SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL OF
MILITARY STUDIES

Tackling Strategic Simultaneity: What NATO Could Do to Adapt to the New Multitude of Threats

COLLECTION:
MILITARY STRATEGY – WHAT IS THE USE OF IT?

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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SCANDINAVIAN
MILITARY STUDIES

ABSTRACT

NATO is facing an unprecedented geostrategic environment characterized by simultaneous threats: Russian revisionism, the rise of China, the related problem of coping with threats in the cyber domain, and persistent challenges emanating from the southern flank. This article applies insights from the literature on organizational ambidexterity to provide a fresh perspective on how NATO could adapt to strategic simultaneity. Exisiting organizational ambidexterity literature focuses on the corporate challenge of striking a balance between exploiting existing markets and technologies, and exploring new ones altogether. In essence, strategic simultaneity demands that NATO do the same. NATO must cope with well-known and less-known threats and strike the right balance between effectiveness in handling known problems and innovation in coping with new ones. The article extracts three key categories from the strategic ambidexterity research: unified senior leadership; separate organizational units for exploitation and innovation; and a strategic approach to pursuing innovation through external partnerships. Applying these to NATO, it argues that, in order to become more ambidextrous, the organization's major countries must unite around a vision that both places simultaneity at the center and is conducive to a balanced investment in tackling all four major challenges. While Allied Command Transformation (ACT) must be maintained as a distinct organizational unit, much stronger bridges must be built between ACT and the other commands. Further, NATO Centers of Excellence and external partnerships must be used in a more targeted way as sources of innovation and new ideas.

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KEYWORDS:

NATO; strategy; adaptation; ambidexterity; simultaneity; leadership; innovation

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Dalgaard-Nielsen, A. (2022). Tackling Strategic Simultaneity: What NATO Could Do to Adapt to the New Multitude of Threats. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 5(1), pp. 165–176. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.143

DOI: 10.31374/sjms.143

INTRODUCTION

Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of neighboring Ukraine in February 2022 did more to unite NATO than anything NATO leaders could have done themselves. The bloody and ruthless military campaign carried out right on NATO's borders fostered much-needed cohesion in an alliance that had only just begun to recover from the squabbles and internal divisions of latter years – divisions that spilled into the public at NATO's 2019 London summit, when President Emanuel Macron of France famously pronounced NATO braindead (*The Economist*, 2019).

The impression of a split and rudderless alliance left by the London summit was not entirely fair. The alliance had taken important steps to re-activate and update its deterrence and defense posture in the wake of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. These efforts are currently being boosted in response to Russia's latest aggression – but still, it could be argued, the business of forging a strategy to match the current geostrategic environment is far from finished. As NATO leaders concentrate on striking a balance between aiding Ukraine and ensuring that the armed conflict does not spread to NATO territory, it still lacks effective means of deterring and defending against Russian hybrid forms of aggression against its own members. These, which include threats from espionage, disruptive cyber-attacks, and misinformation aimed at sowing discord internally in Western societies and promoting alternatives to Western liberal and democratic values, will very likely pick up again once Russia's campaign in Ukraine settles into a steadier state. More, NATO has yet to consider how to react to China's growing military and technological capacity and Chinese efforts to become the leading power in emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and quantum computing. Meanwhile, the threat from terrorism, organized crime, and the risk of irregular mass migration originating beyond NATO's southern border all remain. While groups like the Islamic State and Al-Qaida are down or lying low, the intention of these groups to strike at Western targets remains, as do the basic drivers that permit them to recruit.

NATO has adapted to changing geostrategic realities before. The alliance reinvented itself and took on new tasks and challenges following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the eruption of wars on Europe's doorstep in the Balkans, and 9/11, which placed international terrorism at the top of the Western security agenda. But the current reality of having to cope with four major challenges simultaneously is unprecedented (Hallams et al., 2013; Wallander, 2000).

This article applies O'Reilly and Tushman's theory of organizational ambidexterity to demonstrate how NATO could adapt to this environment (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004). The theory outlines the strategies, leadership, and organizational structures of organizations which succeed in simultaneously navigating different external environments. Originating in the world of corporate research, the theory focusses on the classical corporate challenge of balancing the exploitation of existing markets and technologies with innovation, and the exploration of new markets. Organizations that manage to do so are termed "ambidextrous." Research shows that they tend to be more effective, more innovative, and to endure longer than their less nimble counterparts. More specifically, such organizations allow different priorities, work methods, and cultures to flourish in organizationally distinct subunits, all operating nonetheless under the aegis of a unified senior management team conscientiously tending to the needs of every part of the business.

