

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract network of thin, colorful lines (purple, blue, orange, green) connecting various colored dots (nodes). The lines are dense and form a large, circular shape that frames the central text. The colors transition from purple on the left to orange and green on the right.

**NATO  
ADVISORY GROUP  
ON EMERGING  
AND DISRUPTIVE  
TECHNOLOGIES**

ANNUAL REPORT  
2020

# Contents

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Foreword	4
NATO and innovation in an age of EDTs	6
Chapter I: Overarching recommendations	8
Chapter II: Pathways to make NATO an Emerging and Disruptive Technologies ready organisation	12
Members of the NATO Advisory Group on Emerging and Disruptive Technologies 2020-2022	22

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# Foreword

The adoption of emerging and disruptive technologies requires NATO to operate at a pace of relevance that matches the dynamic technology landscape that surrounds it and to cooperate with a variety of non-traditional actors to achieve this. The success of such an ambitious process is built upon Allied best practices, innovative thinking and honest and critical discussions on current procedures.

In July 2020, the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced the creation of an Advisory Group on Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs). Composed of 12 experts from the private sector and academia, the group provides advice to NATO's innovation efforts and challenges existing approaches when it comes to the adoption of new technologies. The twelve experts from across the Alliance have led cutting-edge research, driven policy developments on emerging technologies and have been responsible for the delivery of innovation programmes in their respective domains.

Our principal aim is to provide Allies and NATO with recommendations on how to take action in the adoption of new technologies considering both long-term goals and concrete steps that could be taken in months rather than years. This annual report sets out initial reflections collected over the last months of 2020 and the Group is looking at further developing these in the months ahead. The report opens with a scene-setter on NATO and innovation in an age of EDTs, proceeds with outlining overarching recommendations and then looks at four cross-cutting work strands to make the Alliance more adaptable. We close this report with a biographical presentation of the twelve members of the Advisory Group.

We wish you a pleasant read.

**Professor Deeph Chana**

*Chairperson of the NATO Advisory Group  
on Emerging and Disruptive Technologies*



# NATO and innovation in an age of EDTs

Policy and diplomacy are key to trigger and sustain innovation initiatives and processes.

NATO should act as a convening voice, encouraging collaboration and creating synergies. Where necessary, instruments, mechanisms and facilities to aid the development of public-private co-development and investment should be established.

These should include testing facilities and agreements that enable rapid joint prototyping, spiral development, integration and acquisition.

Building on its founding principles, NATO is exceptionally well placed to be a global driver of a values-based innovation agenda. To this end, NATO will need to take a more active role as an influencer and participant in Allied innovation ecosystems by financing fundamental research and development as well as by facilitating the testing and integration of new applications in Allied operational environments.

As an organisation focused on global security and stability, NATO should aim at ensuring that the development and the use of emerging and disruptive technologies sustains peace and prosperity, in full alignment with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.



# Chapter I

## Overarching recommendations

In its first recommendations, the Advisory Group highlighted five key areas of importance to the wider Alliance efforts when considering the development and adoption of Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs). Importantly, the Group resisted focussing solely on technical considerations, but delivered its outputs by considering the societal contexts within which EDTs exist and how NATO might maintain relevance and pace within this environment:

### 1. Key science and technology domains

The Group identified the following high-priority interrelated science and technology domains of direct interest to the Alliance.<sup>1</sup>

- **Advances in Machine Learning and Artificial intelligence:** Encompassing the development of the technology itself and advances in its application, this domain concerns the potential impact of innovations such as neuromorphic computing, generative adversarial neural networks and the ability to reveal unexpected insights from data that has been gathered or is yet to be gathered.
- **Harnessing the quantum scale:** There is an ongoing translation of knowledge gained from the study of quantum processes to useable

quantum enabled technologies including quantum computing, quantum sensing as well as quantum cryptographic systems and the manipulation/development of material at the quantum scale.

- **Data security:** Algorithms and systems for securing and compromising the security of communications, data transactions and data storage; including quantum proof encryption methods, blockchain and distributed ledger architectures and the field of cyber-security in general.
- **Computing enabled hardware:** Developments in miniaturisation, power harvesting and energy storage. This domain encompasses the physical systems necessary to deliver digitally enabled critical infrastructure on a global scale (Internet of Things) and the widespread use of robotics. The true scale of global disruption that these developments will bring is yet to be fully revealed/understood.
- **Biological and synthetic materials:** Including the design, synthesis and manipulation of materials at the atomic/molecular level to innovations at mesoscopic and macroscopic scales. Enablers include bioengineering, chemical engineering, gene-level manipulation, additive manufacturing and generative design.

