
THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE DEFENSE CONCEPTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NATO DEFENSE CONCEPT

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Abstract: The contemporary security environment is characterized by increasingly complex and multidimensional threats that challenge traditional approaches to defense. In this context, the Republic of North Macedonia, as a NATO member state, faces the need to align its national defense requirements with the principles and obligations of collective defense. This paper examines the theoretical basis and rationale for developing a modern national defense concept for the Republic of North Macedonia within the context of NATO's defense concept. The research is based on a theoretical and comparative analysis of academic literature and strategic and defense documents, with particular emphasis on distinguishing between the concepts of *concept* and *conception*, as well as on the key elements of contemporary defense. The analysis demonstrates that a concept represents an abstract intellectual model, whereas a conception constitutes a broader framework that integrates concepts, principles, strategic objectives, institutional capabilities, and available resources into a coherent system oriented towards practical action. The analysis of NATO's contemporary defense concept identifies collective defense, deterrence, national defense capabilities, resilience, and the whole-of-society approach as interconnected elements of contemporary defense (NATO, 2022, 2024, 2025). The findings further indicate that the Republic of North Macedonia has a **National Security and Defense Concept adopted in 2003**, as well as other strategic and defense documents; however, the existing strategic framework does not provide a modern, integrated, and updated national defense concept that systematically brings together strategic objectives, institutional capabilities, and societal resources in accordance with the contemporary security environment and the obligations arising from NATO membership (Ministry of Defense, 2003, 2020, 2023). The research also identifies the country's historical experience related to mobilization, resistance, and self-organization as a potential national resource that could contribute to the development of a modern defense concept. The findings indicate that a modern national defense concept should not be understood as an alternative to NATO collective defense, but rather as a complementary national framework for integrating national capabilities and resources with the obligations and standards of the Alliance. The paper concludes that the development and updating of such a concept represents a justified and necessary direction for strengthening the coherence, effectiveness, resilience, and sustainability of the defense system of the Republic of North Macedonia. Further research should focus on its practical implementation, institutional structure, coordination mechanisms, and the integration of national resources within NATO's collective defense system.

Keywords: conception, concept, NATO, defense, resilience

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary security environment is characterized by the emergence and intensification of asymmetric and hybrid threats that transcend the traditional dimensions of armed conflict. Under such conditions, security is evolving from a narrowly defined military category into a broader societal category encompassing the political, economic, informational, and other dimensions of the functioning of the state and society. This transformation of the security environment necessitates a reassessment of traditional approaches to defense and the development of more integrated models capable of responding to the complexity and interconnectedness of contemporary threats (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; NATO, 2022).

Hybrid threats involve a combination of conventional and unconventional means and methods of action, creating a need for an integrated and multidimensional approach to defense. Hoffman emphasizes the convergence of conventional, irregular, criminal, and terrorist forms of action and the need to understand contemporary conflict as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon (Hoffman, 2009). In the contemporary security context, the concept of resilience has acquired particular significance as a basis for the ability of the state and society to withstand threats, adapt to crises, and maintain continuity of functioning following their disruption (NATO, 2022, 2024, 2025).

In this regard, defense can no longer be viewed exclusively as a military function, but rather as a broader system that connects institutional capabilities, critical infrastructure, economic and technological resources, and societal resilience. NATO currently links national and collective resilience to the ability of states and societies to prepare for, withstand, respond to, and rapidly recover from a wide range of disruptions and crises (NATO, 2024, 2025). Within such a security environment, the Republic of North Macedonia, as a NATO member state, faces the need to align its national defense capabilities with the principles and obligations of collective defense, while maintaining its capacity to function and respond to threats at the national level. NATO membership provides a

framework for collective security, while at the same time emphasizing the responsibility of each member state to develop and maintain its own defense capabilities. Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty provides the foundation for this national responsibility and for the development of individual and collective resilience and defense capabilities (NATO, 2022, 2024).

In this context, the question of the existence, content, and potential development and updating of a national defense concept is significant not only for the national defense system, but also for its functional integration with NATO's collective defense system.

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to examine the prospects for the development and enhancement of a national defense concept for the Republic of North Macedonia within the context of NATO's defense concept, through a theoretical and comparative examination of key concepts, principles, and contemporary approaches to defense. Particular attention is devoted to distinguishing between the concepts of *concept* and *conception*, examining the characteristics of NATO's contemporary defense concept, and assessing their relevance to the national defense system of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The research is based on a theoretical and comparative analysis of academic literature and strategic documents, with the aim of examining the relationship between national defense requirements and the obligations arising from NATO membership.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted through a theoretical and comparative analysis of academic literature and strategic documents in the fields of defense and security. The primary analytical material consisted of theoretical sources addressing the concepts of *concept* and *conception*, NATO strategic documents, and documents pertaining to the defense system of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The theoretical analysis was applied to determine the meaning and conceptual distinction between *concept* and *conception*, as well as to examine their application in the field of defense. In this regard, a concept is examined as an abstract category and intellectual framework, whereas a conception is understood as a broader and systematized framework that connects theoretical premises with practical objectives and courses of action (Gray, 2010; Mintzberg, 1994).

