



The 2022 Brussels summit in Belgium, a meeting of the heads of state and government of NATO, took place 24 March 2022 at NATO's headquarters just one month after the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Following the summit, leaders released a joint statement condemning the attacks on civilians and calling on Russia to immediately suspend military operations in Ukraine. (Photo courtesy of NATO)

# The NATO *Strategic Concept* on Its Seventy-Fifth Anniversary

Dr. John R. Deni

Dr. Sten Rynning

**T**he North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will celebrate its seventy-fifth anniversary at its 2024 summit in Washington,

D.C. NATO's age tells a story of alliance endurance through Cold War tensions, a difficult Global War on Terrorism, and now major war on its doorstep in

Europe and a stubborn alliance search for conditions that enable peace. Remarkably, NATO's founding treaty speaks of no evil.<sup>1</sup> It does not mention or define any threat that NATO must counter. Instead, and setting the alliance on the path of enduring political relevance, the treaty is centered on the allies' determination to "safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the

**Dr. John R. Deni** is

research professor of security studies at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute, a nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, and a nonresident Associate Fellow at the NATO Defense College. Previously, he worked in Europe as a political advisor for senior U.S. military commanders. Before that, Deni spent several years in Washington, D.C., as a consultant for the Pentagon, the State Department, and the Department of Energy. Deni has a bachelor's degree from the College of William and Mary, a master's from American University, and a doctoral degree from George Washington University. He is the author of three books on European security and the editor or coeditor of several others. He's also authored peer-reviewed monographs and journal articles, and his essays have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Foreign Policy*, *Politico*, and *War on the Rocks*.

principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law."<sup>2</sup>

Naturally, as a political-military alliance, NATO regularly assesses threats and challenges. Its framework document in this regard is the alliance's *Strategic Concept*, which sets NATO's political compass and guides the alliance's detailed military planning. Strategic concepts in an alliance of thirty-two member states are tedious to negotiate, so allies aim for a document and framework that endures. However, all recognized that the last *Strategic Concept* from 2010 was, and certainly

**Dr. Sten Rynning** is a

professor of war studies and the author of *NATO: From Cold War to Ukraine, A History of the World's Most Powerful Alliance* (Yale University Press, 2024). In 2021, he was knighted by Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, and in 2023, he became the director of the Danish Institute for Advanced Study, University of Southern Denmark.

by 2022, extraordinarily outdated given the major war Russia had unleashed on Ukraine and the changes to the Euro-Atlantic security order.<sup>3</sup>

The question is how well the 2022 *Strategic Concept* has stood up over the last two years of war in Ukraine and other aspects of the evolving security environment.<sup>4</sup> The war broke out in February 2022, giving the alliance some four months to adjust its compass before signing off on the *Strategic Concept*. But in a strategic environment, four months are like the blink of an eye. We assert that Russia's war in Ukraine enabled NATO to set a clearer strategic course and to assess its security environment in bold terms. However, we argue that Russia's appetite for geopolitical revision and its resilience during the war are proving so strong and significant that NATO must critically review the political-military foundations of its *Strategic Concept* and specifically address the challenge that Russia could succeed in cleaving the alliance's political will from its military means.

Moving forward, NATO must do more to rethink the ends, ways, and means of the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO must define a new containment policy vis-à-vis Russia that clarifies the nature of NATO's commitment to Ukraine's independence and sovereignty, and it must reinforce and continuously adapt its collective defense posture and notably ensure that all of NATO-Europe implements it.

## The Ukraine War and NATO's Evolving Security Environment

The 2022 *Strategic Concept* was finalized at a critical time—just as Europe's largest, bloodiest conflict since World War II was unfolding. Gauging whether it is truly fit for purpose now and looking forward requires assessing the security environment the new *Strategic Concept* has landed amid. From a strategic perspective, five war takeaways have emerged over the last two years. First, Russia is as unpredictable and threatening as newer alliance members have long warned. Moscow did not need to unleash a devastating invasion and war to achieve what many have long presumed were its strategic imperatives vis-à-vis Ukraine—namely, to maintain influence over its politics and its economy and to keep it out of Western intergovernmental institutions like the European Union and NATO. Ubiquitous Ukrainian corruption—tied inextricably

to Russian corruption—and the occupation of Crimea and most of the Donbas had effectively put Ukrainian integration with the West on ice.<sup>5</sup> Yet Vladimir Putin invaded anyway. The Kremlin's incomprehensible risk tolerance and seeming irrationality must now factor into NATO's outlook over the next decade, particularly given Putin's reelection in March 2024.

