

IF YOU WANT PEACE, PREPARE FOR WAR

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A Blueprint for Deterrence

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*For the people of Ukraine.
In the darkness of war, they are a beacon of light
that shows the world what it means
to fight for the 'we'.*

PROLOGUE

On the eve of 24 February 2022, I am standing in my office in the NATO headquarters in Brussels. I am looking at the map of Ukraine that we have put up a few months ago. Tonight, I know, I will receive a phone call telling me that the invasion has begun. I send everyone home early to get some sleep while we still can. At 4.15 am, I get the call. At 6.30, I am back at the headquarters. And at 8.30, there is a meeting of the North Atlantic Council where the first facts about the invasion are discussed. Around the table, there is a sense of dismay. Not because we did not see the invasion coming: for months, intelligence has been shared on an unprecedented scale, and NATO's intelligence picture has never been more complete. There is a sense of dismay because,

over the course of one night the course of world history has changed.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a tectonic shift. War is back on the European continent, and the invasion has ushered in a new era of collective defence. Not just for Ukraine, not just for the entire NATO Alliance, but for all free democratic nations in the world. The vibrations of the Russian tanks that drove across the Ukrainian border on 24 February 2022 are still being felt to this day, as far away as Japan, Australia and Argentina. Whether we like it or not, war is back. Great power competition is once again being fought out on the battlefield and Russia is once again a threat to the Alliance.

For me personally, it was a full-circle moment. At the beginning of my military career in the 1980s, too, Russia was also considered a threat to our security. In the Royal Netherlands Navy we had a frigate at sea for guard duties at all times. We patrolled the North Sea, even at Christmas, to be on the lookout for anything suspicious. Together with British, Norwegian and Danish frigates, we regularly escorted Soviet warships that were on their way to the Mediterranean through the English Channel.

All that changed after the fall of the Soviet Union. NATO entered into a new era which was defined by two things: crisis management operations in the Western Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan on the one hand; and relentless defence spending cuts across Europe and Canada on the other.

It was an era in which European NATO Allies and Canada spent their so-called ‘peace dividend’ on priorities other than defence. McKinsey has recently estimated the value of this peace dividend at a shocking \$8.6 trillion (\$8,600 billion).¹ The thinking was that if there was no threat, why should we invest in our defence? With all the complex decisions politicians need to make about where to allocate resources, defence was one less thing to worry about. Europe and Canada thought they could get away with spending the bare minimum on defence, and sometimes not even that.

When I became the Chief of Defence of the Netherlands Armed Forces in 2017, that way of thinking was slowly changing. The spending cuts had stopped, and the government was slowly starting to reinvest. Why? Because after Russia’s illegal invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014, NATO Allies started to

realise that Russia could once again become a threat to the Alliance. It became clear that Russia's political leadership was positioning 'traditional' Russia against the 'decadent and sinful' West. The aim of Russia's foreign policy was to dissolve the post-Cold War security order in Europe, including every state's right to choose its own security arrangements. Georgia and Crimea showed us that the Kremlin was not afraid to use brute force to achieve its aims.

This was why, at the Wales Summit in 2014, Allied heads of state and government agreed on a defence investment pledge: to halt the decline in defence spending and gradually move towards spending 2% of GDP on defence over the next decade.² In 2018, Allied Chiefs of Defence initiated a complete overhaul of our defence strategies and planning to make sure that we were ready for this new era of collective defence. These changes were sorely needed, because the collective defence of our own nations is fundamentally different from crisis management operations. In crisis management we determine when, where and for how long we might participate in a mission or operation. We even set 'levels of ambition'. If for any political reason we want out, we find a way. But when it comes to collective defence, it is our

adversary, not us, that determines the timeline. We have to be ready for an attack in any military domain: land, air, maritime, cyber, and space. We have to be ready for it to happen in any geographical area at any time. Moreover, we have to be ready for several attacks, in several domains, over several geographic areas at the same time. In this new era of collective defence, the Alliance has to go full speed ahead with a war-fighting transformation – from fighting ‘wars of choice’ to winning ‘wars of necessity’.

When I arrived at the NATO headquarters in June 2021, this shift back to collective defence was already ongoing. My role as Chair of the NATO Military Committee was to bring together all the Allied Chiefs of Defence to provide NATO’s political leadership with unfettered military advice on what the Alliance needed to properly deter aggression and defend our nations. I was elected by the Chiefs of Defence to serve as a catalyst for NATO’s military leaders, to be their voice in political meetings, and to help make sure our 3.4 million men and women in uniform have everything they need to protect all we hold dear. As my 92-year-old mother described it on her deathbed, my job was often like ‘herding cats’.

The NATO Military Committee

- The Military Committee is the primary source of consensus-based advice to the North Atlantic Council and the Nuclear Planning Group on military policy and strategy, and it provides guidance to the two Strategic Commanders – Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT).
- As such, it is the essential link between the political decision-making process and the military structure of NATO.
- The Military Committee is responsible for translating political decision and guidance into military direction, recommending measures considered necessary for the defence of the NATO area, and implementing decisions regarding military operations.
- It also develops strategic policy and concepts and prepares an annual long-term assessment of the military strength and capabilities of countries and areas posing a risk to NATO's interests.

- The Military Committee, headed by its Chair, meets frequently at the level of national Military Representatives, and at least three times a year at the level of Chiefs of Defence.

