*Mr. Alex Gallo* is the Executive Director of the Common Mission Project.

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