While O'Reilly and Tushman do not explicitly define strategy, the notion that strategy is a purposeful activity is implicit. Organizational ways and means are directed at realizing a centrally defined end, informed by a clear-eyed analysis of the risks, challenges, and opportunities of the strategic environment. This aligns with the ends, ways, means and risk approach to strategy presented in Jakobsen's (2022) contribution to this special issue. At the same time, bottom-up activity figures prominently. Organizational ability to innovate is essential to the achievement of strategic ambidexterity, and the course and outcome of explorative processes cannot, by definition, be outlined with specificity by central management. Realized strategy may thus diverge from planned strategy, and O'Reilly and Tushman appear to draw both from the "strategy as plan" and the "strategy as pattern of actions" tradition of strategic studies (Mintzberg, 1987, p. 13).

While the theory originates in the field of corporate research, it offers a useful conceptual lens on NATO's current challenges, which demands that NATO cope with a mixture of well-known

DOI: 10.31374/sjms.143

and less-known threats simultaneously, while balancing the necessities of directing attention to prevailing problems and the innovation required for tackling evolving and future threats.

Whereas extant research on NATO adaptation has tended to focus on the drivers of adaptation – a changing geopolitical landscape, shifts in the relative power of member states, institutional self-preservation, and so on – less attention has been paid to the appropriateness and effectiveness of the resulting institutions, organizations, and organizational structures (Kaim 2017, p. 8).[1] This article adds to existing research by applying ambidexterity research, which draws our attention to the desired organizational outcome of NATO's ongoing adaptation process. The article aims to take the policy debate beyond simply calling on policy-makers to come together and pay up (which it is vital they still do) by indicating which type of leadership, strategy, and organizing NATO needs to meet the challenge of simultaneity (Besch & Bond, 2019, p. 4).

The article first outlines NATO's adaptation efforts with a focus on the period since 2014, when Russia's use of force against Ukraine ushered in the current state of strategic simultaneity. It shows that NATO has done well in re-activating and updating its "legacy product" from the Cold War years: Deterrence and defense against a military threat to alliance territory. However, and for the same reason, NATO has under-invested political attention and organizational resources in tackling emerging challenges like China's rise, manifest but intractable hybrid challenges, and challenges arising from the cyber domain and NATOs southern flank. Going on to introduce O'Reilly and Tushman's theory of strategic ambidexterity, the article suggests how this research might inform NATO's political and organizational adaptation in the context of a new strategic environment characterized by simultaneity. It extracts three central categories from the ambidexterity research – unified senior leadership, distinct organizational sub-cultures, and innovation and the ability to bring new ideas "to market" – and applies them to a discussion of how NATO might be better able to tackle strategic simultaneity. Specifically, it suggests that NATO's major countries must unite around a vision that places simultaneity at the center, making the case for a balanced investment in tackling all four major challenges, maintaining Allied Command Transformation (ACT) as a distinct organizational unit while building much stronger bridges between ACT and the other commands, and using NATO Centers of Excellence and NATO's external partnerships in a more targeted way as sources of innovation and new ideas.

NATO MEETS SIMULTANEITY

The 2014 annexation of Crimea, an event that upended NATO's policy of pursuing any "strategic partnership" with Russia, marked the emergence of the current era of simultaneity. It ushered in yet another period of NATO adaptation – one of many since the alliance's foundation more than seven decades ago. Following the collapse of the USSR, and with it the disappearance of NATO's original raison d'être, the Alliance has engaged in ending wars in the Balkans, expanded with the inclusion of newly independent states on its Eastern flank, reacted to the threat of severe organized terrorism against allied territory, and engaged in out-of-area missions as far abroad as Afghanistan.

