

Enablement From a U.S. Perspective: Deter conflict in Europe in an Era of Great-Power Competition with China

Ben Hodges and Carsten Schmiedl

“The greatest interaction therefore occurs between strategy and concerns about sustaining forces, and there is nothing more typical than for these concerns to also determine the strategic guidelines of campaigns and wars.”¹ – Major General Carl von Clausewitz, 1832

“Enhancing military mobility matters not only for the rapid deployment of forces and timely reinforcement of allies, but also to be able to sustain forces in operations, trainings and exercises.”² – NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoana, 2021

INTRODUCTION

In nearly two centuries, little has changed. The enablement of military forces still plays a central role in shaping exercises, reinforcing campaigns and pre-crisis or crisis scenarios, and deterring adversaries in the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO’s ability to move forces across borders — over bridges and rails, through tunnels, across wet and dry gaps, with adequate fuel and supplies and digital defenses to protect critical infrastructure — also gives political leaders options under peacetime conditions beyond a liberation campaign.

When NATO demonstrates enablement, this creates a credible deterrent effect in the minds of potential adversaries. It lowers the risk that potential adversaries will underestimate Allied resolve and miscalculate that a rapid ‘stab, grab, and hold’ maneuver could be successful. This helps avoid a worst-case territorial *fait accompli*. It also helps deter hybrid and other below-threshold activities which threaten to undermine member state confidence in Article 5. Without enablement, in other words, deterrence and defense fail.

From the U.S. perspective, enablement in the Euro-Atlantic area is assuming greater importance given emerging geopolitical trends. The Biden administration is assuredly Atlanticist and has adopted a more productive tone when encouraging greater burden-sharing from European Allies. But while firmly committed to NATO and European defense, the U.S. is undoubtedly ‘pivoting to the Pacific.’ The 2018 National Defense Strategy argued that the U.S. should abandon strategic simultaneity — preparing to fight multiple adversaries at the same time — in favor of preparing for maritime conflict with China in an era of great-power competition.³ The Biden administration’s 2021 interim national security strategy built on this trend, unambiguously assessing China as “the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”⁴

U.S. strategic objectives are to adapt the transatlantic alliance in order to deter conflict in Europe should the U.S. need to amass forces in the Indo-Pacific. More U.S. presence is



While firmly committed to NATO and European defense, the U.S. is undoubtedly 'pivoting to the Pacific'. Pictured are U.S. Army refuelling personnel holding fast as an AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, part of the US Army's 12th Combat Aviation Brigade stationed in Germany, lifts off from a Forward Arming and Refuelling Point (FARP) (photo: Flickr / NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

unlikely to cross the Atlantic anytime soon. Kremlin revisionism through conventional and nonconventional means will continue to present a threat in Europe. Improving enablement would allow the transatlantic alliance to better align current means with NATO and U.S. strategic objectives in the near term, as European Allies continue to build capabilities in the medium to long term.

CURRENT SITUATION

Speed is the key to enablement and effective deterrence. Speed can be measured in three areas: the speed of recognition of malign activities, the speed of decision to start necessary deployments and movements, and the speed of assembly to preempt attacks and signal NATO's preparedness. NATO's capacity in all three respects has improved — particularly since the Alliance's rapid military adaptation after Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 — but remains inhibited by several friction points that blunt NATO's deterrence of Kremlin activities against its members.

The speed of recognition is about identifying threats or potential threats as early as possible. NATO is at a distinct disadvantage in peacetime or pre-crisis conditions if it cannot quickly identify and assess threats in the operational environment.

This is particularly salient given the Kremlin's history of mixing hybrid and non-conventional actions, which mask Kremlin intentions, create ambiguity, and delay recognition. Several hypothetical scenarios are instructive of this challenge. A dockworkers' strike in the Port of Riga could be driven by disenfranchised workers or fomented by the Kremlin to create civil unrest. A water shortage in Crimea caused by the damming of the North Crimea Canal could justify a so-called humanitarian intervention.⁵ The Kremlin could attempt to justify moving Russian forces through Polish or Lithuanian territory to suppress 'civil unrest' or protect 'threatened and isolated' Russian citizens in Kaliningrad. Russia could amass forces in Belarus under the auspices of Western Military District exercises or respond to self-orchestrated sabotage against



Troops from the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division charge across a road during a live-fire exercise at Pabradė Training Grounds in Lithuania. More than 500 troops from the division were deployed to the Baltic nation in 2019 to reinforce the NATO presence there and train alongside Allies (photo: Flickr / NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

its own critical infrastructure.⁶ Each scenario could create the pretext for the Kremlin to test NATO's capacity and willingness to enforce Article 5.

