

## The future of NATO's conventional deterrence<sup>1</sup>

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**To conventionally deter Russia in Eastern Europe is a tough business, as NATO is discovering. There is no magic wand — no one set of force that is the once-and-for-all answer — but rather a whole complex of force and command options to organize, train, and connect; political goals to clarify; and ultimately an alliance to invest in for today and tomorrow. President Trump's visit to NATO in May 2017 left no one in doubt of the importance of such political investments. This article will consider a number of key challenges involved in the stitching together of a coherent NATO conventional deterrence posture. It will also argue that investments in radical defense innovation are not merely nice to have but essential to future deterrence. The one sure conclusion is that conventional deterrence is grinding work that is best sustained by a vision of collective defense.**

### **The VJTF: still needed?**

It is fair to ask whether NATO still needs the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) that was launched with much celebration and pomp back in 2014. On balance, NATO does need it, but the VJTF has proven both too small and reactive, and it is today just one piece in a larger puzzle of deterrence.

The NATO summit in Warsaw resulted in a decision to deploy four Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) battalion-size battlegroups to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland for so-called continuous rotational deployment, meaning the EFP battlegroups will be on the ground continuously, even as troops rotate. The EFP was in fact a major corrective to the approach adopted less than two years earlier in Wales where the allied emphasis was on reaction. The shift to forward presence was born of the weak reaction capacities of the allies, who could not be sure to be able to penetrate the defense shield (anti-access, area denial) of Russia. Lacking both punch and speed, the allies had to move tripwire forces to the frontline in order to credibly introduce an element of risk in Russian calculations: any Russian offensive action would henceforth not encounter just local Estonian forces, for example, but a multinational NATO force, making the triggering of NATO's collective defense clause much more likely.

Still, as with any credible deterrence posture, NATO has to make sure it knows what to do next, just as it must signal the kind of punishment it could inflict on Russia, all in order to deter. Moreover, to avoid a quick fallback to nuclear deterrence — which would be both politically controversial in allied countries and fraught with its own deterrence problems — NATO must deliver a string of conventional forces that are deployable and fit for fight. This means the VJTF and the wider NATO Response Force (NRF) from which it emerges, and then the wider Follow-on Forces that form the bulk of national forces. It also means a plan for mobilizing and commanding them, as well as a focused approach to training them as a coherent force. None of this is easy for the NATO allies as the following cases illustrate.

## **Planning the use of force**

A first issue concerns the challenge of integrating the full spectrum of forces — from EFP battlegroups over VJTF and NRF to Follow-on Forces — in a plan for deployment and use. Without a plan, forces cannot train for a purpose, and the deterrent capacity erodes. NATO has been split between ambitious Eastern allies that have sought standing plans with fixed targets up and down the force structure, and then allies that have been preoccupied mostly to the south and thus have sought looser contingency plans. The compromise has been Graduated Response Plans (GRP) of which there are several according to geography: there are plans for Northern Norway, the Baltic area, and so on, continuing through Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey and into the Mediterranean. The compromise is also a layered approach to force mobilization where plans for deploying the VJTF are quite specific, then broader and less detailed for the NRF, and then finally quite broad and lacking in detail for the Follow-on Forces.

NATO's compromise is to say that the Russian threat is not overwhelming: Russia might be tempted to severely test NATO at certain points, but only at the level of testing where reaction forces more or less suffice to maintain conventional deterrence. If NATO's threat perception changes, if the threat worsens, NATO must in particular give more thought to the Follow-on Forces. This will mean plans for moving US army divisions to Europe; for how Britain and France — the two European allies with real divisional forces — can activate and deploy theirs; for getting Germany into the game of divisional warfare; and for the integration of smaller allies.

## **Commanding forces**

Another challenge is to adapt the command structure. The allies have agreed to a 'functional assessment' hereof, which in 2018 likely will transform into a larger command review. Eastern allies have wanted such a review to beef up NATO's command structure, which, due to the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, does not extend into the territories of eastern allies; southern allies have similarly wanted a beefed up command structure to run capacity building missions in North Africa and the Middle East; and diverse allies have asked whether the command structure should not be better able to deal with cyber threats on the one hand and regional contingencies on the other. In parallel, a fair number of Western allies have made clear that they have no intention of footing the bill for greater collective investments.

For now the compromise is to review the whole issue. However, it seems clear that conventional deterrence requires at least three reforms: it should be clarified how the command structure can extend from Western territory to the eastern frontline where EFP and VJTF/NRF forces will operate; it should contain a cyber command option to anticipate cross-domain operations; and it should draw stability and capacity building under its operational remit, in part because of the southern flank, in part because stabilization is inherent to the eastern flank's hybrid threats. Finally, the allies need to sort out the division of labor between the two strategic commands in the force structure: operations and transformation. As it is, the transformation command (ACT) runs all NATO training and exercises as part of its remit to build tomorrow's force, but with the Russia threat growing, the operations command (ACO) needs to employ training and exercises as part of the

current deterrence posture. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, this small crisis of organizational authority inside the command structure should not go to waste but rather be exploited in the momentum for reform.

