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NATO DETERRENCE AGAINST HYBRID THREATS: EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES

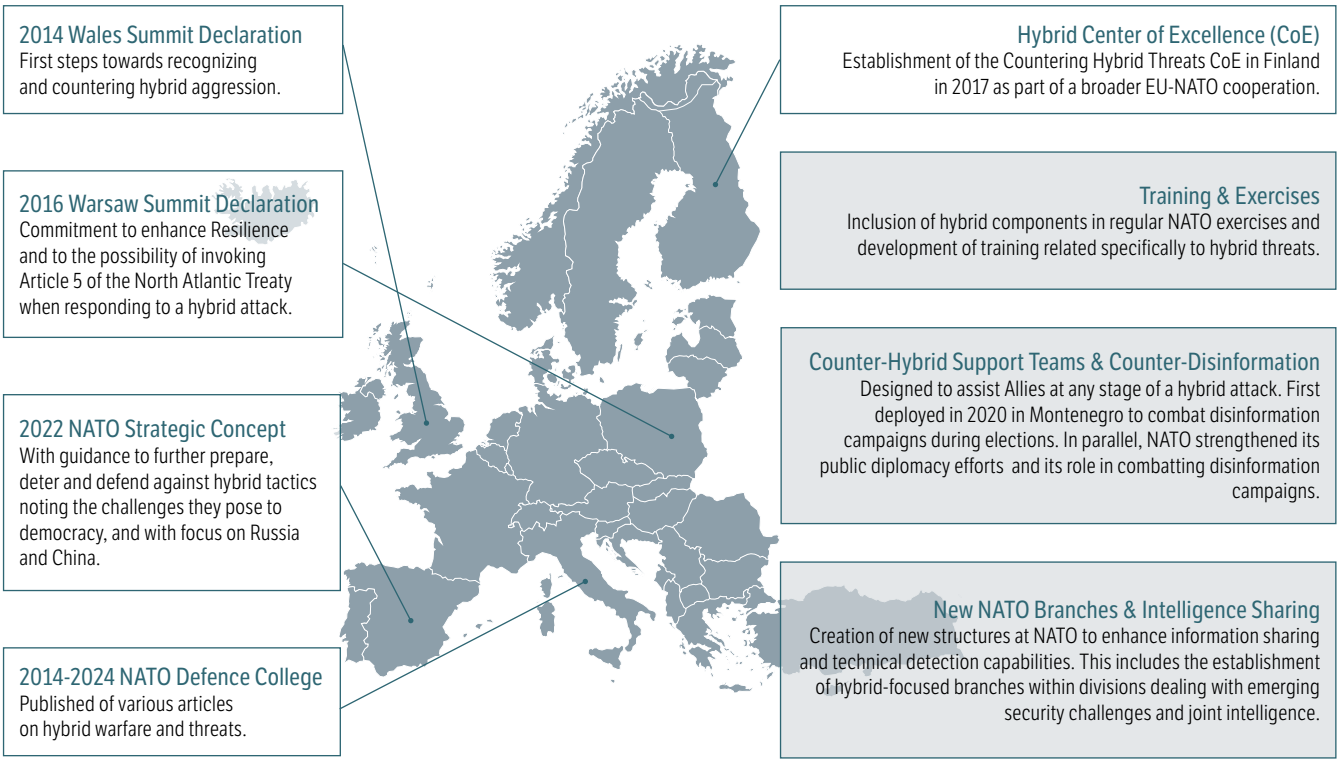
Over the past decades, deterrence has proven to be the most relevant strategic response to security threats in peacetime. Hybrid threats, however, pose challenges to the traditional logic of deterrence. These threats, broadly understood as malign activities aimed at destabilising adversaries without directly triggering a military response, defy the conditions under which traditional deterrence works best.

Until the early 2010s deepening cooperation with Russia was of strategic importance for stability and security in the Euro-Atlantic region. Russia's actions against Ukraine in 2014, however, led to a reassessment of the European security environment by the West. The Wales Summit Declaration issued in the same year marks a turning point in NATO's approach to deterrence and the start of the most significant reinforcement of its collective defence since the end of the Cold War. In response to a perceived harsher security environment, Allied leaders agreed to reinforce NATO's military presence in Eastern Europe through the implementation of the Readiness Action Plan and later the establishment of NATO's forward presence in the eastern flank.

In parallel, the Alliance also developed measures to address hybrid threats, perceived as posing new challenges to Western security. Hybrid threats are broadly understood as malign activities aimed at destabilising adversaries without triggering a military response – in essence, attempts to undermine stability below the threshold of war through, for example, disinformation, foreign interference or cyber-attacks. After 2014, NATO developed new structures, policy and strategic guidance to address these threats at the European level.

