

Balancing Conventional and Hybrid Threats in (Future) State Competition

Potential policy pitfalls stemming from the Ukrainian conflict

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Much attention has been drawn in latest years to the increasing challenges posed by ‘hybrid threats’, and the question how to deter them. The events in Ukraine have prompted NATO allies to accelerate the expansion of their military capabilities to deter further Russian aggression, resulting in an increased political will to reinforce conventional deterrence. While we are certainly in favour of strengthening a long neglected defence, this paper aims to point out some pitfalls in policymaking, associated with the blindly adapting of the (future) force generation process to the events in Ukraine. The course of the conflict, and the consequences that stem from it should prompt us to reflect more thoroughly on the security challenges Western countries are most likely to face.

WESTERN RESPONSES TO THE RAPID CHANGING THREAT ENVIRONMENT

Western states clearly struggled with the question how to respond to a fast evolving security environment, mainly following the 2014 Ukrainian-Russian conflict. The increasing use of cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and attempts to sharpen political polarisation gave rise to wide discussions and conceptual thinking on the role of non-violent instruments in contemporary state competition, and more importantly: how to respond to them.

Responding decisively to these types of threats is challenging. Some important steps have certainly been taken: the creation of specialized international and

national institutions¹, agreeing on important concepts, such as ‘resilience’, and the importance of a ‘whole of governance approach’. However, statistics on the number of cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion activities indicate that there is still much work to be done.

Often underexposed, waging state competition by resorting to hybrid threats serves another indirect side effect in weakening Western states. The perceived absence of conventional threats and interstate conflict led some Western countries to question the utility of high defence expenditures. Opponents of high defence spending eagerly used these arguments as an excuse to delay the fulfilment of the 2014 Wales pledge. Budgetary pressures, in combination with rising unit prices of increasingly specialized material and a diversifying threat environment forced military decision makers to make difficult choices concerning their military architecture. Only a limited number of countries (such as France, the UK, and the US) were able to compete in the growing number of operational domains (e.g. the informational domain) without neglecting their conventional capabilities. Evidences of these evolutions can be found by looking at several Western countries’ arsenals (see e.g. the yearly IISS Military Balance). Despite the 2014 Wales pledge to increase defence spending to 2% of GDP, and spend 20% of allies’ national defence budgets on new major equipment, several allies in reality failed to increase (or in several cases even to maintain) conventional capabilities such as heavy artillery, mechanized infantry, and main battle tanks.

¹ E.g. the Hybrid Centre of Excellence in Helsinki, the Cyber Centre in Tallinn, and NATO’s Counter Hybrid Teams.

With the events in Ukraine, the consequences stemming from a lack of military power on the geopolitical stage suddenly became painfully obvious. This immediately led proponents of hard military power to point to the consequences associated with low defence spending and the neglect of defence in recent years. After years of burden sharing debates, the Ukrainian crisis appears to be the needed accelerator to encourage governments to allocate more budgetary means to defence. First announcements by individual allies and NATO itself (e.g. following the 2022 summit in Madrid) mainly appear to advocate devoting a dominant share of the additional resources to the strengthening of conventional deterrence, in line with the recently observed threats.

While the dynamics of a strengthened defence are certainly favourable and much needed in an ever-volatile world, we however need to point out a number of pitfalls that could result from certain rash choices in response to the events taking place in Eastern Europe.

RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS: PITFALLS TO AVOID IN POLICYMAKING

Above all, escalating and uncontrolled expensive arms races, as during the Cold War, are to be avoided. Let us be clear: we certainly advocate finally giving the military the budgetary means it needs to fulfil its core tasks (such as collective defence), reversing the financial neglect of the latest years. However, Cold War situations in which countries were spending excessive high percentages of GDP on conventional and nuclear procurement have a pernicious effect on prosperity and are to be avoided. Looking back at the Cold War, provoking your opponent into high defence spending and luring him into an arms race could be assessed as an indirect strategy of economic warfare. Increasing NATO presence in the Baltic States up to Brigade level, for example, is a measure that will have a great impact on the armed forces of NATO allies, both in terms of cost and troop fatigue. Moreover, we are also simultaneously waging an intensive economic war against Russia, by imposing sanctions and by decoupling our historical dependence on Russian oil and gas. Despite the fact that this is obviously preferable to direct lethal

conventional conflict, we must clearly measure and monitor the (financial) impact of all these policy choices. Hence, whatever our relation with Russia may be at the moment, we must therefore stay on diplomatic speaking terms and revitalise the arms control and disarmament agenda.