Second, arms control regimes, norms, and laws of warfare have lulled the West into a false sense of security and have become irrelevant when they are needed most. Although the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty has long been moribund, the entire architecture of formal and informal restraints erected in Europe over the last fifty years has been shown nearly useless in the face of Russian aggression.<sup>6</sup> Attacks on civilian infrastructure and massacres of civilians in places like Bucha—while stunning in their brutality and inhumanity—look no different from what our grandparents witnessed in World War II. In the end, assuming Russia would be shamed from its aggressive path because it regularly violated the Vienna Documents in the run-up to the war or that it would be restrained by fears of war crime accusations amount to not much more than hope.<sup>7</sup>

Third, the private sector has come to play a vital role in modern warfare. The most obvious examples include Elon Musk's Starlink internet service in Ukraine or the use of civilian infrastructure to move materiel and supplies across Europe and into Ukraine. Obviously, the private sector has long played a role in modern, industrialized warfare. Today, though, the degree of privatization or semiprivatization of things like transportation infrastructure makes collaboration between governments and commercial actors critical.

Fourth, China has clearly sided with Russia, a country with which it purportedly shares a "limitless" partnership.<sup>8</sup> However, it has yet to assume the role of the "arsenal of authoritarianism," providing Moscow with the massive quantities of ammunition and equipment necessary to overwhelm Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Instead, China is providing Moscow with all the precursors and raw materials necessary to rebuild its shattered ground forces.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, North Korea and Iran are each doing their part to ensure Russia's success, but one can imagine a Kremlin victory would come far sooner if China opened the military materiel spigots. The most obvious reason why this has not occurred yet is the Chinese Communist Party continues to perceive domestic



NATO 2022 *Strategic Concept*, available online at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos\\_213903.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/photos_213903.htm).

control—and hence domestic economic prosperity—as its most important interest. Raising the ire of China's most important, wealthiest customers in North America and Europe through a more robust posture of arming Russia could fundamentally worsen the immense structural challenges confronting Beijing.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the war has shown that the West's universal values—including seemingly fundamental concepts like state sovereignty and human rights—are not universally shared. Most of the so-called Global South views the war and Russia's role in it with benign neglect. Certainly, the UN General Assembly condemned Moscow's invasion.<sup>12</sup> Yet actually *doing* something beyond the rhetorical—like joining in sanctions against Russia—remains a bridge too far for most of the globe.

## The Painful Birth of NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept

Well before Russia's second invasion of Ukraine though, there was a pervasive sense that NATO's former 2010 *Strategic Concept* was dated. Russia had illegally annexed Crimea in 2014, and China was aggressively challenging the international order by the mid-2010s.<sup>13</sup> But allies were divided on what to do. Was partnership still possible with Russia? Was China



mostly an economic rival or a geopolitical challenge, and relatedly, was NATO the right place to address China? The transatlantic politics involved in the Trump presidency (2017–2021) proved so intense that the alliance could not move forward. Thus, at the Leaders Meeting in December 2019, NATO leaders decided to kickstart a reflection process that could lead to a new strategic concept and then also decided that they would not meet again in 2020.<sup>14</sup> In short, they wanted to await the U.S. presidential elections of November 2020 and in the meantime reflect and prepare.

Alliance officials and diplomats know how to exploit time to gain consensus. They thus organized a Reflection Group, which by late 2020 had produced a catalog of new ideas, and they had Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg run a parallel track of policy preparations.<sup>15</sup> By the summer of 2021, the allies agreed on a set of broad priorities for what they knew would become a new strategic concept by 2022. They continued to disagree on the implications of “strategic competition,” but that is where Russia’s choice of war in 2022 clarified matters.<sup>16</sup> The top priority was now unmistakably Russia and collective defense, and it was clear that China somehow was in bed with Russia.

Even though allies realized that they needed to collectively address a new age of strategic competition, they also knew that NATO does not have the luxury of doing just one thing, given the disparity of interests among its members. By implication, strategic competition meant different things to different allies. More specifically, the remaining questions were how tough to go on Russia, how to fit China into the framework, and how to placate southern European members more concerned with instability, insecurity, and underdevelopment in the Middle East and Africa.

