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Strengthening Deterrence a Priority for NATO at the Vilnius Summit

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At the NATO summit in Vilnius in July, the Allies should approve a realistic but ambitious plan to develop the forces necessary to conduct the collective defence mission in accordance with a new strategy and plans. An unequivocal rejection of the limitations contained in the NATO-Russia Founding Act may be crucial to strengthening the determination of NATO members to develop the necessary capabilities and discourage Russia from increasing its aggressive actions against the Alliance.

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 increased the risk of Russian military aggression against NATO over the next few years. Just before the invasion, in December 2021, Russia issued an ultimatum to the U.S. and NATO demanding the withdrawal of Allied troops to pre-1997 positions, the

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renunciation of NATO's enlargement policy, and the adoption by the Alliance of legally binding restrictions on military activities close to Russia's borders. In this way, it openly admitted that its strategic goal is not only to subjugate Ukraine and enforce a sphere of influence in its neighbourhood but also to enact a buffer zone on the territory of NATO in Central and Eastern Europe.

Waging war with Ukraine, Russia threatens NATO members with the escalation of the conflict on their territory and resorts to nuclear threats. In March this year, Vladimir Putin also announced preparations for the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus. In this way, Russia is trying to influence the threat perception of western countries to discourage them from providing support to Ukraine and weaken their determination to strengthen NATO collective defence and deterrence. As Russia has suffered heavy losses in Ukraine, the risk of full-scale aggression against the Alliance has diminished in the short term. However, it may increase in a few years if Russia is able to rebuild its potential and assesses that the status of Central and Eastern Europe can be negotiated, while the main NATO members do not have the potential and the necessary determination to defend their allies.

NATO's Provocative Self-restraints

Over the last several years, Russia has consistently pursued its imperial goals—attacking Georgia in 2008, annexing Crimea in 2014, and triggering a conflict in eastern Ukraine. While Russia intensified its provocative actions at the Alliance's borders, NATO's reaction was constrained by the principles contained in the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. In it, the allies announced, among other things, that for the purposes of collective defence they would not permanently deploy substantial combat forces ([understood as forces of more than one brigade in each of the new states](#)) and reiterated the earlier declaration that they have no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of the new members of the Alliance.

Despite Russia's aggressive policy, some NATO countries recognized the NRFA as the foundation of the European security system, which was to be built together with Russia. The need to maintain the Alliance's political cohesion made it difficult to adapt to the Russian threat and encouraged Russia to intensify its aggressive actions, up to full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Although since 2014 NATO has gradually started to strengthen defence and deterrence mechanisms (including the development of command structures; the deployment of multinational battlegroups on the Eastern Flank), most of the allies have not increased their defence spending to the required level of at least 2% of GDP and have not developed the necessary military potential. Since NATO countries did not have the necessary capacity to support Ukraine and conduct a long-term collective defence mission, Russia could have calculated that the aggression would be successful, would undermine the credibility of the U.S. and NATO, and would make it easier to enforce the concessions contained in the 2021 ultimatum.

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Problems with the Development of NATO's Potential

At the NATO 2022 Madrid Summit, the Allies adopted a new strategy and agreed to strengthen the Alliance's defence and deterrence. NATO recognised Russia as a direct threat and announced that it would be able to defend "every inch of its territory" and "prevail against any aggressor". Achieving these goals should be possible thanks to the bigger military presence on the Eastern Flank, the development of new regional plans, the assignment of specific forces to the defence of individual regions, and the maintenance of much larger forces with a higher level of readiness for collective defence than before (the so-called new force model). In this way, regardless of the type and scale of aggression against NATO, the reaction time of the Alliance should be significantly shortened. Unlike before, NATO will not have to carry out "force generation" during a crisis, asking members to provide the necessary resources for the collective defence mission.

At the same time, the Russian aggression against Ukraine exposed the military weakness of some members of the Alliance. Although Western countries provide significant support to Ukraine, after a year of conflict, their stockpiles of arms and ammunition have been severely reduced. Despite

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attempts to increase the production capacity of the defence industry, replenishing some types of equipment will take at least several years. The credibility of deterrence and NATO's overall strategy will require not only replenishing the stocks but also increasing the military potential in line with the new defence plans. In addition, the Allies must be prepared to provide long-term support for Ukraine.

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The determination to achieve these goals, as in the past, may be hindered by attempts to respect the self-limitations contained in the NRFA. There is no direct reference to this document in NATO's strategy. To facilitate the changes in defence and deterrence posture, NATO stated that it would ensure a "substantial and persistent presence". Despite this, none of the allies who command NATO battlegroups (the U.S. in Poland, the UK in Estonia, Germany in Lithuania, and Canada in Latvia) have decided to increase it to the brigade level.