When I arrived, NATO's military leadership was translating our new military strategies into detailed regional plans and a comprehensive list of everything we needed militarily. At that time, the people on the political side of the headquarters were still hesitant to call Russia a threat. But over the course of my first year, that sentiment changed. The mounting intelligence about Russia's preparations for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine made it almost impossible to deny Russia's intent. The political level started to realise that Russia was no longer a 'partner for peace' and that we may very well once again have to deal with an all-out attack on Allied soil.

In the months leading up to 24 February 2022, diplomacy was conducted at all possible levels. Allied leaders expressed grave concerns about the fact that the Russians, after having illegally annexed Crimea and occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk

regions in 2014, were stationing close to 200,000 troops along the borders of Russia and Belarus with Ukraine. In turn, Russian leaders vehemently denied NATO intelligence, claiming that these were merely ‘routine exercises’, and lamented ‘the West’s’ lack of respect and trust, claiming it was an expression of ‘Russophobia’.

The question on everybody’s mind was, ‘Will Putin actually do it?’ And if we ever doubted the answer... we needed only to listen to the Russians themselves. In January 2022, one month before the full-scale invasion, NATO Allies sat down with Russia in a historic meeting of the NATO-Russia Council. I was surprised to see that the Russian delegation was ill-prepared and uncoordinated in its interventions. These were not the masters of negotiation I had expected. In fact, the Russian statements deviated so far from reality that they were met only with surprise and calm rebuttals by NATO Allies. Russia falsely claimed, among other things, that NATO was responsible for the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991-1992. We had prepared to counter their arguments, but not this outrageous one. And yet, the Alliance reacted in complete unison. One by one, Croatia, Montenegro, North-Macedonia and Slovenia asked

for the floor and laid out the real course of history to the Russian delegation. Their nations had been fighting among themselves after the break-up of Yugoslavia, when NATO came to the rescue and stopped the killing.

The Russian delegation then proceeded to list what they demanded from NATO, based on their written ultimatum from December 2021. This included a ban on Ukraine's or any other ex-Soviet country's admittance to NATO, and the removal of all NATO troops and weapons from the Central and Eastern European nations that joined NATO after 1997.

Both proposals were unacceptable to NATO. Allies firmly defended NATO's open-door policy as a fundamental principle, and they firmly defended NATO's right to decide its own military posture.³ Removing troops and military infrastructure from Allied nations would effectively create a second-class NATO-membership for members that joined after 1997. That was out of the question.

The NATO-Russia Council of January 2022 showed how far apart NATO and Russia had grown, and the divide was about to grow even wider. When the Russians started bringing bags of blood to the border with Ukraine, which are highly valuable and have

a limited shelf-life, we knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that these were not just routine military exercises. They were getting ready to fight. Then, on the night of 24 February, the tracks of the Russian T-72 and T-90 tanks crushed all the mechanisms of conflict resolution and international diplomacy we had built together over the preceding decades.

However the war in Ukraine may end, Russia will continue to be a threat to the Alliance. They will either be emboldened by their success or frustrated by their failure. To make matters worse, Russia is not alone on its path of aggression. It is actively supported by autocratic nations around the world. The so-called CRINK states (China, Russia, Iran, North Korea) are supplying funds, weapons, technology and even troops.⁴ For North Korea and Iran, supporting Russia offers a chance to come out of their decades-long isolation, create division, and destroy democracy abroad in order to retain autocracy at home. The relationship between Russia and China is potentially even more dangerous. This 'no limits partnership' will have implications for our security for decades to come. China is ramping up its military arsenal with unprecedented speed and vigour, and it is increasingly seeking to challenge the United

States in the race for global leadership. One of the reasons China is supporting Russia in its war against Ukraine is to drain Europe and North America of their resources. Because if Russia is using its political, military and economic means to fight against Ukraine, and North America and Europe are using theirs to support Ukraine, then who stands to gain from this conflict...? Exactly. In many ways, the war in Ukraine is much more about China versus the United States than it is about Russia versus Ukraine.

Great power competition is back. It is being fought out on the battlefield in Ukraine, and it is not unthinkable that it will be fought out on other battlefields as well. This could happen either directly through a conflict in the Indo-Pacific or unexpectedly in the Arctic. Or even indirectly, through a different conflict in Europe. In any case, great powers are increasingly going toe to toe, using all instruments at their disposal. This leads to a more divided world.

The CRINK is sometimes referred to as an ‘alliance of autocracies’. But I think the word ‘alliance’ is too big of a word for what is essentially a deeply flawed, temporary set of transactions based on self-interest. There is no true friendship or trust, nor do the

members share the bonds of history and values that unite NATO Allies. Nevertheless, it is important that we see how the dots are connecting. And that we realise that there is no stronger weapon in the world... than our unity.

Allied nations need to learn how to collectively defend all we hold dear. Machiavelli says in *The Art of War*, published in 1521, that if you observe the enemy's plans and strategic objectives well, and you put a lot of effort into training your armed forces, you run a lower risk of being attacked and have a better chance of victory.⁵ In other words, you can only win a war if you prepare properly. To that I would add that you can even prevent war if you prepare properly.

What I realised in my first year as Chair of the NATO Military Committee was that preparing for war is not only a job for the military. War is a whole-of-society event. Therefore, the prevention of war must also be a whole-of-society event. Collective defence is truly a task for the collective, for all of us. Making sure we have strong and capable armed forces is crucial, but preventing war by demonstrating deterrence requires much more. It requires the active participation of every member of