Following intense debate, allies ultimately clarified some matters and obscured others. Among the items clarified, the 2022 *Strategic Concept* refers to Russia as the “most significant and direct threat.”<sup>17</sup> It lists some of Russia’s key modalities, including coercion, subversion, aggression, and annexation. Considering all this, it says, “We cannot consider the Russian Federation to be our partner”—in effect, annulling the “true strategic partnership” that NATO held out in its 2010 *Strategic Concept*.<sup>18</sup> NATO had sought partnership, but Russia had chosen enmity and war, and NATO would now have to adapt accordingly.

The *Strategic Concept* also identifies terrorism as the most “direct asymmetric threat to the security of our citizens and to international peace and prosperity.”<sup>19</sup> There is a caveat built into this assessment in the sense that the threat concerns the citizens, not the member states as such, and that the threat is wide and international. In other words, NATO is taking the threat seriously but may not always be well poised to *do* something about it. Domestic policing and intelligence agencies may be better suited for the task, as may be the case for international development and conciliation agencies.

For NATO, though, including this threat was necessary to placate the southern tier of allies who are most affected by the regional turbulence spilling over from Africa and the Middle East. In the *Strategic Concept*, terrorism is thus followed by an assessment of “conflict, fragility, and instability” in NATO’s southern neighborhood.<sup>20</sup> Even though the alliance has a poor history of imposing stability abroad (see Afghanistan and Libya), inclusion of this issue was necessary to satisfy the concerns of several non-Eastern allies and to create at least the appearance of balance in geographical priorities.

China earned a particularly important place in the *Strategic Concept*, specifically, the People’s Republic of China’s “stated ambitions and coercive policies” are seen as a “challenge” to NATO interests, security, and values.<sup>21</sup> This mention of China is simultaneously noteworthy and inadequate. It is noteworthy because it marks the first time the People’s Republic has ever been mentioned in a strategy for the security of the North Atlantic region. It is noteworthy also because of the multiple critical references to China’s desire to “project power,” to remain “opaque” about its strategy and intentions, to run “malicious” hybrid and cyber operations, and to “subvert” the current international order.<sup>22</sup> China may be a mere “challenge”—which in NATO’s hierarchy of priorities places it beneath Russia and terrorism “threats”—but it is clearly also a geopolitical factor of growing NATO concern.

Yet, the *Strategic Concept* seems inadequate given the role that China plays today in influence operations against European government, cyberattacks against European institutions, intellectual property theft of dual-use technology, and even sabotage of critical European infrastructure in coordination with Russia.<sup>23</sup> “The threats we face are global and interconnected,” which is how NATO prefaced its *Strategic Concept* assessment



At the 2023 Vilnius summit in Lithuania, heads of state and government, including (from left to right) Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, and U.S. President Joe Biden, welcome Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the first NATO-Ukraine Council meeting on 12 July 2023. The purpose of the NATO-Ukraine Council is to “support Ukraine’s further integration with NATO.” (Photo courtesy of NATO)

of the strategic environment.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, NATO’s political ability to put straight words to the interconnect- edness of Russia and China and China’s strategic agility across operational domains is less than impressive.

## How Russia’s War Continues to Challenge NATO

With the *Strategic Concept*—the alliance’s ends— now approved, the continuing challenge for allies is to ensure its means and ways measure up to the dynamic policies of Russia and China and ensure the alliance’s political will remains integrated with its military posture. The war in Ukraine already offers several key operational takeaways that will impact NATO and provide the basis for at least a preliminary assessment of whether alliance means and ways are meeting the moment. First, and most obviously, among those take- aways is that large-scale warfare is back. NATO allies concluded this was probably the case following Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, but the reality was

hammered home by the scale of the second invasion starting in February 2022.

Second, ubiquitous battlefield intelligence, surveil- lance, and reconnaissance have long been expected, giv- en the proliferation of unmanned aircraft around the world over the last two decades.<sup>25</sup> However, seeing this phenomenon play out in an era of large-scale warfare between two developed European countries has had an amplifying effect.

