

## From deterrence to containment The Future of the International Order is decided in Ukraine

Luis de Almeida Sampaio  
Ambassador\*

### Introduction

The author sets out to achieve two objectives with this reflection<sup>1 2</sup>. Firstly - through a foray into successive NATO strategic concepts - to highlight that with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, deterrence has not failed because what defines it, as a central element of NATO's overall strategy, applies exclusively to the protection of allies who are signatories to the Washington Treaty - protection anchored in the collective defence clause enshrined in its Article 5<sup>3</sup> - and therefore does not apply to third states.

Secondly, by elaborating on the limits of deterrence, to contribute to the ongoing debate on the implications of the adaptation of NATO's new strategic concept<sup>4</sup>, speaking out in favour of the urgency of a containment

---

<sup>1</sup> reflection that reproduces and expands the author's intervention in the session *Ukraine, Russia and the West*, on 27 June 2023, integrated in the 31st edition of the *Estoril Political Forum*.

<sup>2</sup> a sentence to note that although the author's speech at the 31st edition of the *Estoril Political Forum* preceded, albeit by a few days (27 June 2023), the NATO Summit in Vilnius (11 and 12 July 2023), this text includes considerations arising from the results of this which, in addition to their specific importance - especially when combined with the statements by the President of the European Commission and the High Representative, as well as the concomitant G7 decisions taken on the same occasion - should be interpreted already in the perspective of the road to next year's Washington Summit which, in celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Atlantic Alliance, will not fail to be a unique opportunity for major resolutions.

<sup>3</sup> Article 5 of the Washington Treaty: "*The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.*"

<sup>4</sup> adopted at the Madrid Summit on 29 June 2022.

strategy that projects international stability and security even beyond the Atlantic Alliance's area of responsibility.

## Deterrence

Without prejudice to the premise that deterrence precedes and is not exhausted by the Washington Treaty, it is indispensable for any analysis of its scope and meaning as understood by the Atlantic Alliance to begin by recalling the essentials of Articles 5 and 6 of the Washington Treaty.

According to Article 5: "*The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all*" and Article 6<sup>5</sup>, "*For the purpose of Article 5, an armed attack on one or more of the Parties is deemed to include an armed attack on the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, on the territory of Turkey or on the Islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer, on the forces, vessels, or aircraft of any of the Parties, when in or over these territories or the Mediterranean Sea or the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer*".

Anchored in these two central articles of its founding treaty, NATO's first two strategic concepts (1949 and 1952) had as their matrix the building of a robust deterrence.

The first of these two documents<sup>6</sup> states as its main objective: "*To coordinate, in time of peace, our military and economic strength with a view to creating a powerful deterrent to any nation or group of nations threatening the peace, independence and stability of the North Atlantic family of nations*". This "*powerful deterrent*" was essentially based on the threat of the use of US nuclear weapons (although without mentioning them) - the so-called "*deterrence by punishment*" - but immediately introduced a second pillar - the so-called "*deterrence by denial*" - through the deployment of adequate forces to defend Allied territory.

In other words, '*deterrence by denial*' was nothing more than a forward defence strategy designed to '*stop the enemy's advance as far east as possible*'.

In 1952, the second strategic concept maintains the two pillars of deterrence but, as a result of the lessons of the Korean War, emphasises the

---

<sup>5</sup> in the edited version after the accession of Greece and Turkey in 1952.

<sup>6</sup> the historic DC 6/1: "Strategic Concept for the Defence of the North Atlantic Area", approved in December 1949.

prominence of the first, the nuclear one, with the aim of making it clear that any attempt to seize Allied territory would have exorbitant costs.

Deterrence remains central to the third strategic concept (1957) - which is the first to explicitly mention nuclear weapons and recommend their use in the form of *massive retaliation*, including in response to conventional Soviet aggression - always with two pillars, recognising that these would require two distinct types of forces: nuclear (*the sword*) and conventional (*the shield*).

However, although in the 1957 strategic concept NATO's conventional forces were not a mere *trip wire* for massive nuclear retaliation, they were not yet given the decisive role that they would later assume with the *flexible response*, an idea that underlies the 1968 strategic concept.

Since 1968, with the adoption of the *flexible response* doctrine, NATO has finally equipped itself with the means to respond "gradually and appropriately" to a crisis. In the well-known words of Robert McNamara: "our great nuclear superiority does not solve all our deterrence problems".