<sup>1</sup> This is not an exhaustive list and is not ordered in terms of relative importance.

## 2. The Socio-Technical context

The Group foresees the continued proliferation of cyber-physical systems; where computing systems directly affect change in the physical world and evolve autonomously through sensing and data. Advances in autonomy, the ubiquity of high-speed communications and other advances will rapidly drive human-machine teaming. The rise in communication platforms and the importance of data transactions will simultaneously motivate citizen expectations concerning digital inclusion/isolation and the needs for protecting personal digital assets – including private data and private computing tools.



## 3. The Battle for Resources

As the global population increases, the struggle for classically defined resources such as water, food, energy and raw materials will continue to grow and heighten. Data as a resource will add a significant new stress dimension to these pre-existing drivers of conflict, creating and reinforcing global asymmetries in opportunity and prosperity. Geographic data pooling has the potential to create data poverty in the world, data gathering without rights and consent has the potential to create optimal conditions for data exploitation and the insights gained from data analysis risk increasing disadvantage when it comes to accessing more conventional resources. These conditions are likely to precipitate digital and physical conflicts over data and data systems in the future – cyber-physical conflict.

Importantly, Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Business (STEM-B) talent and competence will be the human resource of global value and key strategic importance. Allied and partner countries need to be shaped to develop, attract and retain such talent.

## 4. The emerging theatre of EDT activity: Space

Space will be the key theatre of the future within which NATO must lead in the development of a technologically proliferated environment that is demonstrably driven by values and ideals. Primarily, the domain of Space should be viewed as an opportunity to deliver on its global good objectives (e.g. UN Sustainable Development Goals, NATO 2030) rather than a platform for perpetuating archaic conflict narratives. The opportunity for global thought leadership in EDTs presents itself and should be taken.



## 5. Necessary organisational traits

NATO will need to embrace certain organisational traits to capitalise on and cope with the developments and trends outlined above. Importantly, NATO will have to commit financial and human resources to this effort. The Alliance will need to develop its capability to horizon scan effectively, experiment at pace and embrace the idea of controlled failure to achieve greater agility. NATO will need to develop ontologies and taxonomies to structure EDT knowledge across the Alliance. The organisation will need to develop internal competence in innovative technologies and innovation and actively participate in developing triple-helix ecosystems in order to optimally leverage the brightest minds from industry, government and academia. In addition, NATO will urgently need to develop novel means and methods of achieving modularity and interoperability at pace through experimentation, testing, standards development and best practice.

Common international rules and regulations on transfer, use and access to data and technologies will shape alliances and trust in the age of digitization. The active role of NATO in the discussion on international policy will be key for the security and peace amongst Allies.

NATO must establish itself as a recognisable thought leader amongst the technology literate, engaging with civil and defence applications across the public and private domains. Leading the mission to use Emerging and Disruptive Technologies to defend the ideals, ethics and norms of free, open, tolerant and transparent societies that seek to protect human dignity and diversity. EDTs bring the risk of significant erosion of these ideals if misused.

In the following section, the Advisory Group provided initial recommendations on how to achieve these organisational traits.



## Chapter II

# Pathways to make NATO an Emerging and Disruptive Technologies ready organisation

A clear challenge that emerges from the Group's deliberations is the need for NATO to become an organisation that is able to adapt and adopt new technologies at a pace that is appropriate to the rapidly evolving EDT landscape. In order to achieve this aim NATO will have to embrace the organisational traits of agility within a coherent Innovation Programme, which include:

- Widening of the distribution of technology literacy throughout the organisation;
- Establishing an efficient network of Innovation Centres – drawing on NATO's existing innovation capabilities;
- Design, facilitation and participation in novel, flexible financing mechanisms, enabling NATO to embrace not only innovation driven by large companies but, importantly, by agile and disruptive tech SMEs;
- Development of an Allied Innovation Ecosystem – creating innovation partnership initiatives with external EDT stakeholders from industry and academia.



## Education and talent development

EDTs, by their very nature, represent a complex space that decision makers, contractors, politicians and users with limited technical insight will struggle to navigate. This presents numerous risks related to the due diligence of technology development and adoption and motivates the need for an organisation-wide level of technical literacy to move NATO towards being a 'technology ready' organisation. The motivation for achieving this increase in organisational competence is clear when the high pace of technology development and adoption within and outside of NATO's membership is considered.

