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**The role of NATO in counteracting hybrid warfare and enhancing resistance to external threats**

*Si vis pacem, para bellum*

*If you want peace, prepare for war*

2014. Drawing on the proxies and special forces, Russia occupies Crimea and unleashes bloodshed in the East of Ukraine. For the first time in the post-1945 world, the borders are forcefully changed in Europe. In the years to come, a wide range of informational, economic, and technological means are harnessed to undermine the Western democracies. The new reality has come. It can be seen anywhere - in the coup d’état in Montenegro or in financing radical parties throughout Europe, in poisoning dissidents or directing cyberattacks at the critical infrastructure. As if it were not enough, Chinese economic prowess seems to spread Beijing’s influence far from its borders, using generous investments and debts as a leverage to promote its interests.

It is hard to argue that NATO was prepared to such a rise of hybrid warfare. It was only after the annexation of Crimea, in September 2014, that the Alliance pledged to adopt a common counter-hybrid strategy. Released in 2015, the document considered countering hybrid threats a ‘permanent task’ for the Alliance. Having lost its original purpose of existence after the Cold War, NATO finally had to reinvent itself for protecting its members from the emerging threat of hybrid warfare.

Although hybrid warfare was suddenly brought into the limelight in 2014, it is very far from being a new tactic. Sun Tzu, Chinese strategist and renowned author of the groundbreaking Art of War, already in the 6th century BC wrote about ‘winning the battle before the battle is fought’. And this is precisely what hybrid warfare is about. However, the modern hybrid warfare seems to be even more challenging, with international relations increasingly globalised, countries interconnected, and technology sophisticated.

NATO has always been praised for its readiness to protect the member states under Art. 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The Alliance cannot afford to retreat today. It is only joint action and unswerving dedication to the Atlantic unity that can make NATO effective in counteracting hybrid warfare and other global challenges such as terrorism. Moreover, existence of the Alliance hinges on its cohesion, as some of the partners are heavily dependent on the NATO’s joint efforts to protect their national interests. The Baltic states are a vivid example of the active NATO members that face hybrid warfare and, due to Russia’s significant soft power in some regions, are particularly susceptible to this threat. The ability of NATO to protect such members determines the future of the Alliance.

The role of NATO is especially important in coordinating efforts of the Allies. Undoubtedly, each member is a sovereign state and is entitled to conducting an independent policy. The task of NATO is to achieve synergy that could help each member state and Alliance as a whole tackle the threats coming from outside. For instance, Cyberspace Operations Centre created in 2018 as part of the NATO Command Structure is a strong indication that Allies are determined to take joint action to protect themselves from the emerging external threats.

However, the role of NATO in counteracting hybrid warfare and other threats is not limited only to protecting member states. NATO maintains strategic and mutually beneficial relations with a number of its partners beyond the borders of the Alliance. Cooperation with them is crucial for countering threats and ensuring security in international relations worldwide. Ukraine, as such a partner and a victim to Russia’s aggression, is one of the countries whose national security is in many ways dependent on NATO. Apart from financial and military aid, NATO plays a role of counterbalance that curb Russia from engaging in further military actions. Although NATO is not actively involved in military confrontation, its role in maintaining peace and security in Ukraine is crucial. Gradual strengthening of ties between Ukraine and NATO, adapting the Ukrainian military to NATO standards enhances defence capabilities of NATO in the long term. My crucial suggestion would be continuing support for democratic governments in such countries as Ukraine and Georgia. Of course, NATO cannot disregard interests of its own members, but curbing disruptive powers in their aggressive actions is indeed in the long-term interest of the Alliance.