Russia's annexation of Crimea led to a number of significant political decisions and to an updated re-activation of the Alliance's deterrence and defense posture. At the Wales summit in 2014, allies pledged to increase defense spending after years of decreasing budgets.[2] At the Warsaw summit in 2016, it was decided to strengthen the alliance's deterrence and defense posture in the Baltics and Poland, among others, with four battalion-sized battlegroups, present on a rotational basis. NATO's Readiness Action Plan, also agreed in Warsaw, comprises a variety of efforts and capability development initiatives, aimed at deterring and defending the alliance's eastern territories. As part of this plan, NATO's command structure has been

1 For an exception see Wallander (2000), who focuses on the nature of NATO's institutional assets to explain institutional longevity in the face of a changing geostrategic environment (Wallander, 2000, pp. 4, 54, 705–735). Moreover, NATO's so-called Functional Review of Headquarters has (apparently) grappled with the issue of effectiveness. It is not publicly available.

2 A pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defense by 2024 and to dedicate 20% of total spending to investment in new capabilities.

DOI: 10.31374/sjms.143

reformed in order to better support transatlantic reinforcements, should the need arise (Brauss, 2020, p. 137).[3] Whereas European allies have increased their defense spending (NATO, 2019B, p. 14) the United States has increased its investment in European defense in terms of exercises and the presence of more combat troops on a rotational basis. A new military strategy centered on "theaterwide and horizontal escalation" and with a clear focus on deterring Russia was formally adopted in 2019 (Karpavičiūtė, 2020, p. 142).[4]

Notwithstanding the public squabbling of NATO leaders at the 2019 London summit, NATO's ability to adapt to Russia's more aggressive military posture has proven significant. NATO's capabilities and capacity to act on the ground have arguably improved as the alliance has adapted to the re-emergence of a military threat to its territory. Russia's latest aggression against its neighbor appears to have caused a genuine heightening of the willingness of the allied nations to dedicate resources and to reach the goal of spending 2% of GDP on defense within reasonable time frames. Countries like Finland and Sweden seem set to join the alliance, adding their considerable territorial defense assets to the alliance's total.

NATO's adaptation to the current environment remains, however, unbalanced. Far less political attention and capital has been invested in coping with other threats presenting themselves simultaneously. The alliance has been less effective in responding to Russia's hybrid and gray zone warfare. Hybrid warfare here refers to a combination of

> military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces. Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace, and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations. They aim to destabilise and undermine societies. (NATO, 2021)

While gray zone activity is nothing new, its use by Russia against adversaries has intensified. Moreover, the increased digitization of Western societies, the polarized state of contemporary politics in many allied nations, combined with an increase in the interconnectedness in the information sphere, has created vulnerabilities on a new scale (Brauss, 2020, p. 133).

NATO has reacted to this challenge by establishing "Counter Hybrid Support Teams," introducing hybrid threats in its exercises, and trough the establishment of a Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats located in Helsinki. Allies have agreed to a common set of "Baseline Requirements for National Resilience" aimed at ensuring continuity of government and basic services in case of malicious attempts to disrupt societies or in case of natural disasters. Finally, so-called Rapid Reaction Teams have been set up to protect NATO's electronic network, and a Cyberspace Operations Centre has been established (NATO, 2019B, pp. 8–9). These initiatives seem to have limited deterrent effect, however. Difficulties of attribution, divided responsibilities both across and within individual member states, and the absence of the perception of a common threat hamper the efforts (Efjestad & Tamnes, 2020, p. 18). Turning from cyber defense to cyber offense, the challenges pertaining to the so-called sovereign cyber effects provided voluntarily by allies are significant, as elaborated in Jensen's (2022) contribution to this special issue.

In addition, the alliance has hardly begun to consider how to react to the global rise of China. While China represents no military threat to NATO today, its growing military ambitions seem clear, as illustrated by its development of a carrier capability and its widespread strategic infrastructure investments around the globe. China's partnership with Russia, including joint military exercises conducted in waters near Europe, underlines the need for allies to address how to respond to its rise. Its ambitions and its leading role in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and other advanced technologies with defense and security applications, as well as investments in critical infrastructure in a number of NATO allies, risk creating political and economic dependencies with negative consequences for NATO coherence, interoperability, intelligence sharing, and, ultimately, for NATO's ability to defend the Euroatlantic area. China's growing assertiveness in the cyber and information spheres also challenges information

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3 With, among others, the Joint Support and Enabling Command in Ulm, and the Joint Force Command, Norfolk, Virginia.