NATO must be able to maximise the opportunities new technologies represent through the competence and skills of its personnel and their understanding of how to use technology effectively within their respective fields. It is important to note that in most cases, the need for a deep level of technical competence is both unrealistic and unnecessary. In the general context a more appropriate aim would be to increase the base levels of awareness and technical literacy within all levels of the organisation. NATO already possesses advanced training centres that may be utilised to design and deliver an appropriate education programme to meet this need.

Broadly, the level of technical literacy among Allied and NATO staff could be raised by the following:

- Development of educational programmes for raising awareness on new technologies among operational, technical or political staff that can be tailored for national use by Allies.
- Organisation of educational events at NATO and in Allied countries (information days, exhibitions, fairs) dedicated to emerging technologies.

- Inclusion of operational scenarios in training activities to provide real-world context for EDT application.
- Dissemination of best practices and curricula for training the trainers across the organisation.
- Establishing challenges or hackathons to actively engage non-specialized NATO or Allied staff on technology-related issues in collaboration with leading private sector technology specialists and technology educational institutions.

In large part the development of EDTs is dominated by STEM-B activities in the private (civilian) and higher education sectors. Furthermore, many of the world's leading organisations within these categories are contained within NATO's membership allowing for the development of external outreach activities such as a programme of "learning expeditions" to relevant industry or academic laboratories to augment professional education.

NATO should also consider the development of opportunities for formal academic qualifications for those outside and within the organisation. A competitive programme of NATO Innovation Scholarships or Fellowships at the MSc and PhD levels connected to partner academic institutions could be readily achieved. This would not only boost talent within the organisation and the broader public-private complex, but also promote NATO as an organisation genuinely committed to STEM.





## Innovation networks

Keeping pace with Emerging and Disruptive Technologies necessitates agility and rapid iteration with respect to development and experimentation. These aspects, in-turn, form part of a wider innovation lifecycle that incorporates requirements elicitation, ideation, technology translation and technology transfer – moving research to implementation – involving the active and passive participation of numerous stakeholders. NATO must expend efforts in ensuring that such stakeholder networks are optimised with respect to efficiency and effectiveness in order to augment its aspirations for pace.

In this regard NATO's extant structures such as the NATO Industrial Advisory Group, this Advisory Group, the NATO Science & Technology Organization, the NATO Communications and Information Agency, Allied Command Transformation and the Conference of National Armaments Directors represent a wealth of expertise, talent and capability. Through these structures, the Alliance already has access to comprehensive, state-of-the-art resources in science research, the defence industry and strategic foresight. These resources should be examined within the context of their architectural connection to each other leading to consideration of how effective Innovation Networks might be composed through clustering, for example. Such networks should be well coordinated and have a strong focus on the development of utilisable outputs.

Technology innovation is driven by the private sector, powered by talent and research that emanates from world class STEM-B higher education institutions and academic centres. Generating close working relationships with such entities is fundamental to NATO's engagement with the domain of new technologies. In order to achieve this NATO's needs must be clearly articulated. In this regard NATO should:

- Clearly develop and articulate a set of Innovation Mission Statements accompanied by performance indicators to help networks shape and direct their activities.

- Consider the establishment of a high-level cross-functional Innovation Working Group composed of NATO's civilian and military leadership, external advisors from the private sector and relevant international bodies in order to develop this. This board would serve to prioritize NATO Innovation Missions and concrete projects.
- Set out objectives for harnessing dual-use, multi-use technology developments – capitalising on already existing technology from other domains and driving the development of multi-use outputs.

Best practice in technology development across many Allies often involves a combination of government, academia and the civilian private sector. NATO should proactively engage with these pre-existing Innovation Centres to understand their operation and assess how they might be usefully connected to its Innovation Mission Statements and Networks. At minimum this linkage is likely to greatly augment NATO's ability to conduct and coordinate pro-active horizon scanning as well as to select optimal technology options for solving specific problems.

In order to curate a network of Innovation Centres NATO should:

- Set priorities for affiliated centres based on NATO needs and NATO Innovation Missions.
- Collect, assess and prioritize innovation concepts and outcomes from these existing Centres.



## Financing

NATO's strategy on EDTs must include a review of financing and the role that NATO could or should play in this regard. A well-developed and relevant set of financing procedures and initiatives will be necessary to allow NATO to play an active and influential role in any Alliance-wide EDT innovation ecosystem.