Friction in the speed of recognition also comes from within the Alliance. Recognition depends on situational awareness and a common operating picture of SACEUR's entire area of responsibility — in other words, an 'unblinking eye' that looks on NATO's operating environment. While NATO

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has established a joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (JISR) system,⁷ sources of information and intelligence vary across member states and are far from being fused seamlessly at the multinational level. One prominent example is Five Eyes, an intelligence-sharing coalition within the Alliance that enables information exchanges between the U.K., U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. While its origins predate NATO, Five Eyes creates a seam within the

Alliance that limits intelligence-sharing. In scenarios that involve countries outside of Five Eyes, this could obfuscate the operational picture and conceivably delay crisis response.

The speed of decision is about how quickly NATO decides to move. Unity is the source of NATO's strength, but coalitions are tough. Some friction is inevitable when 30 member states must reach consensus before responding to a potential crisis. This is partially because NATO lacks a clear definition of 'crisis' — which means that SACEUR cannot begin mobilizing, drawing ammunition, and deploying until the North Atlantic Council reaches consensus under peacetime conditions. The U.S. could conceivably lead a 'coalition of willing countries' but this would undermine Alliance cohesion and neglect long-term U.S. strategic interests to establish collective and credible deterrence of Russia in Europe.

The Kremlin's authoritarian system of government has a distinct advantage in reaching decisions quickly. This has been evident in *Zapad* military exercises, the rapid mobilization and buildup of forces along the border with eastern Ukraine, and Russia's militarization of the Arctic.⁸ Fast interior lines of movement also benefit from the lack of internal borders and associated customs procedures and transport regulations. NATO's challenge is demonstrating that it can compensate

for the Kremlin's inherent first-mover advantage and match its speed.

The speed of assembly is about moving military mass where it is needed. Part of the challenge is a legacy of NATO enlargement. The accession of several Central and Eastern European Allies to NATO in 1999 and 2004 moved the Alliance's eastern border further eastwards. Rather than reinforcing the nearby Fulda Gap, SACEUR must prepare to reinforce Tallinn from Wiesbaden — roughly the same distance as New York to Miami. Some infrastructure and enablers in the Euro-Atlantic area were also not designed for NATO reinforcement. For example, when crossing the Suwalki Corridor, the 65-kilometer Polish-Lithuanian border, the rail gauge changes from standard to broad which means unloading and reloading heavy equipment before continuing to the Baltic states.

The Alliance has made a significant effort since 2014 to improve enablement, but there are at least eight areas which currently inhibit the speed of assembly: (1) rules, regulations, and procedures are not standardized to streamline cross-border movement permissions and transporting dangerous goods; (2) transportation infrastructure lacks a robust capabilities assessment, the capacity to carry sufficient heavy

equipment, and standardized rail interfaces; (3) command, control, and coordination does not have a single national points-of-contact to process movement requests quickly or fully enable NATO's Joint Support and Enabling Command; (4) insufficient EU funding and allocation in NATO's common funding towards enablement; (5) the lack of special capabilities such as capability catalogues, enhancing national military transportation capacities, and logistics hubs; (6) insufficient cyber and information warfare resilience; (7) the need for more robust exercises between the EU and NATO which includes civilians and military; and (8) the need for closer EU-NATO cooperation through structured dialogue and greater senior leadership engagement.⁹

There are other positive signs that the speed of assembly is increasing — but that a fully unified approach is still lacking. The EU recently welcomed the U.S., Norway and Canada into PESCO's military mobility project, but some NATO members are still missing.¹⁰ Germany and the Netherlands will house a joint hub to improve military mobility coordination at Joint Sustainment and Enabling Command (JSEC) in Ulm. The 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué gave “high priority, both nationally and in the Alliance, to ensure enablement of SACEUR's Area of Responsibility to improve our ability to support the deployment of sustainment of Allied forces,” a



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Pictured is a Polish soldier who awaits orders to begin a river crossing at Zły Łęg lake during NATO Exercise Allied Spirit. 6,000 U.S. and Polish soldiers took part in the exercise (photo: Flickr / NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

recurring recommendation in NATO communiqués since at least 2014 which has failed to produce tangible progress.¹¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following concrete recommendations would improve enablement and help achieve NATO and U.S. strategic objectives:

Prioritize the enablement of SACEUR’s Area of Responsibility. The Alliance has long discussed delegating more authority to SACEUR to enable initial movement in a crisis, including drawing ammunition and preparing for deployment. The U.S. should take the lead in re-raising this issue. Secure VTC communications offer a potential means of accelerating crisis decision-making and reaching consensus.¹² NATO should consider granting the Secretary General the authority to enable SACEUR in peacetime conditions. Establishing clear redlines and rules of engagement before consensus could also help alleviate Allied concerns about delegating authori-

ty. Enabling SACEUR’s Area of Responsibility will also require harmonizing the operational space and rear area with greater infrastructure investment and routine logistical exercising.