Third, and related to the strategic observation above on the commercial sector, the war in Ukraine has shown the importance of large-scale logistics under- written by a robust, flexible defense industrial capacity. In an era of potential large-scale conflict between stra- tegic competitors or their proxies, the ability to pro- duce, move, store, maintain, and sustain at scale is vital.

Finally, the conduct of the war also reminds us of the difficulty of trying to teach old dogs new tricks. Defense reform defined broadly remains elusive in much of eastern Europe, despite, in some cases, decades

of exposure to Western concepts, doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures.<sup>26</sup> This is especially evident today in Ukraine, where Western maneuver warfare has often given way to Soviet-era tactics, contributing to the limited gains on the battlefield during 2023.<sup>27</sup>

Few of these—or other—operational takeaways from the war made it into the 2022 *Strategic Concept*, partly because the document was largely completed by the time the operational lessons began to emerge and partly because the document rightly remains at the strategic level, well above the operational. That said, some strategic takeaways identified above are discernable within the *Strategic Concept*. For example, the *Strategic Concept* notes that authoritarian actors challenge NATO interests, values, and democratic way of life. In principle, such a Manichean view of the world is intuitively appealing—NATO as a democratic community is an easy sell among most allied citizens. But in practice, it flies in the face of authoritarian tendencies among a small number of allies as well as the alliance’s long history of having authoritarian regimes among its members on occasion.

Beyond these operational takeaways, the Ukraine war also challenges NATO in a wider geopolitical sense. The future place of Ukraine in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture remains a political headache, and it is growing more acute as the war continues. The *Strategic Concept* paints with a very broad brush on these issues. It contains four references to Ukraine, which is not an overwhelming level of attention paid to a European country subjected to major armed assault. NATO declares early in the *Strategic Concept* that “a strong, independent Ukraine” is “vital” for the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area. And it later “reaffirms” the 2008 Bucharest decision “with respect to Georgia and Ukraine.”<sup>28</sup>

The *Strategic Concept* thus does not spell out the Bucharest decision—that Ukraine will become a member of NATO—nor does it provide a sketch of a roadmap for achieving it. At NATO’s summit in Lithuania in July 2023, the allies continued to diverge on the concrete implications of the Bucharest decision. They did agree that Ukraine’s path to NATO membership did not need to include the somewhat tortuous Membership Action Plan, but they then detoured the fast track to membership into a new NATO-Ukraine Council, the purpose of which is to “support Ukraine’s further integration with NATO.”<sup>29</sup>

If Ukraine was winning outright on the battlefield, things would be simpler for NATO. The alliance could await victory and then offer membership once the dust settles. But Ukraine continues to struggle, and NATO is being forced into a position where it must consider ways to secure and stabilize Ukraine even as Russian forces occupy considerable portions of the country. Russia’s war on Ukraine thus compels NATO allies to revisit their operational blueprints for effective self-defense and deterrence and their geopolitical design for continental stability, and the 2022 *Strategic Concept* is but a starting point for allied responses.

## Allied Responses—Mapping Means and Ways to Ends

Given the security environment, the related strategic and operational implications, and the framing, or scaffolding, provided by the 2022 *Strategic Concept*, how have the allies responded regarding command and force structure, defense planning, operational planning, posture, or strategic deterrence? Although there is evidence of progress toward fulfilling the vision laid out across all three of the slightly revised core tasks—deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security—the weight of activity over the last two years has clearly been aimed at strengthening alliance deterrence and defense.

The most prominent manifestations of this are launching a new force model and related regional defense plans. Recognizing that it needed to better prepare its defenses against Russia, the alliance drafted a series of regional plans. These plans earmark specific allied forces and capabilities for the defense of allied territory. Previously, NATO based its operational planning on somewhat more vague operational typologies without regard for a specific adversary or a particular geography. The new operational plans were approved formally by allied heads of state and government at the Vilnius summit and addressed the requirements to defend the alliance in the north, south, and southeast.

The alliance also launched a new force model at its 2022 Madrid summit to source the forces required for the operational plans. At that time, the secretary general outlined a three-layer force structure consisting of Tier 1 forces ready for deployment in the first ten days of a crisis, Tier 2 forces ready between eleven and 180 days, and Tier 3 forces ready beyond 180 days.<sup>30</sup>





A Swedish marine watches from the gun turret of his CB-90 fast assault boat as the USS *Gunston Hall* approaches near Tovik, Norway, on 1 March 2024, just prior to the beginning of Exercise Nordic Response 24. More than twenty thousand soldiers from thirteen nations, including NATO's newest members, Finland and Sweden, took part in drills that lasted nearly two weeks in the northern regions of Finland, Norway, and Sweden. (Photo courtesy of NATO)

Additionally, the allies created a new Allied Reaction Force (ARF) that functions as the 9-1-1 force, ready to deploy within hours. Multinational and multidomain, the ARF is not tied to any specific geographic region.