Indeed, the doctrine of *massive retaliation*, because it implied starting a nuclear war, undermined deterrence since the West, as the Berlin crisis had shown, would not take such a step except in extreme circumstances.

The consequence was a reversal of the role of the two pillars of deterrence. In Berlin and Cuba, to again quote McNamara, "conventional forces were our sword and nuclear forces our shield".

Primacy then shifts to conventional forces. The simple listing of the three types of *flexible response* (*direct defence*; *deliberate escalation*; *general nuclear response*) makes it immediately clear how the emphasis shifts to the forward posture of NATO conventional forces, their "appropriate deployment in depth in suitable tactical locations", logistical support, tactical mobility and the establishment of a trained, equipped and ready reserve force.

This strategy, the *flexible response*, worked for two decades and was perhaps "the" decisive factor in the Allied victory in the Cold War.

What comes next is well known. With the advent of a new era in international security, NATO's three strategic concepts - 1991, 1999 and 2010 - have moved away from deterrence to focus on a broad range of tasks including *dialogue*, *cooperation*, *consultation*, *collective defence*, *crisis management*, *conflict prevention*, *partnerships* and *cooperative security*.

In essence, in this phase of its strategic thinking, the Atlantic Alliance replaces the concept of *forward defence* with that of a *reduced forward presence* and reshapes the principle of *flexible response* to reflect less reliance on nuclear weapons.

As the world had changed, or seemed to have changed, the two pillars of deterrence had disappeared, or at least seen their ambition and strategic significance greatly reduced.

All because NATO's strategic ambition had come to rest on the hope that a *balanced mix of forces* would be sufficient to implement this *new broad approach to security*. The 1991 strategic concept left no doubt: "The Allies seek, through arms control and disarmament, to enhance security and stability at the lowest possible level of forces".

The word deterrence has disappeared from official NATO documents. In a word, after the victory in the Cold War, NATO's strategy became disarmament.

This profound transformation, with consequences that were unforeseeable at the time, continued unabated in the strategic concepts of 1999 and 2010 with the goal of achieving the *ideal balance* between *crisis response forces* and *forces capable of preparing for the worst-case scenario* - considered very remote - of the need for *large-scale operations* for collective defence.

In 2014 the world changed.

The Wales Summit Declaration (5 September 2014) is unequivocal: "We, the Heads of State and Government of the member countries of the North Atlantic Alliance, meet in Wales at a crucial moment for Euro-Atlantic security. Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace."

Reality, with the brutality that always characterises it, had destroyed NATO's post-Cold War strategic concepts. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war imposed by Russia in the Donbas radically undermined the approach that NATO had adopted since 1991 to maintain stability in Europe.

There was therefore an urgent need to rethink deterrence, including through an *enhanced forward presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland*, embodied in multinational battle groups, as decided at the Warsaw summit in 2016.

This new stance, which essentially consisted of "rapidly reinforcing any Ally under threat to meet all contingencies", was complemented by the new doctrine - still the subject of complex debate - of allowing "cyber" and "hybrid" attacks to be treated as armed attacks within the meaning of Articles 5 and 6 of the Washington Treaty.

At the same time, deterrence took on a new dimension with the progressive extension - open to all allies who wished to adopt it - of the Nordic concept of *total defence*, involving civil society and individual citizens in NATO's protection.

These adaptations, all of which were the result of the events of 2014, seemed to work momentarily, contributing to a climate of some détente and immediately precipitating the resurgence of voices in favour of resuming the security dialogue with Russia because, despite those events, the "strategic balance" in Europe would remain intact, according to their heralds.

## A changing world and NATO's new strategic concept

On 24 February 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine shattered this illusion for good.

And with its destruction came another with even deeper consequences.

Indeed, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine - because it did not constitute an armed attack against a NATO member - did not represent the failure of deterrence, its ramifications laid bare another reality to which the 2014 aggression had already pointed, but which no one had dared to recognise at the time: what had failed, with the thunder of Russian bombardments of Ukraine, was the containment of Russia's aggression, which, in the end, had always been one of the West's great objectives.

NATO was thus forced to recognise that, faced with Putin's Russia, it no longer had the capacity to manage crises outside the Article 5 area of responsibility, unlike in Bosnia, Kosovo and to some extent Afghanistan.

Reductions in defence investment by allies since 1991 had exacerbated the fundamental problem, and by the time the 2022 invasion broke out it was clear that the strategic balance had shifted significantly.