Importantly and quite contrary to the common belief, the role of NATO is not only about powerful military forces. NATO facilitates and actively engages in development of sustainable democratic institutions, rule of law, resilient economy etc. According to the recent report of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the Western Balkans are one of the regions where NATO initiatives are directed at tackling state capture, criminality, black economy, drug trafficking, judicial systems.[[1]](#footnote-1) This case evidences that the role of NATO does not limit itself to counteracting military threats or strengthening capabilities to protect member states from hybrid warfare. The role of NATO is much broader. Today, when all the serious problems are global and cross-border in nature, NATO is tasked with creating a peaceful, constructive environment in international relations.

An informational dimension of NATO’s role in maintaining security is always very important. Determined to use coronavirus as an informational operation, Russia and China took part in disinformation campaigns aimed at spoiling a positive attitude of local population towards NATO. It has been evident during the coronavirus crisis when Chinese and Russian aircraft ostentatiously brought humanitarian aid to the Western Balkans. Russians went even further and conducted joint operation with Serbia forces to disinfect buildings and organise treatment centres. It is the task of the Alliance to ensure that fake reality, imposed by opponents of the Alliance, does not undermine the unity of NATO.

An inherent part of such disinformation campaigns is messages that NATO will allegedly never accept other countries as its own members. Such messages are often used by the Russian propaganda to undermine nascent democracies aspiring to enter NATO. I believe it is necessary to constantly reaffirm that it is possible to become a NATO member or at least a valuable partner of NATO. These reassurances would definitely help overcome the challenge posed such disinformation campaigns.

In terms of information, it is also important to explain to the public why NATO should exist. Populist voices can often be heard arguing that NATO is an unnecessary burden. It is the task of the Alliance to dismiss these claims and ensure that member states’ population clearly understands how beneficial and important membership in the Alliance is. This can be done through radio talks, public discussions, interviews with NATO representatives, and institutional visits.

Another dimension of NATO’s role in counteracting threats resides in its cooperation with the European Union. Given that NATO and the EU are arguably the most powerful international institutions in the world, it is crucial for them to cooperate in a mutually beneficial and coherent way. The need for cooperation stems from the duplication of membership (21 common members) and the shared set of core values. Since 2000s that NATO and the EU embarked on institutionalised cooperation.

NATO and the EU effectively cooperated in a number of areas.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since 2015, their partnership has helped conduct operations to dismantle networks of human smugglers and traffickers, extending intelligence gathering in the Mediterranean, conducting search-and-rescue operations. Counterterrorism can be another important issue of cooperation.

Moreover, EU-NATO cooperation can help full NATO’s role in ensuring peace and security in Europe by making possible ‘military Schengen’. NATO is limited in realising cross-boundary infrastructural projects. It is the EU that can help increase military mobility of both its own units and NATO forces. I would suggest working closely with the EU to solve this problem. Finally, both countries can conduct joint missions to assist their partners. Such missions have been carried out in Tunisia, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, and Iraq. Thus, it is crucial for NATO to cooperate with the EU, not suppressing EU’s own defense initiatives, but rather synchronising it with NATO’s military infrastructure.

Overall, I believe that the main achievement of the recent years is that it is finally possible to clearly define the role of NATO. Before 2014, the Alliance had experienced a state of confusion, not clearly understanding what it existed for. Although, undoubtedly, there had been goals such as countering terrorism and promoting national security interests of member states, disappearance of a clear threat had fostered inaction and made the Alliance more vulnerable. Today, the reality of a multipolar world has finally, albeit painfully, become sufficiently clear to revitalize the Alliance.

Nowadays, it is perfectly clear that NATO plays a crucial role in maintaining peace and security in Europe, limiting freedom of action of disruptive powers. In the context of the emerging threats, NATO is a form of cooperation that is mutually beneficial for the states on both sides of the Atlantic. Its role resides in staying united and proactively preparing its capabilities to counter new threats. It is crucial to not only strengthen military capabilities of its member states, but also to facilitate peace in international relations in other countries and regions, as global problems can be solved only by global action and solidarity.

1. NATO PA, ‘Key challenges to maintaining peace and security in the Western Balkans’, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. NATO PA, ‘NATO-EU partnership in a changing global context’, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)