

BULLETIN

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New Strategic Concept and NATO's "visible assurances" towards Central and Eastern Europe

by Jacek Durkalec

Highlighting the importance of "visible assurances" in the new Strategic Concept (NSC) is crucial from the perspective of Central and Eastern European states (CEE). Nevertheless, apart from conducting military exercises, it is improbable that in the short term the present forms of NATO presence in this region will significantly change. In the long term, the position of CEE states to propose increasing NATO's presence in their territories, however, has been strengthened.

Consistent with the stances of Central and Eastern European states (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), the new Strategic Concept confirms the role of defence of territories and populations of member states as a core Alliance mission. It also indicates a need for increasing the capabilities of the NATO Response Force (perceived until now in the CEE as "paper forces") and possessing contingency plans in case of aggression—the Alliance has updated plans for Poland and has begun development of plans for the Baltic states. What is important from the CEE states' perspective is that the NSC highlighted a need to provide "visible assurances" to Alliance member states. A form of these assurances, which already has been announced, includes military trainings and exercises (the first field exercises of the NATO Response Force will take place in Poland in 2013). Apart from this, stressing the importance of "visible assurances" creates the possibility (although limited in the short term) of supplementing and improving the presence of NATO in CEE states, which so far have perceived such a presence as insufficient. This presence has included: the Baltic Air Policing mission, one NATO institution, military infrastructure enabling states to receive reinforcements in case of aggression, as well as headquarters for multinational units and institutions supporting NATO tasks.

Baltic Air Policing mission. The patrol of Baltic states' airspace is currently the only form of NATO presence in the CEE involving the deployment of military forces, which on a day-to-day basis secure the territorial integrity of NATO members. The mission is conducted on a four-month rotational basis with each rotation usually entailing the presence of four fighter interceptors and up to 100 personnel from one of the NATO member states. The main operating base for Air Policing is Lithuania's Zokniai airbase (after modernization, airbases in Estonia and Latvia also will be used to support the mission). The mission, which has been conducted since 2004, initially had a temporary character. In 2009, it was extended until 2014. The Baltic states would like it to become permanent.

Presence of Alliance institutions. The Joint Force Training Centre (JFTC) in Bydgoszcz is currently the only key element of NATO command structure in the CEE. It acts as a focal point for NATO's tactical-level training and transformation, and includes 100 NATO personnel in Poland. It is subordinated to the Allied Command Transformation, which currently consists of seven institutions in total. None of the 11 key Allied Command Operations centres or any NATO Agency is located in the CEE.

The Lisbon summit decision regarding the need to reform NATO's command structure and decrease a number of its elements seems to exclude any new key NATO headquarters from the CEE. It also is improbable that any of NATO's agencies, the number of which will decrease from 14 to three, will be moved to the CEE. Through the prism of "visible assurances" it will be important to keep JFTC, the only crucial NATO institution in the CEE. The only possible way to increase NATO

institutional presence in the CEE will be to maintain a plan to establish the 3rd NATO Signal Battalion Headquarters in Bydgoszcz, though NATO budgetary constraints put its future into question.

Enabling the Military infrastructure to receive reinforcements in case of aggression. CEE members fully participate in NATO's common-funded Security Investment Program (NSIP). NSIP finances or co-finances projects that provide the necessary infrastructure for the effective execution of NATO missions, including territorial defense. They involve, for example, modernization of airbases and seaports, as well as the provision of air defense radars. Due to Alliance financial constraints, "visible assurance" most probably would be in the completion of investments that already had been planned (in years 1994-2014, NATO had planned to provide about €523 million to fund NSIP projects in Poland). Approval and initiation of brand-new NSIP projects in the short term seems unlikely.

Multinational units and institutions supporting NATO tasks. There are two headquarters of multinational units located in the CEE, as well as Centres of Excellence. They are not elements of the NATO command structure and their personnel and functioning are not financed by the NATO common budget. However, they are closely related to the Alliance and could play an important role in fulfilling its missions (for instance, in crisis management and answering new threats such as cyber attacks). As their role to NATO will be augmented, their role as a form of "visible assurance" in CEE will be increasing as well.

The first of these is the Multinational Corps Northeast Headquarters located in Szczecin. It was established by an agreement between Poland, Denmark and Germany. Currently, eight other NATO members also are members of the corps and assign personnel to its Headquarters (about 200 people in Poland). The corps' relations with the Alliance strengthened after it was certified by the North Atlantic Council as Headquarters of Forces of Lower Readiness (Land). Corps personnel have already twice taken part in ISAF missions.

The second is the Heavy Airlift Wing located at Pápa Airbase (Hungary). Its 131 personnel operate a fleet of three C-17 Globemaster III aircraft owned by the NATO Airlift Management Organization. HAW is an operational component of the multinational Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) program consisting of 10 NATO and two Partnership for Peace nations (Finland and Sweden). Apart from providing strategic airlift capabilities to NATO, HAW performs other missions at the discretion of SAC program members.

In addition to the two headquarters, in the CEE are located three Centres of Excellence accredited to NATO (out of 15 accredited so far), and an additional two are being formed. Membership in the centres is open to all NATO members. So far, each of the accredited centres has between six and 10 sponsoring nations. Centres provide NATO with expertise in various specialized fields such as cyber defense, military medicine, as well as chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defense.

Conclusions. Highlighting the importance of "visible assurances" by NSC has a significant role from the CEE states' perspective. So far, manoeuvres demonstrating in practice the role of the NATO Response Force in territorial defense have been the only real examples cited of these assurances. The real value of these exercises depends on their becoming regular and the development and maintenance of an appropriate level of military forces by allies, above all the NATO Response Force. Apart from an extension of the Baltic Air Policing mission, maintenance of current (JFTC) and planned (3rd Signal Battalion) institutions and NSIP investments, it is difficult to expect that "visible assurances" in the short-term perspective will take the shape of other significant forms of a NATO presence.

In the longer term, the introduction of "visible assurances" by NSC strengthens the position of CEE states in requesting and acquiring tangible signs of NATO security guarantees. The lack of a definition of "visible assurances" provides flexibility regarding their concrete forms. They could involve new NSIP projects, as well as new key Alliance institutions (including Headquarters and Agencies) and military capabilities—in case they need to be established in the future. In such instances, institutions or units could be formed "from scratch" or on the basis of those that already are functioning in the CEE. In the longer term it could not be excluded that U.S. missile defense assets in the CEE (including Poland), if they will be realized within the NATO framework, would be regarded as elements of a NATO presence in the CEE.