Although the U.S. maintains about 10,000 soldiers in Poland, which is the equivalent of at least two brigades, most of the troops are deployed on a bilateral basis outside NATO structures, which may facilitate their withdrawal. It cannot be ruled out that some countries are ready to observe the restrictions on the presence of NATO troops, believing that it offers a chance for normalisation of relations with Russia. For the same reason, some countries may also demonstrate no determination to increase defence spending and to invest in their defence potential. Half of NATO's 31 members are unlikely to meet the goal set at the 2014 Wales Summit, according to which members should increase defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2024. This increases the risk that they will use the temporary weakening of Russia and/or the freezing of the conflict in Ukraine not as an opportunity to make necessary investments, but as a pretext to stop or delay them.

Russia may interpret the lack of rejection of the NRFA as a signal that the states of Central and Eastern Europe still have a different security status than the rest of the Alliance. It can be expected that Russia will demand NATO observe the self-limitations contained in the NRFA as one of the conditions for ending the hostilities

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in Ukraine, which will make the document even more divisive for the Alliance than it is now. This will also increase the risk that Russia will rebuild its potential and further escalate threats to NATO or decide to confront the Alliance directly in the future to enforce the concessions contained in the 2021 ultimatum.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although Russia has suffered significant losses in the war with Ukraine, which limits the risk of full scale aggression against NATO, it is not going to abandon its imperial policies as long as there is no major socio-political change in that country. If it freezes the conflict in Ukraine and manages to strengthen its potential, in a few years' time it will be able to take advantage of the U.S. involvement in the Indo-

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Pacific and the shortcomings in NATO's potential to provoke a conflict with the Alliance. The political goal of such a conflict would be to force concessions on the demands contained in the 2021 ultimatum and create a buffer zone in Central and Eastern Europe. As in the past, Russia will see NATO's self-limitations as a weakness that will encourage the regime to step up its aggressive actions against the Alliance, further

increasing the risk of direct confrontation. As Russia compensates for the weakening of its conventional potential by increasing the importance of nuclear weapons in its strategy, the risk it will use such weapons during a confrontation with NATO may also increase.

Alliance support for Ukraine is a strategic necessity, but it has weakened the credibility of NATO defence and deterrence. The risk for most countries is acceptable only because Russia's potential has also decreased. Minimising the risk of a direct confrontation between Russia and NATO requires the Allies to develop the necessary potential for the defence of Allied territory, but also to clearly signal that the countries of the Eastern Flank do not have a different status than the rest of the Alliance. Although the military realities related to the weakening of Russia's potential may not require an increase in battlegroups to the brigade level in the short term, there are political and strategic reasons for doing this.

Factors that will threaten NATO's political cohesion to a greater extent than before will be the lack of necessary defence spending, delays in the development of capabilities for collective defence, and the Alliance's self-restrictions, which do not correspond to trends in Russia's aggressive policy. The divisions weakening the credibility of the Alliance will also be deepened by the dispute over the NRFA. While some Allies argue that the NRFA does not apply in practice, the Alliance's approach to a permanent presence of multinational forces on the Eastern Flank undermines these arguments.

Therefore, before the July Vilnius Summit, the Allies should agree on the following:

- NATO should unequivocally reject the military self-restrictions contained in the NRFA. Russia's recent announcement about the development of infrastructure for the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus and plans to create new formations in the Western strategic direction once again confirm that it perceives self-restraints as a weakness of NATO, which encourages Russia to escalate tensions. While Russia can and will use the rejection of self-restrictions for propaganda purposes, the fallout can be mitigated with appropriate strategic communication. On the other hand, maintaining self-limitations will pose a much greater threat to NATO than the potential effects of Russian propaganda. If the Alliance fails to reach consensus on the NRFA, it will be important to take actions that will

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clearly signal that the restrictions on the presence of NATO troops on the Eastern Flank do not apply in practice.

- The Allies who command battlegroups in countries bordering Russia and have the necessary capabilities (e.g., Germany) should adopt a plan to increase their units to the level of a brigade.

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Although this size still does not exceed the level of the understanding of “substantial combat forces”, it will be a political change that will help to reduce the concerns of the Eastern Flank states related to continued observance of the NRFA. It will also put pressure on the development of the infrastructure and capabilities necessary to conduct the collective defence mission.

- The Alliance should agree a realistic but ambitious plan to develop collective defence capabilities in line with the new strategy and plans. In the short term (1 to 3 years), the priority should be to obtain the ability to use forces of 30 brigades (about 100,000 troops), able to act within 10 days. The Alliance’s medium- and long-term goals should be to have 100 fully-fledged brigades (at least 300,000 troops) at various levels of readiness. The reference point for planning should be a scenario of a full-scale conflict with Russia, with the simultaneous involvement of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific. Maintaining NATO’s ability to operate in accordance with the 360-degree rule should be interpreted in the context of the threat posed by Russia, which can launch attacks from all geographical directions.
- The U.S. should maintain its forces in Europe at the current level, which was increased in 2022 in response to Russia’s preparations for aggression against Ukraine. During the development of NATO’s collective defence potential, the credibility of defence and deterrence will be based on an increased presence of U.S. forces on the Eastern Flank.