Command structure reform will cost money: today, the command structure copes with the aforementioned GRPs only because allies reinforce the structure with voluntary national contributions. Wider reform cannot be dealt with ad hoc but should channel new resources into a modernized command structure.

### **Projecting stability**

Finally there is the challenge of articulating NATO's contribution to political and societal stabilization. Such stabilization became a core NATO task in Afghanistan (2003-2014), and it is not normally associated with deterrence. However, unrest in Ukraine and also Georgia — both of whom were offered a lofty promise of NATO membership back in 2008 — changed perceptions hereof. As Russia in 2014 violated numerous principles of Europe's security order by its actions in Ukraine, security assistance moved from being a tool of long-distance crisis management to being a central piece in the denial of Russian objectives. In short, stabilization became a deterrence measure: today NATO runs five trust funds to advise, train, and capacity build Ukrainian authorities and ultimately deny Russia's objective of destabilization.

NATO allies tend to disagree on several issues. There is the classical division of labor between NATO and the EU, where some European allies tend to support first and foremost a role for the EU in 'soft' security matters. There is also a concern among southern allies that resources destined for southern stabilization now will be sucked up by eastern deterrence, just as there is a concern perhaps notably in Germany that any prominent role for NATO in stabilization matters tends to militarize the issue in an unhelpful way. On account of these different perspectives NATO's role remains modest.

To bridge gaps and move the Alliance forward, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg has invested considerable energy and prestige of his office in a new initiative labeled Projecting Stability. It is about anticipating unrest and conflict both east and south, in fact in any direction, and using partnerships and capacity building as a means to prevent conflict. It is a valiant ambition, and Projecting Stability is ingeniously designed to speak to all major allied concerns, but it remains hampered by the underlying disagreement over the extent to which stabilization should be a maiden of conventional deterrence or something else entirely.

### **Innovation for tomorrow's deterrence**

As the allies grapple with these current complexities of deterrence, they must also look to the future. The VJTF, which NATO presented as an organizational innovation, is in fact not about defense innovation. The VJTF builds on existing know-how: what it requires is political will and organizational muscle to finance high alert forces, train multinational forces, and run an operational 'Schengen' area in which NATO equipment can move swiftly from A to B. There may be real punch in all this, but it is not defense innovation.

Defense innovation is about the integration of revolutionary technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence) into new types of military organizations taught to fight in new ways. If anyone can master this complex of technology, organization, and doctrine, then they merit the label innovative. It is a tall order, but this has been the main focus of US forces ever since they in around 2011 began transitioning out of the major counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. One piece of the innovation drive got labeled “third offset strategy”, but the effort is wider and bigger and built into all the US services and, naturally, it is about negating Russia, China or any other power’s attempt to deny US forces access to their geographical ‘near abroad.’ In short, defense innovation is about conventional deterrence.

One NATO approach to this US-innovation drive could be to await the diffusion of US ideas to the main allies, Britain, France, and Germany, and then hope for a type of innovation institutionalization in the force structure. While such diffusion unquestionably will be a major transmission belt for US ideas, it should be complemented by a collective and willed NATO anticipation of the future. In the short term, NATO allies stand to gain exponential deterrence strength if they are able to integrate more effectively and seamlessly their national firepower systems into a collective ‘joint fires’ grid. ‘Joint fires’ is already on the agenda in NATO but action now requires real investments in critical surveillance and command and control capabilities on the one hand and the most effective combinations of weapons, ammunitions, and platforms on the other. In the longer term, robotics and automated warfare systems must be the next topic of strategic discussion. NATO Europe is bound to be short on military manpower, and Russia can amass manpower at its point of choosing, just as it can modernize its approach to warfare. Any future collective defense posture in NATO must therefore involve offsetting investments in automated systems of reconnaissance, fire, and logistics in support of fewer but highly trained forward-deployed troops.

### **Conclusion**

This article has laid bare some of the key challenges in building and maintaining a credible NATO conventional deterrence posture. It is not just about a spearhead force, as NATO enthusiastically came close to arguing in 2014. It is about the entire spectrum of forces and deployment plans, modernized command options, and complementary stabilization initiatives. Finally, it is also force innovation for tomorrow.

There is plenty for NATO’s political masters to discuss and plenty of guidance to be issued to planners. It is thus fortunate that the masters will meet for a NATO summit in 2018 and again in 2019. They should be cognizant of the challenges laid bare in this article and then also the fact that the greatest deterrent of all is their unquestionable political cohesion. In every respect there is work to be done.

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