The comparative analysis was employed to compare the key elements of NATO's contemporary defense concept with the national strategic and defense orientations of the Republic of North Macedonia. The analysis took into account NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, the Alliance's contemporary approaches to resilience and civil preparedness, as well as national strategic documents published by the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of North Macedonia (NATO, 2022, 2024, 2025; Ministry of Defense, 2003, 2020, 2023).

The analysis focused on the following elements: collective defense, deterrence, resilience, national defense capabilities, the whole-of-society approach, and the relationship between strategic objectives, institutional capabilities, and societal resources. In addition, the historical experience of the Republic of North Macedonia was examined as an element relevant to understanding the national approach to defense.

The findings of the theoretical and comparative analyses were synthesized to examine whether the existing strategic orientations and documents of the Republic of North Macedonia provide an integrated framework for national defense and to determine the extent to which they can be aligned with NATO's contemporary defense concept.

3. RESULTS

The theoretical and comparative analysis demonstrates that distinguishing between *concept* and *conception* is essential for understanding the relationship between strategic thinking and the practical organization of defense. A concept provides an abstract intellectual framework for understanding a particular phenomenon, whereas a conception represents a broader and more structured framework that connects concepts, principles, strategic objectives, institutional capabilities, and available resources within a coherent system oriented towards action (Gray, 2010; Mintzberg, 1994).

The analysis of NATO's defense concept demonstrates that collective defense, deterrence, national defense capabilities, and resilience constitute interconnected elements of contemporary defense. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept reaffirms collective defense as the Alliance's fundamental purpose and identifies deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security as its three core tasks (NATO, 2022).

The analysis further demonstrates that NATO's approach extends beyond purely military capabilities and requires the involvement of civilian institutions, the private sector, and society as a whole. In this context, the **whole-of-society approach** represents an important element of resilience and national preparedness. NATO defines resilience as both a national responsibility and a collective commitment, rooted in Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO, 2024, 2025).

With regard to the Republic of North Macedonia, the analysis demonstrates that the country has a **National Security and Defense Concept adopted in 2003**, a **Defense Strategy adopted in 2020**, a **Long-Term Defense Capability Development Plan 2023–2032**, as well as other sectoral and strategic documents. The official list of

the Ministry of Defense identifies these documents as part of the strategic framework of the national defense system (Ministry of Defense, 2003, 2020, 2023).

However, the analysis demonstrates that the existence of the 2003 National Security and Defense Concept does not, in itself, mean that a modern and integrated national defense concept exists that is aligned with the contemporary security environment and with the evolving obligations and standards within NATO. Accordingly, the research does not address the question of whether a document with a conceptual character exists at all, but rather whether the existing strategic framework provides a modern, integrated, and functional conceptual foundation for national defense.

The analysis further demonstrates that the development, or alternatively the updating and enhancement, of a national defense concept could provide a framework for connecting the country's existing strategic objectives, institutional capabilities, technological resources, and societal potential. Such a concept would not constitute an alternative to NATO collective defense, but rather a national framework for fulfilling the responsibilities arising from NATO membership, particularly those associated with Article 3.

The findings also indicate that the historical experience of the Republic of North Macedonia, including traditions of mobilization, resistance, and self-organization, may constitute a relevant element in considering the foundations of a modern national defense concept. However, incorporating these historical elements would require their adaptation to the contemporary security environment, NATO requirements, and the specific characteristics of North Macedonia as a small NATO member state.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicate that distinguishing between a concept and a conception is not merely a terminological issue, but has practical implications for the organization and functioning of the national defense system. While a concept provides an intellectual basis for understanding and interpreting phenomena related to defense, a conception represents a broader framework for translating strategic ideas and principles into an organized system of objectives, capabilities, resources, and actions. From this perspective, developing a national defense conception can be understood as a process of linking strategic thinking with the practical functioning of the defense system (Gray, 2010).

The analysis of NATO's contemporary defense approach demonstrates that collective defense cannot be separated from the individual responsibilities and capabilities of its member states. NATO's understanding of resilience is rooted in Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty and emphasizes that resilience constitutes both a national responsibility and a collective commitment. It does not refer solely to military preparedness, but also to the ability of civilian institutions, critical infrastructure, essential services, the private sector, and society as a whole to withstand, respond to, and recover from crises and disruptions (NATO, 2024, 2025).