However, none of this should be surprising to anyone who has studied the impact of the *Primakov doctrine*<sup>7</sup> on the political and military thinking of the ruling regime in the Kremlin, how Putin appropriates that thinking as early as February 2007<sup>8</sup> and, as a result, the Russian incursions into Georgia and Syria and, of course, the events of 2014.

For the purposes of this text, it matters little whether the Russian Federation continues to define itself, like the Soviet Union before it, in opposition to NATO and the West in general, whether in terms of security or democratic values, just as it matters little whether this existential opposition is inherent in Russia's geopolitical situation or whether it results from decisions by the Putin regime.

The point here is to try to understand whether and how, in the new strategic phase we are in, the West - NATO and the European Union - will have the means, conceptual, political and military, to contain Russia in and after Ukraine and to provide resilience and security to neighbouring or partner countries that cannot do so on their own.

---

<sup>7</sup> Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov (29 October 1929 - 26 June 2015) was a Russian politician and diplomat. During his long career he was Prime Minister (1998-99), Foreign Minister, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, head of the secret service and member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. His doctrine represents the rejection of the international order prevailing since the end of the Cold War and is the consecration of the *realpolitik* of spheres of influence.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Putin's speech took place on 10 February 2007 at the Munich Security Conference. The echoes of the *Primakov doctrine* are evident: "...Putin criticised what he called the United States' monopolistic dominance in global relations, and its "almost uncontained hyperuse of force in international relations".

It is in this exact context that the new NATO strategic concept adopted at the Madrid Summit on 29 June 2022 should be read, since it is inseparable from the adaptation of a new *deterrence and defence posture*, approved on the same occasion, which contemplates the transition from "*forward presence*" to "*forward defence*".

In other words, NATO's new *posture* is now evolving again from a mere *trip wire* function to a true *deterrence by denial*, which implies the possibility of reinforcing NATO *battlegroups* on the eastern flank, increasing forces in high readiness and strengthening pre-positioned capabilities.

This development, because it raises the Alliance's level of ambition, inevitably has consequences in terms of resources. But that is another debate that cannot be detailed here.

NATO's three *core tasks* are renamed: "*deterrence and defence*" instead of "*collective defence*"; "*crisis management and prevention*" instead of simply "*crisis management*"; and "*cooperative security*", the latter as in the 2010 Lisbon document.

This characterisation appears in the Madrid document only after the description of the strategic environment, considered "changing" and posing unprecedented risks to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area.

The effects of emerging and disruptive technologies, the erosion of international arms control frameworks and climate change as a crisis multiplier, in addition to the persistence of instability and conflict in the Alliance's neighbourhood, are also described as having an impact on our collective security.

In addition, the concepts of "resilience" and "technological advantage" are enshrined as "*critical enablers*" of all NATO functions and activities.

In the case of crisis prevention and management, the new strategic concept specifies that NATO will continue to prevent and respond to crises whenever they may significantly affect the security of allies, and as for cooperative security, NATO's partnership policy is firmly oriented towards preserving and protecting the "*international rules-based order*".

It then reaffirms the "*open door*" policy already enshrined in Article 10 of the Washington Treaty and emphasises the NATO-EU relationship, both in terms of "crisis management" and "cooperative security", reiterating that the European Union is NATO's "*unique and essential partner*".

It all culminated in the promise of the continued success of the Atlantic Alliance, which perseveres in strengthening its cohesion and unity, intensifying consultations between Allies and the centrality of the *transatlantic link* to collective security.

NATO's new strategic concept seeks to address this whole range of challenges, but it was set against the backdrop of aggression in Ukraine and the imperative to contain Russia.

But does it represent a real containment strategy?

### **A containment strategy**

Some clues to answer this question are listed below.

In the West, the overwhelming majority of voices with political, intellectual and academic responsibilities believe that the future of the international order is decided in Ukraine and argue that everything must continue to be done to ensure that Ukraine can assert its right to territorial integrity, self-defence<sup>9</sup> and its right to self-determination<sup>10</sup>.

At the same time, there is no shortage of other voices, including in the West, with arguably equivalent political responsibility and intellectual and academic credentials - some even without differing from those on Russia's responsibility for triggering the conflict and its terrible consequences - who insist on the need and urgency of a rapid negotiated solution to the conflict, even if to do so Ukraine must make concessions - first territorial, but also limiting its sovereignty and its right to self-determination - and offer Russia "security guarantees".

In essence, these other voices want the West to find ways and mechanisms to accommodate, even if only partially, Russian claims and demands, which underpin the narrative used by the Kremlin to justify the invasion.