4 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_166244.htm.

security, the integrity of critical infrastructure, and the societal cohesion of a number of allies (Efjestad & Tamnes, 2020, p. 19).

The security implications of China's growing military, technological, and economic muscle have arguably been obvious for years. NATO has yet to begin, however, to form a common assessment of China as a security actor, to consider implications for the alliance, and to develop ways and means to tackle the ensuing challenges. The 2019 London summit declaration simply stated: "We recognise that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address together as an Alliance."[5]

In the run-up to the 2019 London summit, allies, under pressure from the United States, undertook a review of NATO-China relations. But intra-alliance disagreements persist on whether to debate China at all under a NATO chapeau. Unresolved issues include striking a balance between developing mutually beneficial economic ties and preserving control of technologies and infrastructure with security applications; updating export controls/dual-use regulations; investment screenings; and tackling China's gray zone activities, including the spread of disinformation (Oertel, 2020, p. 78).

Meanwhile, the instability emanating from NATO's southern flank, and the threats from terrorism, organized crime, and irregular mass migration, remain. Political, ethnic, and religious tensions, lack of good governance, a worsening climate crisis, food shortages, proliferation of weapons, and emerging disruptive technologies, will continue to add fuel to conflicts in this region. It is highly doubtful whether current alliance efforts in the South, including NATO's mission in Iraq, will be sufficient to leave any lasting positive impact on the stability of the region (Arteaga, 2019, p. 84; GLOBSEC, 2017, p. 18).

To sum up, NATO has a long history of adapting to the changing requirements of a changing threat environment – with, however, the luxury of only facing a single major threat at a time. This luxury is no longer present. Today, NATO must tackle four challenges simultaneously: the threat from Russia, the rise of China, interrelated challenges in the cyber domain, and persistent risks and problems emanating from NATO's southern flank. The alliance must develop the ability to navigate an environment characterized by strategic simultaneity.

STRATEGIC AMBIDEXTERITY TO THE RESCUE: REQUIREMENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATION TO SIMULTANEITY

The theory of strategic ambidexterity originates in the field of business and corporate studies. It builds on a distinction, first suggested by the organizational scholar James March, between a corporation's need to simultaneously exploit existing assets with efficiency and to adapt to changing environments if it is to successfully explore new products and markets (March, 1991, p. 72).

The research interest in organizational ambidexterity grew rapidly in the wake of the *Harvard Business Review* article "The Ambidextrous Organization" (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004). Summarizing the findings of a study of 35 private sector companies, the article proposes the theory of organizational ambidexterity, describing its core proposition that successful firms manage to operate in different strategic environments simultaneously. They do so by building and shielding dedicated organizational units that pursue new products and markets. These units are permitted to develop distinctive priorities, structures, and cultures that set them apart from the rest of the organization. At the senior leadership level, however, they remain tightly integrated into the overall business, in the sense that top management understands the rationale of both new and legacy units, tolerates (and even promotes) the presence of very different ways of organizing and working within diverse units, and ensures an appropriate distribution of resources between them. Their co-existence is part of an overall strategic design that seeks to balance efficiency in the legacy business with investment in emerging products and technologies.

O'Reilly and Tushman and their colleagues studied companies pursuing radical innovation goals by means of four distinct organizational setups. Some companies pursued innovation within

5 London Declaration. Issued by the heads of state and government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London, 3–4 December, 2019; https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm (accessed on December 8th, 2020).

the existing departments; some deployed cross-functional teams, both across the existing organization and outside the existing management hierarchy; some used wholly independent and unsupported teams; some pursued innovation in separate and independent organizational units within the existing management hierarchy. The latter model outperformed the three first by wide margins. Not only did the aimed-for innovation occur, but the existing business improved or held steady. O'Reilly and Tushman argue that this makes sense theoretically. The new units are permitted access to the assets of the mother-organization such as resources, knowledge, talent, and intelligence by senior management, while remaining organizationally and culturally separate, and so shielded them from becoming "overwhelmed by business as usual" (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004, para. 13). The existing organization, on the other hand, is able to focus on the core business, remaining protected from the potential distraction of major innovation projects.