Over more than half a century, deterrence has proven to be the most relevant strategic response to security threats in peacetime. Hybrid threats, however, complicate the traditional logic of deterrence because countries and international institutions often lack clear thresholds or easily identifiable actions that would trigger punitive responses. While NATO's military adaptation can be seen as a proportional response to increasing regional instability, this rationale does not directly apply to countering hybrid threats. The application of deterrence theory to unconventional forms of aggression is challenging as these actions often do not fit into conventional categories of state-to-state aggression. Hybrid actions often lack clear attribution, and their effects tend to be dispersed rather than immediately impactful. This adds complexity to developing proportional responses, especially when working at the multinational level. Why, then, has the West persisted in using deterrence as a central element

FIGURE 1. NATO INITIATIVES ADDRESSING HYBRID THREATS (2014-2022)
Source: Elaborated by the author, based on Rühle (2021).



in addressing hybrid threats? In this publication, I discuss the challenges of adapting NATO deterrence to hybrid threats.

The Evolution of Deterrence in NATO

Deterrence practice is not straightforward, but its principle is simple: discouraging or restraining an actor from taking unwanted action. The existence of alliances can be a source of deterrence in itself. The commitment of multiple Western countries to collectively defend each other in case of an attack has a deterrent effect as long the costs of aggression are convincingly communicated, backed by credible capabilities, political will and readiness to defend European territory, especially by the United States.

Over the past decades, the evolution of deterrence theory and practice in the West has adapted to changing geopolitical contexts (Freedman, 2021). During the Cold War, nuclear deterrence dominated. Mutual assured destruction consolidated in arms control agreements ensured strategic stability between the United States and the Soviet Union, based on the vital need to prevent inadvertent escalation. With the dissolution of the bipolar confrontation at the heart of the Cold War, the focus shifted to conventional deterrence, which concentrated on the ability of NATO to deter aggression through conventional military superiority.

Although deterrence practice has never been straightforward, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 has introduced a new element to the equation. By employing overt and covert, military and non-military tactics enhanced through the use new technologies to effectively achieve political objectives, this episode highlighted how hybrid threats defy the conditions under which traditional deterrence works best: (i) unambiguous redlines reinforced by known capabilities; (ii) linked with vital interests; and (iii) backed by clear and credible messages.

Deterring Hybrid Threats in Practice: Main Challenges

The low levels of violence in NATO territory and the few major 'nuclear scares' over the past decades are good indicators of the success of deterrence in practice. This strategy allowed for Western defence budgets (especially European) to remain relatively low while still providing effective means for preventing Soviet aggression. Moreover, the resort to hybrid threats by adversaries can be seen as consequence of the success of nuclear and conventional deterrence: both are perceived as too costly, whereas hybrid threats can cause disruption without provoking proportional retaliation. This happens, in part, as there are no specific capabilities to respond nor clear redlines for what would trigger a national or collective response to hybrid attacks.

(i) Unambiguous redlines reinforced by known capabilities

The evolution of NATO deterrence to address threats that fall below the threshold of armed conflict can be framed within two recurrent distinctions in the literature: deterrence by punishment, which relies on the threat of severe penalties, and deterrence by denial, which seeks to deter an action by making it unlikely to succeed. The 2016 Warsaw Summit was a landmark in formalising the reinforcement of deterrence in both dimensions.

Resilience – here understood as the capacity of states to withstand and respond to multiple threats while maintaining internal stability and fulfilling international commitments – is a key component of deterrence by denial. In 2016, Allies committed to enhancing resilience with NATO's support. This was likely driven by the recognition that NATO's role as a military security provider depends on the internal political stability and cohesion of its Allies, both of which could be undermined by hybrid attacks targeting civil society or critical infrastructure.

