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COMMENTARY

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Quadrennial Defense Review—Implications for US Policy towards NATO

by Bartosz Wiśniewski

The latest US Quadrennial Defense Review emphasizes the importance of NATO for US security policy. Particularly noteworthy is the announcement to retain the present structure of American military engagement in Europe.

The major function of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) from the United States Department of Defense is to map out the lines of the armed forces' reform and development. It would therefore be wrong to look for a comprehensive US position on the future of NATO in the Review's latest edition of 1 February. However, it can be seen as a major indication of US position in a discussion on the Alliance's new strategic concept, especially as regards the future of US military presence in Europe.

Laying stress on the priority importance of the transatlantic bond and the significance of the North Atlantic Alliance for US security, the QDR does not differ fundamentally from a similar document issued back in 2006. NATO is to remain the key instrument to provide security in Europe, including response to out-of-area challenges. This is in line with the US-advocated transformation of NATO into an organisation prepared to shape security environment on an above-regional scale. But the Review does not lay out any concrete expectations vis-à-vis the Alliance (meaning, in practice, from its European members) in respect of e.g. increased capabilities to embark on expeditionary missions.

A major novelty in this year's QDR is emphasis on US readiness to strengthen the credibility of security guarantees under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, and to keep NATO's threat deterrence capability. Serving this will be the announced retention in Europe of four Brigade Combat Teams, indicating that the present level of US land forces in Europe (43,000), constituting the bulk of overall US forces in the region, will be kept. This translates into a discontinuation of the troops reduction process, going on with varying intensity since the end of the Cold War. Over 2002–2009 alone, the combined US military presence in Europe shrank by 32%, to some 80,000 personnel.

The previous administration planned further cutbacks which would mostly affect land forces and units equipped with heavy armour, to be sent back to bases on US territory, leaving only two Brigade Combat Teams in Europe. The plans set out in QDR are equivalent to shelving these plans, thus demonstrating that misgivings in the military quarters about the reduction's potentially adverse consequences for effective cooperation with allies (including interoperability and keeping a say on major questions of European security) have been heeded. Among the advantages of retaining four Brigade Combat Teams, as indicated in the paper, is the capacity for more effective crisis reaction in NATO's immediate vicinity and the deterrent effect of a strong US military posture in Europe upon calculations made by potential aggressors in the Euro-Atlantic area. The QDR does not contain any indications about possible alterations in the geographical pattern of US forces deployment, but the suspension of the Bush administration's plans to cap US troops in Europe may suggest that the US will not be interested in seeking new locations for their bases, or introducing a practice of rotating presences of US-based units in e.g. Central and Eastern European countries (as the previous concept foresaw). And nothing seems to indicate a reduced willingness to participate in military exercises in the region.