It is too early to know which of these two currents of opinion, once transformed into a political and diplomatic course of action, will ultimately prevail, just as it is too early to predict how much longer Russia's war on Ukraine will last.

I think it is not unfair to say that the latter voices - always invoking the argument, which is very difficult to refute, especially among our public opinion, that the priority must be a rapid end to the conflict - seem to attach more importance to "accommodating" Russia in Ukraine than to doing everything to ensure that the international order based on international law, including, but not limited to, the UN Charter, is preserved and strengthened.

Russia's understanding of the future of the international order is essentially different from that of the West and its allies.

And this is exactly why a strategy to contain Russian aggression is vital.

In these terms, a containment strategy will also require - independently of and in addition to support (political, economic, financial, humanitarian,

---

<sup>9</sup> as enshrined in Article 51, Chapter VII, of the UN Charter.

<sup>10</sup> as enshrined in Article 1, Chapter I, paragraph 2 of the UN Charter.

military) for Ukraine, and perhaps for other countries that may be targeted by Russian expansionism - the prioritisation and strengthening of deterrence, including the nuclear dimension and the ballistic missile defence component, which will raise very delicate domestic political problems in many of the Allies.

It will also always be essential to coordinate, firstly between the European Union (which the new strategic concept defines, I repeat, as a "*unique and essential partner*") and NATO, but also with other partners in the Mediterranean, the Indo-Pacific region, Africa and Latin America, the appropriate political responses to the challenges that Russia poses to the international order.

From this perspective, there should be no illusions about the difficulties, perhaps insurmountable, in securing China's support for this endeavour, but neither should there be any advantage in ignoring the fact that China is not only a challenge, competition and opportunity, but also an inevitable actor in the preservation or destruction of the international order.

In any case, it will always be crucial, above all, to maintain and strengthen the vitality of the transatlantic relationship, which will only be possible within the framework of NATO, relying on the United States and the United Kingdom, in close coordination and complementarity with the European Union.

In view of the above, a question arises: how can these important objectives be implemented?

The answer can never be unaware that perceptions of the threat are not univocal in Western public opinion, as they are the result of geography and history and, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries, are part of heated domestic political debate.

Second, because there remain, both in the United States and in Europe, geopolitical priorities competing with the containment of Russian assertiveness. China, the Indo-Pacific, the fight against terrorism, even until recently Afghanistan, are just part of that list of priorities.

With regard to China, it is essential to realise that, regardless of the *nuances* between American and European policy - and, in the case of the latter, between the different EU member states - there is a fundamental convergence in NATO's assessment of the challenges, risks and threats posed by China, as reflected in the new strategic concept.

Terrorism - one of the two threats (Russia is the other) explicitly labelled as such in NATO's new strategic concept - remains the most direct asymmetric threat to the security of Alliance citizens and to international peace and prosperity.

Finally, we should also bear in mind the particular strategic relevance of both the Western Balkans and the South (which includes the Maghreb, the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa, of particular importance to Portugal).



These are concerns that are gaining justified prominence as the threats emanating from it are no longer limited to terrorism, but result from the increasing assertiveness and presence of Russia and also China.

Given this simple list of imponderables, it is easy to conclude that the chances of the heralds of accommodating Putin (not "humiliating" him, to repeat an expression already used publicly by political leaders of countries with very significant European and global influence) winning are very high.

If they win, the West will give up the opportunity to create the conditions for achieving real strategic stability with Russia in time, on its own terms.

The immediate consequence of such a resignation will be the prolongation of an ever-precarious equilibrium which, in essence, will represent the recognition, at least tacitly, that Primakov was right after all and that European security and the relationship with Russia have no alternative outside resignation to the *realpolitik* of spheres of influence.

At the antithesis of this position are those who argue that the only way to restore the international order based on rules and values - to protect the territorial integrity of states and the right of peoples to self-determination - is to contain Russia and its ambitions now, in Ukraine and about Ukraine.

Only in this way, by pursuing a policy of genuine "strategic containment"<sup>11</sup> will it be possible to counter Russia's political will and military capability, paving the way for the promotion of the minimum conditions required for better dialogue, greater predictability, more transparency and more effective risk reduction, and thus slowly but surely building "strategic stability" based on respect for international law.

## Conclusion

I hope I have made it clear that, like the redefinition of NATO's defence and deterrence posture, the construction of a containment strategy is not just a military-strategic issue. It is, above all, a political issue, requiring unity and solidarity.