A key aspect for consideration is the need for NATO to have the ability to contract and fund at a speed and pace that is matched to the short turnaround times that are essential for small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Such entities are increasingly driving EDT innovation, but as profit centres with limited capital of their own engaging with long procurement cycles with onerous or rigid contracting processes is simply not feasible.

Allies should also recognise that funding from defence and security is viewed as carrying ideological reputational risk by many and more should be done to expose the diversity of issues that NATO engages with and to promote a values driven approach to EDTs. In particular, NATO should set out publically available principles of responsible use, when it comes to the operationalization of new technologies for defence and security to build trust and transparency within civilian innovation communities.

NATO should proactively use its significant influence to develop a more vibrant and active private sector investment environment for defence and security innovation by several means including:

- Actively promoting dual and multi-use technologies
- Providing clear market signals pertaining to its EDT interests
- Demonstrating and exposing routes to market/application for innovations of direct and indirect interest – including solutions aimed towards the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

The Alliance should view the contribution to reducing uncertainties and barriers to financing for private or public investors across application domains as an important strategic posture. Connecting smart direct investments with the leveraging of private capital and expertise has the potential to create a sustainable Alliance-wide innovation base, incubating creativity to stay at the technology edge.

NATO and Allies must also recognize the critical need for a continuous, longer time-based investment in science across the Alliance as the foundation for looking beyond the currently understood set of EDTs. The EDTs of today have been built on long-term investments in fundamental science and NATO should play a leading role in promoting and mobilizing patient capital investment to secure relevance in technology for the future.

An appropriately designed and orchestrated set of novel financial instruments and processes will contribute greatly to achieving the goal of an agile organisation that is governed by the speed of relevance rather than the speed of approval.



## Development of a NATO innovation ecosystem for EDTs

As a means of drawing together the threads covered in this report NATO should consider the establishment of an innovation ecosystem with the aim of better connecting and aligning the EDT innovation activities of industry, government and academia in a triple-helix approach.

The ecosystem should serve to reduce friction in the transference of fundamental scientific research and development to NATO's needs whilst simultaneously aiding the development of NATO's thinking on requirements. The ecosystem should provide the environment within which NATO can exercise, develop and grow its competencies in EDT agility; for example, by embracing and tailoring modern DevSecOps technology development practices.

As an integral component of an ecosystem model the EDT Advisory Group suggests the design of an ambitious EDT agency in the style of the US DARPA programme to create a NATO Advanced Technology Project Agency (NATPA) composed of existing capabilities and centres of excellence. The Agency would be set up as a public executive research and development organisation, tasked with making pivotal investments in breakthrough STEM-B projects for Allied security. In close collaboration with the NATO enterprise and Allied innovation entities, this Agency would coordinate and manage NATO's innovation processes. The Agency would issue calls for proposals to academia, the public and the private sector encouraging the formation of triple-helix consortia activities across the Alliance. The Agency would be responsible for plotting pathways to implementation and adoption, harnessing existing testing and evaluation facilities and processes and developing new ones, where needed. NATO's Military Committee could provide a key source of problem statements to be tackled by the Agency's programme.

NATO should also seek to promote, participate and establish triple-helix centres amongst the Allies and to network these centres to establish a broad, comprehensive, inclusive external EDT structure. Centres within this network should be capable of bidding against published calls and incubating innovative projects and start-up companies. This ecosystem component should act to augment NATO's thought leadership, horizon scanning, talent development and STEM education capabilities and activities.

As a final ecosystem component NATO could consider the establishment of a NATO Investment Bank to fully support broad-scale EDT investment. As the financial hub for EDTs the Bank would fulfil numerous functions including financing innovative projects run by NAPTA using instruments such as subsidies, seed capital, grants or prizes. The Bank would possess its own values-based venture capital fund with a remit to invest in promising solutions, technology companies and start-ups across application domains. As such it would develop a portfolio of ownership spanning products and solutions, equity, and intellectual property and would be able to grant licences for commercialisation. Initial financial contributions to such a Bank would be made by Allies with an aspiration that in time it should be sustained by its investment returns. The Bank's governance would include oversight by the NAC.

In order to avoid duplication, cooperation with EU initiatives and other international organisations, where relevant and possible, should be explored. Connections to the European Innovation Council, the European Defence Fund and other digital investment programmes such as the Digital Europe Programme, for example, would be of benefit.

# Members of the NATO Advisory Group on Emerging and Disruptive Technologies 2020-2022



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