The new NATO Force Model and the ARF replace the NATO Response Force and its spearhead unit, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force.<sup>31</sup> More broadly though, the NATO Force Model was designed to be a more systematic organization of the entire force pool, which is comprised of mostly land formations but includes air, maritime, cyber, and space forces.<sup>32</sup> The NATO Force Model is intended to facilitate geographic specificity required by the new plans and, therefore, to enable the identification of regional expertise requirements across the total alliance force pool. If done correctly, every force element across the alliance should know its place in the plans so that it can train and exercise in preparation for its specific role in collective defense.

At the same time though, the *Strategic Concept* commits the allies to ensuring that they can also deploy and sustain military and civilian crisis management, stabilization, and counterterrorism operations, including at

strategic distance. Given the limitations evident across the alliance in terms of manpower alone, this seems like a tall order when layered atop the requirements of collective defense in Europe.

The alliance's posture to date seems ill-suited to achieving deterrence by denial. Although the *Strategic Concept* does not use this phrase, it does state the alliance will "deter and defend forward," which amounts to the same.<sup>33</sup> In any case, achieving this goal remains on the alliance's "to-do" list, particularly regarding the defense of the Baltic states. The horrors of Bucha, the abduction of Ukrainian children, and the relentless attacks on civilian infrastructure have convinced many in the West that NATO must achieve deterrence by denial, at least in northeastern Europe versus reinforcing allies there after a conflict or crisis begins.<sup>34</sup> However, instead of bulk-ing up the alliance posture in northeastern Europe, the allies have spread the peanut butter a little more thinly, creating Enhanced Forward Presence units—or what are increasingly referred to as forward land forces—in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria.<sup>35</sup> Beyond the political symbolism, why allies (Slovakia, Hungary, and



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (*second from left*) and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy hold a bilateral meeting 20 April 2023 in Kyiv. This was Stoltenberg's first visit to Ukraine since the invasion began in 2022. (Photo courtesy of NATO)

Bulgaria) with little to fear from Russian land forces or allies (Romania and Bulgaria) facing greater threats from Russian missiles, drones, and submarines would need or want land-centric allied units is a mystery.

Meanwhile, the alliance's approach to nuclear issues remains partly hamstrung by an unwillingness to fully and openly address the imbalance evident when considering Russian and Western capabilities and capacities in the European theater.<sup>36</sup> Russia maintains a formidable mobile nuclear arsenal in Kaliningrad and Belarus, and it has a strong record of issuing nuclear threats.<sup>37</sup> Responding to these challenges and reversing the imbalance is taking time, as many allies still await deliveries of dual-capable F-35s. However, there are reasons to think that even if they acquired them immediately, the alliance's nuclear posture would still be insufficient in quantity and perhaps quality as well.<sup>38</sup>

At a broader geopolitical level, while keenly aware of the stakes involved in the war in Ukraine, the alliance per se has been at pains to pull Kyiv closer while simultaneously keeping support for the war at arm's length. The military, financial, and humanitarian aid channeled to Ukraine is at the behest of individual countries acting as such and not as NATO allies or countries acting in

coalition, such as the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. There is no NATO stamp on the lethal aid going to Ukraine's embattled forces. NATO's secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, also did not visit President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, until April 2023, more than a full year into the war. This reflected NATO's political masters reigning in the presence of the alliance in the war, eager to avoid escalation and fulfillment of Russia's narrative.<sup>39</sup>

For some allies, another key way of avoiding escalation has been to delay Ukraine's membership into the alliance. However, failing to offer Ukraine NATO membership could be seen as succumbing to Russia's balance of power politics. A Ukraine left outside a collective defense umbrella could de facto become pulled into Russia's security sphere, meaning Russia would have succeeded in arresting NATO's post-Cold War promise of a Europe "whole and free"—a vision first outlined by President George H. W. Bush in 1989—and in imposing a balance of spheres of interest.<sup>40</sup>

NATO allies have punted this football. Their 2023 summit decision to set up a NATO-Ukraine Council was tantamount to buying time.<sup>41</sup> Whether this, coupled with some advice on meeting conditions for



membership, will satisfy those members of the alliance most supportive of a faster track for Kyiv's candidacy remains doubtful.<sup>42</sup> They may force those who would prefer to avoid this contentious topic at the July 2024 Washington summit to offer more refined political thinking on how to pull NATO through this squeeze between escalation and capitulation.