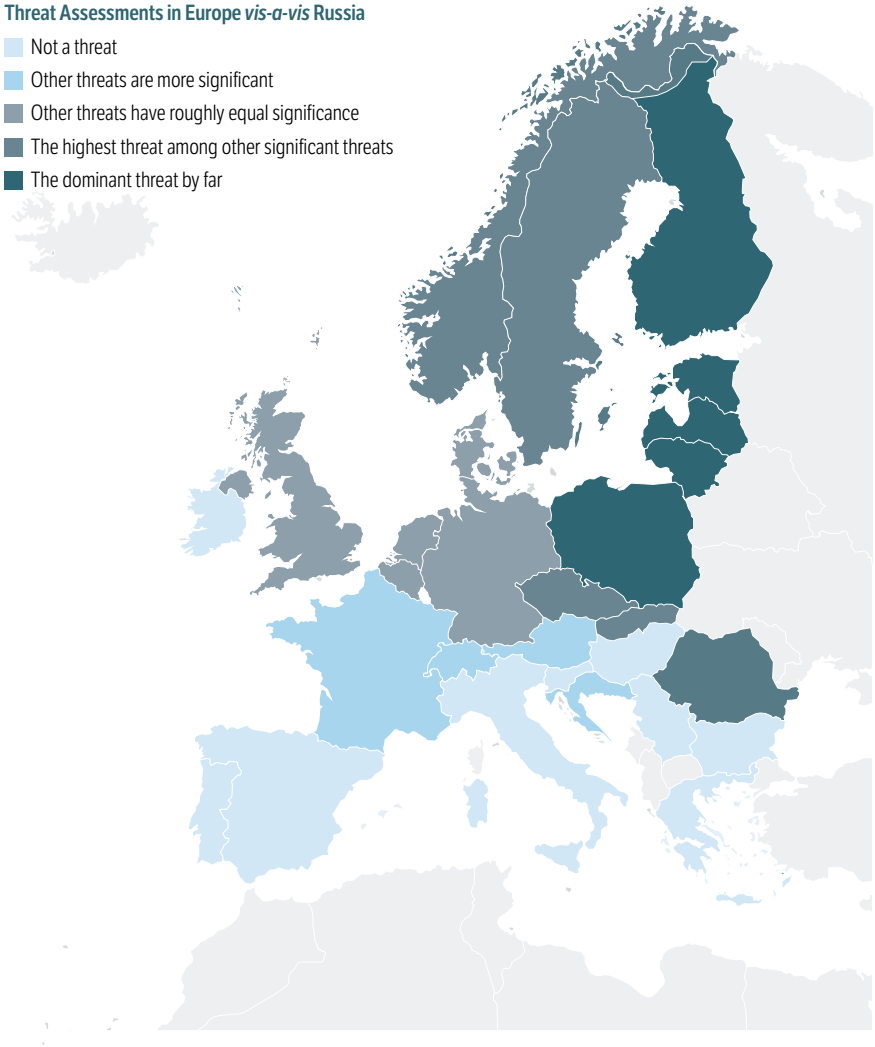
For deterrence by punishment, in the same year, NATO publicly acknowledged the possibility of invoking Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty in response to a hybrid attack – meaning that such an attack against one Ally could be considered as an attack against all Allies (Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 2016). While recognising that the primary responsibility for responding remains with the targeted nations, this commitment aims to signal that hybrid attacks – whether cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, or other disruptive actions – can cross specific redlines. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to envision a scenario that would call for invoking Article 5. Attribution, for example, is a sensitive topic, let alone collective attribution. Although states can develop capabilities to make this commitment more credible, through improved technical capacity and legal instruments for attribution of hybrid attacks, the decision to either publicly or privately assign malicious actions to a specific actor differentiating it from an accident remains a national competency and is not without risks. European states have different risk tolerances when it comes to political attri-

BOX 1. HYBRID THREATS: CONCEPT AND EVOLUTION

The first references to hybridity date from mid-2000s, when Frank Hoffman introduced hybrid warfare as an operational concept, referring more to the tactics of non-state actors than to its strategic use by states (Hoffman, 2007). Attempts to expand Hoffman's concept, however, did not gain political buy-in from European countries until NATO officials introduced the term at a strategic level in 2014. After that, references to hybrid threats grew exponentially in policy documents, political debates and academia.

The new concept, however, had little to do with previous versions of it. Although using the label 'hybrid', it captured a broader spectrum of means both military and non-military, with a focus on the latter, and highlighted the role of surprise and ambiguity associated with the conduct of hybrid warfare. Russia has a long tradition of using similar approaches to conduct foreign interference and to advance foreign policy objectives. This includes complementing military strength with the skilful use of non-military means, such as disinformation and other central elements of Soviet Union's long known 'active measures'. Moreover, Ukraine's specific circumstances – historic, domestic, cultural, geopolitical entanglement with Russia – make a similar attack unlikely to replicate in European territory (Rühle and Roberts, 2019: 62). It is, thus, unlikely that the novelty associated with hybrid threats comes either from the tactics used or from the fear that something similar may occur in Western soil. The novelty associated with it seems rather related to the urge to create and adapt existing structures such as deterrence to address to the specificities of these threats.