Secondly, the real threat posed by conventional threats should be analysed with the necessary degree of objectivity, paying particular attention not to neglect other challenges. Decision-makers have a habit of overreacting to challenges as they already emerge, rather than taking preventive actions. Rather than being responsive, we also need to continue studying other future threats that might affect our security. Apart from the rapidly decided increases in conventional spending, we must not lose sight of the long needed investments and strategies needed to counter hybrid threats. Further advances in e.g. cyber deterrence require more analysis capacity to enhance the degree of detection and attribution, or even (although sensitive in nature) offensive cyber capabilities. This requires investments in highly specialized personnel, infrastructure, and equipment. Therefore, we must avoid conventional capabilities from absorbing an excessive share of the defence budget, leaving little budgetary space for facing the broad range of other threats in the non-conventional domain. Simply stated: if we truly want to increase our defensive potential, we must avoid over-responding to one type of threat, while remaining vulnerable in other domains.

These non-kinetic threats have certainly not disappeared from the scene, quite the contrary. The way the West responded to the conflict (i.e. condemning Russia's actions, putting pressure on the Russian economy by means of sanctions, and increasing NATO's presence at the Russian borders), is considered as expansionist and provocative from a Russian perspective, prompting further counterreactions. Russia on the other hand is more limited in terms of (conventional) response options, as it needs time to recover from its losses and to replenish its units that suffered large losses in terms of personnel and equipment. All these variables will likely incite Russia to make even more intensive use of hybrid threats to

wage state competition, profiting from their attractive characteristics such as low cost and the ability to inflict losses while remaining below the threshold that would trigger a powerful response. Hence, Russia will likely continue following the strategy it (successfully) adopted over the past years, striving to weaken the alliance's unity over the long term. This should prompt NATO to accelerate its efforts to counter threats in the hybrid domain.

More threatening however, the current conflict may trigger a series of other second-order effects that could make Western countries more vulnerable to certain types of hybrid threats, rendering the use of them even more attractive. Examples are numerous and the associated consequences are becoming gradually more tangible. The EU's response to Russian actions, i.e. the use of economic pressure by means of sanctions or the recent EU's proposal to stop the import of Russian oil by the end of this year, are further contributing to the already strong increases in energy prices and, ultimately, to the increase in inflation. Russia is further contributing to these inflationary pressures by impeding the export of Ukrainian raw materials and nutrients (grain being the best example), resulting in increasing food prices and shortages all over the world. As already warned for by economists, the associated decline in purchasing power will have a proportionally larger effect on lower income groups, eventually resulting in a further increase of the income disparity. As shown in the literature, income and wealth inequality can become a topic of political contestation at a certain moment, resulting in increased political polarisation. The difficult budgetary choices a government will need to make can further stir up political movements and radical parties. All this is fertile ground for hybrid operations, such as the further spread of disinformation and the support of radical parties. These threats, if not met, can hit us much harder than we realise. A strong conventional military force will do nothing to counter this. The challenges associated with hybrid threats have for from disappeared and should remain one of the priorities for NATO allies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The crisis in Ukraine constitutes a turning point, reminding Western states in a painful way of their weaknesses, but also leading to more political and public support for higher defence expenditure. In responding to this crisis, we must however not revert completely to Cold War thinking. No one questions the importance of strengthening NATO's conventional deterrence, strongly needed to maintain a credible collective defence. Nonetheless, we must not be drawn into a costly conventional arms race. We should not simply blindly adapt our (future) defence policy to the events in Ukraine, but also continue to fully address the contemporary threats that affect Western states on a daily basis: cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, political warfare, and economic coercion. In the end, these threats have the potential to weaken Western states over the longer term, and to undermine the speed and trust with which political decisions are made; strong decisions that are much needed to face the type of challenges currently observed in Ukraine. Now that there is a strong momentum for changes in the area of defence and security, we propose two concrete recommendations in line with the challenges discussed.

First, we are at a perfect moment to accelerate the development of private-public partnerships to quickly deal with capacity-building in defence and security. These partnerships could result in a better understanding of hybrid threats, higher chances of detecting and attributing these threats, better agreeing on responsibilities in dealing with them and a further step forward in building resilience. In addition, these partnerships could also boost the national economy.

Second, this crisis provides an excellent opportunity to promote the role of the reserve forces. As witnessed during the crisis in Ukraine, reservists and civilians played a key role in quickly reinforcing the defensive potential



when needed². More importantly, specific profiles of specialists, e.g. to deal with cyber-attacks, are scarce on the job market. Reservists have the opportunity to serve their country, while also learning skills that could benefit them on the job market. Moreover, the increasing use of reservists could contribute to the cultivation of a broader security culture.

Let us make good use of this turning point, not only to strengthen the (much needed) military conventional pillar, but also to think thoroughly about implementing a total defence strategy, allowing us as well to counter the less visible threats we're encountering on a daily basis.

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² The Ukrainian 'IT army' constitutes a good example, consisting of thousands of digital talents, organizing cyber-attacks on the Russian government, media and financial institutions.





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