It is in this framework that the outcome of the NATO Summit in Vilnius<sup>12</sup>, the statements made by the President of the European Commission and the EU High Representative on the same occasion, and the concomitant decisions taken by the G-7 should be understood.

---

<sup>11</sup> also in the sense of George F. Kennan and his famous, though anonymous, article in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947.

<sup>12</sup> the NATO Summit took place in Vilnius on 11 and 12 July 2023.

As for the summit's outcomes, even its critics will recognise the success of the strengthened deterrence along the entire front line with Russia from the *High North* to the Mediterranean, the effects of the recent accession of Finland and (soon) Sweden<sup>13</sup>, the enhanced forward presence on the territory of eight of the allies and the *New Force Model*, agreed last year, setting out specific wartime responsibilities, notably for meeting obligations arising from the commitment to devote at least 2% of each ally's gross domestic product to defence spending<sup>14</sup>.

Of course, the same critics will not fail to point out the "lack of ambition" on the degree of openness regarding Ukraine's future membership. But it could not be otherwise given the specific weight of the most reluctant, in this case the United States and Germany.

The end result may not have been inspiring enough for Zelenskyy, as he was keen to make clear, but what is certain is that Ukraine now no longer needs to comply with the dictates of the *Membership Action Plan*, that the *NATO-Ukraine Commission* becomes the *Council*, that the Alliance will support Ukraine in carrying out the reforms essential for future membership, and that membership will come as soon as "the Allies agree and the conditions are met", which means, in practice, *when the war is over*.

This is not the place for an exegesis of the Vilnius communiqué, but I will always say that it cannot be dissociated from the G7 statement issued on the same occasion<sup>15</sup>, which reaffirms Ukraine's right to choose its own destiny without intimidation or aggression and emphasises the continued supply of arms to enable Ukraine to win the war.

It should be emphasised that the G7 declaration, which basically aims at providing security guarantees for Ukraine, is open to all countries that wish to join<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> indeed, in the margins of the Vilnius Summit, the last obstacles to Sweden becoming NATO's 32nd member were removed, and now - at the time of writing - only the ratification processes for its accession by the parliaments of Hungary and Turkey have to be finalised.

<sup>14</sup> one of the long-anticipated "novelties" of the Vilnius Summit was the adoption of a new *Defence Investment Pledge* which, in a very general way, sets as a minimum and no longer as a target (unlike the Wales commitment), to devote 2% of the gross domestic products of each of the allies to defence spending.

<sup>15</sup> interesting to note that the G7 members were all in Vilnius.

<sup>16</sup> for example, Portugal and the Czech Republic, where the author is accredited as Ambassador of Portugal, were among the first countries to join the G-7 declaration.

However, neither the summit communiqué, nor the G7 statement, nor the proclamations made at the same time by either the President of the European Commission or the High Representative, yet constitute a strategy for containing the present aggressions and protecting against future provocations by the Kremlin.

But while we wait for this strategy, the urgency of which is highlighted in this text, we must recognise that the path that will lead to it has already begun.

A path that, in the short term, will involve the need for NATO to equip itself with the plans and resources to give substance to its new deterrence posture, in the expectation that it will - with enhanced interoperability between allies and also with Ukraine, accompanied by increased production of military hardware, especially so-called *battle decisive ammunition* - contribute to the containment of Russia's aggression and the restoration of international order.

If not, NATO's new strategic concept and the ongoing adaptations that go into it will ultimately be among the main tools for dealing with a situation the West has not yet faced in this century: a full-scale war in Europe.

This is also why building a strategy to contain Russia's aggression is the best guarantee for peace in Europe in our time. In essence, it is the best agenda for peace, and the only one that can simultaneously guarantee our collective security and preserve the international order.

That is also why the advocates of peace in Ukraine at any price are placing us all before threats, even if momentarily deferred in time, of unimaginable consequences.

---

N.B.: This text is the sole responsibility of its author and does not necessarily reflect official positions of the Portuguese Government.

\*The author is a diplomat. He served in Brussels (in NATO and the European Commission), Bosnia and Herzegovina and Angola, was responsible for Portuguese development cooperation, was ambassador to Algeria, Serbia, Germany and NATO and is currently ambassador to the Czech Republic. Author of dozens of articles on political science and international relations, he recently published a book on the economic and financial crisis of the last decade, entitled "*Diplomacy in the Time of the Troika*".