O'Reilly and Tushman underline that tight integration at the level of senior management is crucial to successful transformation. Senior leaders need to articulate a clear and compelling vision for the whole company that explains and legitimates the need for both exploitation and exploration. They must stand firmly and united behind this vision and ensure an appropriate distribution of resources between existing and emerging parts of the business. Further, they must vouch for an effective transfer of new concepts from mere "good ideas" into actual products that can be taken to market and eventually produced in an effective and efficient manner by units specialized for exactly this. Companies managing this feat are, in O'Reilly and Tushman's term, ambidextrous (Bryson, Boal & Rainey, 2008, pp. 15–16; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013, 4).

O'Reilly and Tushman's original formulation of the need for ambidexterity triggered a significant volume of follow-on research, exploring the connection between ambidexterity and company performance. Overall, this research, which comprises large number datasets, longitudinal data, and in-depth case studies, indicates a positive connection between ambidexterity and organizational performance, innovation, and longevity (O'Reilly & Tushman 2013, pp. 6, 10).

The follow-on research also expanded on how ambidexterity is achieved. Some researchers, like O'Reilly and Tushman, focused on how ambidexterity could spring from specific organizational structural designs; others focused on the level of the individual employee, suggesting that individuals may play a central role in deciding when to exploit and when to explore (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013, p. 9). Finally, some studies took a more macro-level perspective, focusing on how ambidexterity might be cultivated through external partnerships. Strategically cultivated partnerships were shown to enable firms to acquire new knowledge as an alternative or a supplement to growing it internally. An organization's ability to reach out and build bridges and networks becomes crucial. Equally important, however, is the ability to absorb, to make use of, and to integrate new knowledge in ways that create business or mission value. This ability hinges both on the attention paid by management and the resources granted to the external networks, and to the degree of open-mindedness and the capacity for learning possessed by the "receiving" units (Kauppila, 2010, p. 283).

Combining Tushman and O'Reilly's original research with the follow-on research, it is possible to extract three general and interrelated categories that together appear to be central to the achievement of organizational ambidexterity: unity of vision at the level of top management; separate organizational units dedicated to exploitation and innovation that afford the organizational ability to bridge the two and take novel ideas "to market"; and a strategic approach to the pursuit of innovation by means of external partnerships.

The following section applies this conceptual triad as a means to structure discussion of what a more ambidextrous NATO would look like, and how the alliance may move in that direction in order to match the strategic environment.

LEADERSHIP, ORGANIZATION, INNOVATION: TOWARDS A MORE AMBIDEXTROUS NATO

UNITY OF VISION AT THE TOP LEVEL OF LEADERSHIP

According to the ambidexterity research, if the senior management of an organization is to achieve ambidexterity, it must communicate, clearly and in concert, why the diverse activities

DOI: 10.31374/sjms.143

of exploiting and exploring must take place simultaneously. Further, it must conscientiously attend to and resource both parts of the business (Bryson, Boal & Rainey 2008, pp. 15–16; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013, p. 4).

Needless to say, it was not until recently that NATO's major governing bodies displayed such unity of vision – a capacity that has proven elusive since the collapse of the Soviet threat. The underlying political disagreements about what NATO should prioritize and who should pay how much, which spilled into the public at the 2019 London summit, reflect diverging threat perceptions, different geographies, and national histories (Jakobsen & Ringsmose, 2018, p. 38).

Russia's aggressive conduct in its "near abroad" will, for a time, deliver from the outside what NATO leaders have been unable to deliver from the inside: Stronger coherence, solidarity, and a sense of common purpose. But Russian aggression, even if it is currently the most pressing challenge, will remain more of a concern for the Eastern, Baltic, and North Atlantic members of the alliance than for its southern members. The absence of one overarching and external threat and its replacement by a multitude of security challenges is likely to return as a factor challenging NATO's political cohesion in years to come.