This finding is of particular significance for the Republic of North Macedonia. NATO membership provides the country with a framework for collective defense, but it does not eliminate the need for a clearly defined national approach to defense. On the contrary, the obligations arising from Article 3 emphasize the importance of national capabilities and preparedness. Therefore, the issue is not simply the absence of a national conception, but **the need to reassess, update, and integrate the existing conceptual and strategic framework** in accordance with contemporary security challenges and NATO membership.

In this regard, a national defense conception should neither duplicate NATO's defense concept nor create a separate defense structure. Its purpose would be to translate the principles and obligations arising from NATO membership into a coherent national framework adapted to the specific security environment, institutional structure, available resources, and strategic priorities of the Republic of North Macedonia. Such an approach would strengthen the link between national responsibility and collective defense rather than treating them as competing categories.

The **whole-of-society approach** is particularly important in this context. Contemporary threats, including hybrid activities, cyberattacks, attacks against critical infrastructure, disinformation, and other forms of disruption, cannot be addressed exclusively through military capabilities. NATO's contemporary approach emphasizes cooperation among government, the private sector, and civil society as an important component of national and collective resilience (NATO, 2024, 2025).

For the Republic of North Macedonia, this implies that the future enhancement of the national defense conception should view defense as a broader societal function rather than solely as the responsibility of the armed forces and defense institutions. This approach is also consistent with broader European efforts to strengthen resilience, address hybrid threats, and develop coordinated instruments for security and defense (European External Action Service, 2022).

The historical experience of the Republic of North Macedonia may also contribute to such an approach, particularly through the traditions of mobilization, resistance, and self-organization identified in the analysis. However, historical experience should not be directly transferred into contemporary defense planning. Its value primarily lies in the lessons it provides regarding societal resilience, mobilization potential, and the relationship

between the state and society in conditions of crisis. These elements should be interpreted and adapted in accordance with contemporary security requirements and NATO standards.

Overall, the findings indicate that the development and enhancement of a national defense conception could provide the Republic of North Macedonia with a more coherent framework for linking strategic objectives, institutional capabilities, technological capacities, and societal resources. Such a conception would complement, rather than replace, NATO collective defense and could contribute to greater coherence, preparedness, resilience, and sustainability of the national defense system.

5. CONCLUSION

The theoretical and comparative analysis confirms that the development and enhancement of a contemporary national defense conception for the Republic of North Macedonia represents a justified and necessary direction for the further development of the national defense system. The distinction between a concept and a conception demonstrates that a conception goes beyond the theoretical definition of terms by providing a framework for linking strategic objectives, institutional capabilities, and available resources into a coherent system oriented towards practical action.

The analysis of NATO's contemporary defense concept demonstrates that collective defense, deterrence, national defense capabilities, and resilience represent interconnected elements of contemporary defense. At the same time, the requirements arising from Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty emphasize the responsibility of individual member states to develop and maintain their own defense capabilities. The growing significance of hybrid and non-military threats further highlights the need for resilience, civil preparedness, and a whole-of-society approach (NATO, 2022, 2024, 2025).

With regard to the Republic of North Macedonia, the research confirms that the country has a **National Concept for Security and Defense dating from 2003**, as well as a Defense Strategy adopted in 2020, the Long-Term Defense Capabilities Development Plan 2023–2032, and other strategic and defense documents (Ministry of Defense, 2003, 2020, 2023).

However, the existence of these documents does not mean that the current strategic framework fully reflects contemporary security conditions, the evolution of hybrid and non-military threats, the contemporary understanding of resilience, or the full range of obligations and standards arising from NATO membership. Therefore, the main conclusion is not that the Republic of North Macedonia lacks a national conception, but that there is a **need to reassess, update, and integrate the existing conceptual and strategic framework into a contemporary national defense conception**.

A national defense conception should not be understood as an alternative to NATO collective defense or as a parallel defense system. Rather, it should serve as a national framework through which the principles and obligations arising from NATO membership can be translated into an approach adapted to the country's specific security environment, institutional capabilities, available resources, and strategic priorities. In this regard, national responsibility and collective security should be understood as complementary dimensions of defense.

The country's historical experience, together with its contemporary institutional, technological, and societal resources, may provide a basis for enhancing such a conception. However, the integration of these elements should be adapted to contemporary security requirements and NATO standards, while taking into account the specific characteristics of the Republic of North Macedonia as a small member state of the Alliance.

Finally, the research demonstrates that a national defense conception should not be regarded merely as a theoretical construct, but as a potential instrument for strengthening the coherence, effectiveness, resilience, and sustainability of the defense system of the Republic of North Macedonia. Accordingly, further research should focus on the practical development and implementation of such a conception, including its institutional structure, coordination mechanisms, allocation of responsibilities, and integration of national resources within the framework of NATO's collective defense system.

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