Establish a comprehensive ‘unblinking eye’ along NATO’s Eastern Flank. The Alliance should reduce gaps and seams in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. The Alliance needs a combination of air, sea, space, and land-based systems as well as reporting from embassies, border guards, sea ports, and others that covers the Arctic region through the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea region. This should include unmanned systems and other emerging and disruptive technologies, as well as improving intelligence-sharing beyond Five Eyes and with NATO Partners such as Ukraine, Georgia, Finland, and Sweden. All sources of intelligence and information should be fused with the aim of informing decision-makers.

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Redefine burden-sharing in NATO’s next Strategic Concept to incentivize greater investment in enablement. The new Strategic Concept is the right moment to redefine NATO’s 2% defense-spending guideline and incentivize greater investment in enablement. Defense expenditures are currently calculated at the national level — which means that some Allies would get credit for enhancing resilience or investing in infrastructure while others might not. A more sophisticated approach to burden-sharing would count investments that have real military value for the Alliance and would incentivize Allies to invest in improving enablement.

Enhance command, control, and coordination. The number of stakeholders and authorities involved in enablement at the multinational and national levels can create friction in peacetime and crisis conditions. NATO and the EU should increase cooperation on enablement by establishing structured dialogue and delineating authority where each has a comparative advantage. As a first step, the EU should establish national points of contact in Host Nations and add national territorial commands to ensure freedom of movement. Germany, as a European hub, and the Netherlands, which leads the EU’s PESCO project on military mobility, should continue to play a leading role in improving enablement. The forthcoming center for coordinating military mobility, led by the Netherlands and Germany at JSEC Ulm, is a positive development. The U.K. should follow in the footsteps of the U.S., Canada, and Norway and join the PESCO military mobility project.

Invest in transcontinental and dual-use infrastructure to facilitate movement across Europe. The Alliance needs increased capacity for transporting heavy equipment via rail, roads, and bridges. NATO should build on national-level efforts such as the Solidarity Transportation Hub in Poland and multinational efforts such as the Three Seas Initiative and PESCO to enable more seamless continent-wide movement.

Exercise to failure. NATO should build on Defender 20 and Defender 21 with future transcontinental multinational exercises — some planned and others as ‘snap’ exercises, albeit with transparent communication and advance invitations to observers from non-NATO countries. Too often, exercises also occur in controlled environments which do not truly test Alliance capabilities to failure. NATO officers should instead be challenged to take initiative in realistic scenarios rather than running through the scripted motions. Exercises should include contingency planning where hybrid or ‘below-threshold’ actions create ambiguity or compromise critical infrastructure and communications.

Enhance and integrate air and missile defense (AMD). Improving AMD into integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) would enable mobile forces to move safely and quickly. NATO should reach consensus on the perceived threats of air and missile attack and then integrate land, air and space, and maritime-based AMD capabilities with early warning ISR and command and control.

Redefine the ‘rear area’ based on emerging security trends. The rear area is increasingly blending with the forward area of operations. Cyber and other emerging and disruptive technologies are nullifying geographic factors, damaging forward capabilities and enablers from distance. This potential was visible in the *NotPetya* and *Colonial Pipeline* cyberattacks. Threats could begin crossing boundaries at speeds that humans cannot process, creating digital battlefields that exclude humans. Strategic planners should consider the implications of eliminating geography and reducing human agency as it adapts enablement for the future of warfare.

Plan for the future of sustainment networks. While the Central European Pipeline System enhances redundancy and resilience in Alliance sustainment networks, enablement will not be excluded from renewable energy transformation. Strategic planners should consider the operational implications of renewable energies — which are not yet fully understood — for delivering capabilities and moving forces across Europe. Less refueling could mean greater range in transport and reduce sustainment networks and logistics hubs and it could affect maximum payloads. Some states will surely adopt renewable energies at different rates, which could create capability and interoperability gaps.

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