It might be tempting to suggest a regionally specialized NATO made up of subgroups of like-minded countries: a "NATO-north-east" to cope with Russia, a "NATO-south" to cope with the southern flank, a "NATO-global" to cope with the rise of China, a "NATO-cyber" to cope with the cyber domain. Ambidexterity research does not indicate that an organizational division of labor is a problem – on the contrary, it recommends functional specialization. What it does show, however, is that a strong and united senior management group must vouch for the overall balance and necessary bridges between functionally specialized units. Absent such leadership, strategy in a NATO of regional subgroups risks degenerating into a long laundry list of matters relating to different coalitions of countries seeking to promote and sponsor their favored item at the cost of others on the list. Opponents of regionalization have indeed warned that it would undermine the solidarity that lies at the heart of NATO: The common defense clause of the Washington Treaty's Article V.

While differences of threat perception and geographies cannot be wished away, they certainly can be negotiated, balanced, and brought into better alignment. The ongoing process of formulating a new strategic concept for NATO offers an opportunity. If leaders place strategic simultaneity and solidarity at the center of this concept, they may use it as a jumping off point for articulating a unifying vision to match the current strategic environment.

To underpin, rather than undercut, solidarity, the strategic concept must unequivocally underline NATO's commitment to tackle all four challenges simultaneously and in solidarity, even if not all challenges may call for the same level of investment at this point in time. The Strategic Concept must, in general terms, commit to desired ends in each area. Moreover, in general terms, it must identify and commit to tried and tested ways and means while also identifying areas where innovation is needed, outlining how NATO intends to pursue such innovation. Such a concept would provide for a reference document that the Secretary General and other NATO leaders could leverage when seeking to strengthen solidarity, forge compromises, and make individual allies respect common positions.

The process of negotiating a text can serve to align perceptions and build rapport between key leaders.[6] New working formats, including more frequent and more informal meetings between heads of state and government, between foreign and defense ministers, and at the permanent representative level of the North Atlantic Council, including less scripted and more informal sessions suitable for informal interaction, would serve to rebuild and enhance trust (Davis 2018, p. 375; Reflection Group, 2020, p. 61).

6 In effect this process has already begun with the work of the so-called High Level Reflection Group, established in the wake of the contentious London meeting. The group consisted of ten individuals tasked by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to provide recommendations on how, first, to reinforce the unity, solidarity, and cohesion of its membership, including cementing the centrality of the transatlantic bond; second, to increase political consultation and coordination between NATO's members; and third, to strengthen NATO's political role and instruments relevant to addressing current and future threats and challenges to the alliance's security emanating from all strategic directions (Reflection Group, 2020, p. 3).

While NATO cherishes the principle of consensus, which provides every member with an emergency brake and a voice, effective alliance leadership in a group of 30 countries arguably must entail a degree of informal leadership by the biggest allies.[7] Effective big-state leadership, looking at the current strategic environment, would need to include Germany and Italy to ensure that due attention is paid to all major current threats and challenges. While informal leadership by bigger allies needs to be subtle and considerate with regard to smaller member states, the important thing here is that it should place simultaneity at the center. Although big allies differ in their assessment of how to prioritize different threats, they must agree on, and push, a holistic vision, paying requisite attention to all major geostrategic challenges facing NATO.

It is a key precondition for success that the current U.S. administration should reassert its alliance leadership role, which it seems to be doing in the wake of Russia's latest aggression against Ukraine, and drive the on-going adaptation process forward. The change of administration in Washington has offered a chance to wipe the slate clean, while Russia's overt aggression against a neighboring country has helped re-focus minds on why NATO matters. If there is any silver lining to the tragic war and its immense human cost, it is that it might eventually serve to galvanize political commitment on both sides of the Atlantic to make the alliance work.

Few companies manage to achieve a fully ambidextrous leadership. It will be no small feat for NATO to do so. But the current geostrategic environment and the process of forging a new strategic concept offers an opportune moment to at least seek to move in that direction.

SEPARATE ORGANIZATIONAL UNITS DEDICATED TO EXPLOITATION AND INNOVATION – AND THE ABILITY TO BRIDGE THEM

Russia's grey zone activities, China's rise, and new challenges in the cyber domain present NATO with complex problems. The alliance's ability to explore new ways of tackling such threats, following the arguments of Tushman and O'Reilly, rests on the capacity for innovation. The skills, knowledge, work methods, and culture in units dedicated to innovation need to differ from the skills, knowledge, methods, and culture of the "mother organization." Simultaneously, a robust appreciation of the necessity of these units from the top level of the organization should ensure that they are properly resourced, staffed, and listened to. Innovation calls for the ability to eventually bring new ideas "to market" lest they remain merely good ideas generating neither mission nor market value.

NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT), geographically and organizationally separate from NATO's Allied Command Operations, has been in place since 2003. It is tasked with driving the transformation of NATO military structures, forces, capabilities, and doctrine, and has overall responsibility for NATO's Centers of Excellence – research and training centers sponsored by individual allies or groups of allies. In principle, ACT could provide for exactly the sheltering and nurturing organizational space needed to innovate – yet, according to some observers, ACT is not sufficiently staffed with "the best and brightest" and is held in less regard by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) than legacy units and commands. Struggling to make its voice heard in Brussels, it has been termed "the forgotten command" (GLOBSEC, 2017, p. 18).

The NAC's focus on current operations and efforts to tackle here-and-now problems might be natural seen from a political perspective. If being a "forgotten command" imparts the freedom to look ahead, innovate, and develop new capacities, all would be well – in principle. If, however, it entails a lack of funding (NATO budgeting rules tend to be risk averse, and thus likely to neglect funding for innovation where the return on investment is necessarily uncertain), or a want of ability on the part of senior management to recognize, scale, and implement new ideas and solutions, it becomes problematic. For NATO to achieve organizational ambidexterity, alliance leadership arguably needs to better understand and support the requirements of NATO's innovation units and to leverage their results (interview, Danish official, 30 March, 2021).

7 For example, the ability of NATO to take military action in connection with crises like Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya stemmed from coordinated U.S., British, and French leadership, which managed to bring reluctant allies along and refrain from vetoing the interventions (Jakobsen, 2014, p. 69).

DOI: 10.31374/sjms.143

In principle, ACT has an advocate and "translator" at NATO headquarters in Brussels. The new Innovation Unit – a unit that has paid special attention to emerging and disruptive technologies – could fill an important role if it avoids duplicating the efforts of ACT and instead works to place innovation on the NAC's agenda, acting as an advocate to ensure the necessary organizational support and funding (interview, Danish official, 29 March, 2021).

NATO's Science and Technology Organization (STO) and several NATO Centers of Excellence are dedicated to emerging topics and technologies like artificial intelligence, quantum sciences, hybrid warfare, and so on (NATO 2019A, p. 104). Yet both STO and the CoEs are based on voluntary contributions from allies of national subject matter experts and funding. Relying as it does on the goodwill and specific interests of individual allies, this way of funding and staffing is not conducive to a coherent, strategic approach to innovation. As a further consequence, the Centers of Excellence cannot be systematically tasked by NATO's political and military authorities (GLOBSEC, 2017, p. 19). While a complete alignment between NATO's strategic priorities and the CoE network and a common funding scheme appears unrealistic, NATO could take a stronger guiding role as regards which new centers are necessary. More, it might insist on the agreement that, in return for being NATO bodies, the centers are obliged to place a proportion of their staff-hours at the service of the organization, enabling them to be systematically and strategically tasked.

In sum, NATO has many parts of the organizational infrastructure in place which could in principle underpin an ambidextrous strategy. While public and independent knowledge about the effectiveness, functioning, and impact of these units remains scarce, there appears to be room for improvement when it comes to tasking, funding, and integrating the perspectives, ideas, and products of the units dedicated to innovation. Arguably, NATO's major challenge lie less in structure and more in how this structure is balanced and leveraged by senior leaders.

A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO PURSUING INNOVATION VIA EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

Ambidexterity research points out that innovation may originate on the inside of an organization in dedicated, protected, units. New ideas may also, however, be acquired from the outside by means of partnerships and networks.

NATO is indisputably attractive as an ally and a partner – as witnessed by the alliance's continuous expansion in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and by its wide network of partners around the globe. NATO's ability to build bridges is high. Its ability to do so in a strategic, targeted, and effective manner is, however, debatable. The organization's current network of partners has grown organically over time and in response to emerging needs and opportunities. More often than not, NATO seems to have responded to external demands or here-and-now operational needs as opposed to strategically building and proactively leveraging its network in order to shape the environment or to acquire and implement new knowledge (Kaim, 2017, p. 6).