What seems certain is that Ukraine, in the long run, challenges NATO to deepen its thinking on its political vision. If NATO's goal, as expressed in the 2022 *Strategic Concept*, is a world in which "sovereignty, territorial integrity, human rights and international law are respected and where each country can choose its own path, free from aggression, coercion or subversion," then it needs to consider that there cannot be "border lands"—countries like Ukraine, stuck between the West and Russia.<sup>43</sup> Russian leaders remain bent on conflating their own security with dominance over their neighbors, which, of course, is the opposite of sovereignty.

For this reason, fulfilling its vision must involve a clear-eyed view of not only NATO's long-term Russia strategy but also the path to greater European defense contribution and leadership inside the alliance. This is particularly the case given the debate surrounding comments made by a leading U.S. presidential candidate, which appears to threaten American abandonment of European allies.<sup>44</sup> NATO's thinking on these issues will predictably take time and involve a considerable amount of summitry and day-to-day consultations in NATO headquarters.

## NATO's Washington Summit and Beyond

NATO's 2022 *Strategic Concept* has invigorated the alliance's collective defense commitment. It designates Russia as the alliance's most significant and direct

threat. And it commits allies to developing the force posture for effective defense and deterrence. There is thus a clear ends, ways, and means structure to the 2022 *Strategic Concept* that its 2010 predecessor lacked.

However, as we have argued, NATO political and military authorities must continuously upgrade this structure considering the situation on the battlefield in Ukraine and of wider geopolitical events, not least China's role in supporting Russia's war. Two issues are paramount in NATO's continuing search for an integrated political-military strategy. First, allies need a military force concept that ensures continuous adaptation to commercial sector and battlefield innovations, and they need to ensure that this concept comes to life in European defense enterprises. Inevitably, these allies will have to do a lot of the heavy lifting of forward defense and must adapt. In short, NATO's military rubber needs to meet the road.

Moreover, NATO needs to connect this force concept to its political vision for Ukraine. Eventually, the alliance's forward defense will need to stretch from Finland, down through the Baltics, into Poland, across northern Ukraine, along the Donbas, and down to Odessa. If NATO plays a longer game, it will still have to consider how members' national forces in various formats can meaningfully assist Ukraine while defending and deterring aggression against what is likely to be a significant enlargement—geopolitically and operationally—of NATO territory.

NATO's new *Strategic Concept* is a prescription for thorough, top-to-bottom political-military dialogue for the purpose of strategy. Events on Ukraine's battlefield show that NATO can still improve in this classical art. ■

*The views expressed are the authors' own, and do not necessarily reflect those of their respective employers or governments.*

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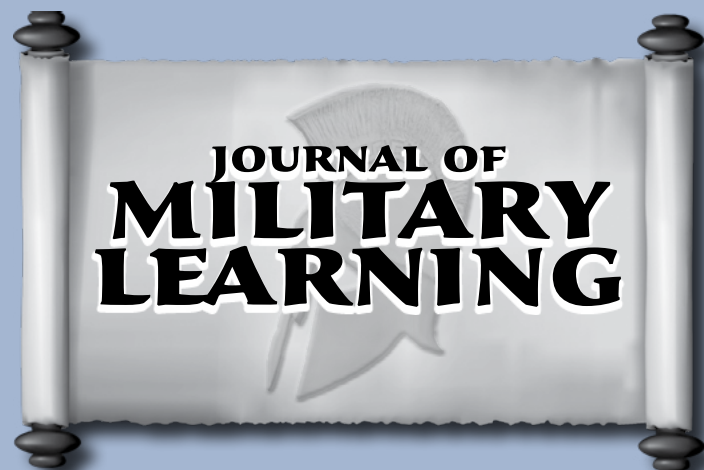
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