FIGURE 2. THREAT ASSESSMENT IN EUROPE VIS-A-VIS RUSSIA BEFORE 2021
Source: Elaborated by the author, based on Meijer and Brooks (2021).



bution as it, even when made with high levels of certainty, may rebound and allow for plausible public deniability by the accused party.

(ii) Links with vital interests

Another aspect that makes the logic of deterrence more likely to succeed is the ability of a state or a security community to link threats to vital interests. While the connection between state survival, nuclear deterrence and the Soviet threat was rather evident during the Cold War, linking hybrid threats to vital interest today is more complex for two main reasons. First, because in the Western debate 'hybrid threats' lack a clear definition. As references to the term grew exponentially after 2014, the concept has been used loosely in the political and policy realms, preventing in-depth engagement with the phenomena it applies to and with its strategic relevance (Libiseller, 2023).

Second, because Western countries have divergent views on how to prioritise the threats posed by China and Russia, it is challenging to link hybrid activities perpetrated by these actors to vital interests. There is, for example, no evidence that the 2014 conflict in Ukraine contributed to a unified threat perception of Russia among European countries. Indeed, studies show divergences of threat perceptions across Europe have even deepened after 2014, leading to disagreements on how to prioritise Russia versus other challenges (Meijer and Brooks, 2021). Thus, while Russia's assertiveness might have been a wake-up call for the possibly of using force to change borders in European and laid bare any hopes of a broad Euro-Atlantic security community, it was not corresponded by a significant perception alignment and policy change in the West. Recent studies do not support the argument that the threat from Russia became a priority for most European countries post-2014, and there is also no evidence that this has been the case after 2022.

(iii) Backed by clear and credible messages

Finally, the success of deterrence hinges on the clarity and credibility of the messages it communicates. The principle of deterrence remains simple: convince an adversary that the consequences of their actions will outweigh the benefits. But, while nuclear or conventional deterrence failure may lead to military escalation with obvious dire consequences, hybrid threats add complexity to the communication logic of deterrence for three main reasons.

First, effective communication of collective deterrence presupposes a certain degree of alignment between Allies and the political will to act when necessary. Despite growing concerns over hybrid threats and efforts to address them over the past decade, it is arguably unclear what specific situation could trigger a collective response. Extending Article 5 to encompass hybrid scenarios can be seen as a strategic way to bridge new challenges with NATO's longstanding principles, as it provides a clear, well-established narrative for deterring and responding to threats. While offering 'presentational advantages', this approach however risks oversimplifying the complexity of hybrid threats and may hinder the development of more nuanced strategies. This illustrates the difficulties in creating a unified approach to hybrid threats and consequently credible and clear deterrence.

Second, the credibility of deterrence depends on the specific actor being deterred. When applied to hybrid threats, the communication logic of deterrence is challenged by asymmetric views on what constitutes non-military behaviours that compromise security and proportional responses. Thus, over the past years, NATO's strategy for addressing hybrid threats has evolved from a broad focus on resilience to a more targeted approach, tailored to counter and respond to particular threats posed by specific adversaries, such as Russia and China.

Third, the effective delivery of deterrence messages is contingent on both

systemic and normative aspects of the international order. On the first, while the tactics employed by Russia were not entirely new, in 2014 the West was arguably caught off guard by its unexpected use, as it was broadly assumed that Russia would wish to uphold the international system as it stood in early 2010s (Johnson, 2018). In this sense, even if a similar scenario was unlikely to replicate in NATO territory, 2014 served as an indicator that a new era of competition as dawning.

From a normative perspective, 2014 also marked a breach in long-standing international norms, as territorial integrity and sovereignty. In public discourse, Western countries stood firm in their support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In practice, this resulted in reinforced deterrence and defence with focus on Eastern Europe, in the coordinated application of sanctions and in providing capabilities and training to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Over time, however, the Western approach has proven insufficient. Sanctions had a limited impact and were often circumvented, some European nations even deepened their energy dependence on Russia, hybrid attacks proliferated, and the belief that interdependency, economic integration, and closer diplomatic ties would prevent conflict and promote democracy has been discredited. Moreover, the lack of a consistent response may be considered a break in reciprocity – where one state's violation was not met with a proportional response.

This becomes relevant for our argument, as the gradual erosion of international norms may lower the costs for adversaries to use hybrid tactics, which allows them to test the limits of democratic responses to hostile intervention while avoiding direct confrontation or a costly retaliation. When combined with internal political shifts within the West, such as the rise of radical-right movements that undermine democratic norms, states become vulnerable to foreign interference that exploits divisions within democracies to further political goals. In this environment, deterrence becomes harder, and adversaries have greater incentives to use unconventional tactics to destabilise democratic processes. ●

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