In addition, the current reliance on trust funds and voluntary contributions to financially support NATO partnerships is not conducive to a strategic approach to partnerships. Like NATO's CoEs discussed above, this approach to funding means that the partnership program depends on the goodwill and individual priorities of allies; it does not necessarily coalesce into a coherent, strategic instrument or mechanism for innovation where NATO needs it most.

As noted by the High Level Reflection Group established in the wake of the contentious 2019 London summit:

> NATO should review and reinvigorate existing partnerships by shifting from the current demand-driven approach, in which partner countries determine the scope and depth of their partnership, to an interest-driven approach, in which NATO itself prioritizes what it does with partners based on strategic needs and limited resources." (Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group, 2020, p. 58)

Terminating or openly downgrading some partners may be politically unpalatable and unwise. But one way ahead may be to work in targeted thematic formats on issues where NATO is currently struggling – tackling hybrid aggression in closer partnerships with the new members

DOI: 10.31374/sjms.143

Finland, Sweden, for example, addressing hybrid threats, disinformation, and emerging disruptive technology in closer partnership with the EU,[8] and dealing with the consequences of China's rise in closer cooperation with NATO's Indo-Pacific partners.

All in all, the diversity of knowledge, perspectives, and experiences represented by NATO's widely distributed network of external partners represent a potential source of strength, which could be cultivated and tapped more deliberately to help allies innovate to tackle emerging and evolving threats. The need to form a better and more nuanced view of China as a security actor could be harnessed to the partnership program reform agenda, so helping to drive it forward. Success depends on a combination of will and interest at the political level, and effective advocates at headquarters.

CONCLUSION

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has travelled far in terms of re-activating and updating its ability to deter and defend against a military threat to alliance territory. Arriving at effective ways of deterring and defending against hybrid aggression directed at allies, dealing with China's rise, and coping with persistent risks and challenges emanating from NATO's southern flank, meanwhile, have proven more difficult.

This article has borrowed from research into corporate strategy and ambidextrous organizations to show how NATO could begin to better adapt to the new strategic era of simultaneity. While this research originates in the corporate research field, it offers a useful conceptual lens on NATO's current challenges. It takes us beyond simply calling for NATO leaders to come together and pay up (which they still must) by indicating which type of leadership and organizational mechanisms NATO requires to meet the challenge of simultaneity. Specifically, it is argued, NATO's major countries must unite around a vision that places simultaneity at the center, calling for a balanced investment in tackling all four major challenges. While Allied Command Transformation (ACT) must be maintained as a distinct organizational unit, much stronger bridges must be built between it and the rest of NATO to promote the effectiveness and impact of the innovation it offers; NATO Centers of Excellence and NATO's external partnerships must be used in a more targeted way as sources of innovation and new ideas applicable to areas where NATO needs them most – including the tackling of hybrid warfare, emerging disruptive technologies, and the rise of China.

The article has sought to add to extant research on NATO adaptation by focusing on the organizational outcomes best suited to enabling the institution to tackle a dynamic environment rather than on the means by which a dynamic environment drives adaptation.

Few private sector companies manage to achieve full ambidexterity. It will be a tall order for NATO to do so. But Russia's renewed aggression against neighboring Ukraine and the U.S. administration's recommitment to alliance leadership offer a moment of urgency and opportunity in which NATO may at least move in the direction indicated in this article. No matter their size, no ally can tackle the current environment of strategic simultaneity alone.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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8 The European Union is a natural strategic partner for NATO due to the two organizations' similar foundational democratic values and overlapping membership. Yet, as noted by the High Level Reflection Group: "Follow-through on political agreements is lacking, stalling key initiatives, and relegating cooperation to the staff level. As a result, the substance of cooperation could be further improved." (Reflection Group 2020: 55). The group recommends i.a. a renewed political commitment to the cooperation, thematic working groups at staff level, and clear metrics of progress as well as regular review of progress in areas of agreed cooperation." (Reflection Group, 2020: 56).

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Dalgaard-Nielsen, A. (2022). Tackling Strategic Simultaneity: What NATO Could Do to Adapt to the New Multitude of Threats. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 5(1), pp. 165–176. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.143

Submitted: 16 January 2022
Accepted: 13 June 2022
Published: 09 September 2022

Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Scandinavian Military Studies.

SCANDINAVIAN MILITARY STUDIES