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Yawning Gaps in NATO Planning

NATO is preparing new defence plans with the potential of having available the scarcest military resources ever. Although the Alliance is attempting to create leaner, better equipped deployable forces, it is losing capabilities crucial for both projecting power and territorial defence. Since NATO is determined to adapt to new threats, planning teams may be forced to further de-emphasise assets needed for credible conventional deterrence.

The defence planning process that ensure NATO maintains the proper capabilities for an adequate and timely response to various kinds of threats is in full swing. However, in a time of decreasing military expenditures the Alliance yet again will have to overcome the divergent interests of its members to present itself as a reliable force able to deter adversaries and defend allies.

One of the many challenges the Alliance faced in the post-World War II period was how to convince Western European countries focused on rebuilding their economies to devote enough spending on defence.¹ The U.S., which contributed to Europe's security with conventional forces and nuclear weapons as a deterrent, consequently accused its allies of putting the majority of those military expenditures on the American taxpayers' shoulders.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia no longer constitutes an existential threat to the West, and the possibility of a major confrontation on NATO territory has decreased substantially. The number of U.S. troops in Europe has been lowered from 300,000 to 80,000, although the Allies remain dependent on American help, which was first revealed during the war in the Balkans in 1990. Even so, the growing sense of security has allowed for further cuts in resources for territorial defence and a shift towards a more

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¹ R. Kupiecki, *Siła i solidarność*, PISM, Warsaw, 2012, pp. 183–187.

flexible NATO that is ready to address threats around the world. The September 11 terrorist attacks on America in 2001 led to more than decade of NATO operations in Afghanistan and further accelerated changes with the allies more actively engaged in out-of-area missions. Today the Alliance has more than 5,000 troops in Kosovo, performs anti-piracy operations off the Gulf of Aden and East Africa, leads anti-terrorist maritime surveillance operations in the Mediterranean Sea and supports the African Union by helping transport troops in Africa. It also performed the successful operation in Libya. Although the mission in Afghanistan is to be completed by the end of 2014, even after the planned withdrawal of combat troops NATO will have to remain committed to supporting the Afghan military and police, at least with training, advising and financing.²

Member states have recently agreed to strike a balance between expeditionary capabilities and territorial defence and have decided to increase the credibility of Article 5, which states that members must come to the aid of an ally under attack. Nevertheless, the ongoing transformation of the Alliance into an expeditionary-capable force accompanied by uncoordinated cuts in military budgets may lead to the loss of capabilities crucial for territorial defence. The aim of this report is to briefly outline NATO's overall strategy, examine how it can be translated into defence planning and analyse how it could influence the sense of security of member states.

Common Threat Perception and Shared Priorities

In the midst of the Afghanistan war in 2006, NATO members decided to redefine the so called Level of Ambition, declaring that the Alliance should be ready to simultaneously conduct two major and six minor operations, in addition to Article 5 collective defence missions. The shift towards an expeditionary Alliance, which was supported by a group of countries including the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain, worried NATO border countries, especially the Baltic States, Poland and Norway.³ The former argued that the threat from Russia is exaggerated and that NATO should not be distracted from the mission in Afghanistan while the latter stressed that their sense of security needs to be addressed with reliable defensive plans and exercises before they support the expeditionary role of the Alliance. The arguments of the territorial defence advocates were strengthened by the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008, the Russian *Zapad* and *Ladoga* exercises in 2009, which simulated attacks on the Baltic States and Poland, the increased activity of Russian bombers close to the airspace of NATO member states and by threats of preventive attacks on elements of the missile defence system planned for Europe. The growth in military expenditures in Russia is often mentioned as another argument for NATO to maintain a credible deterrent. In February 2012, the then-Russian prime minister and presidential candidate Vladimir Putin announced plans to spend 23 trillion roubles (\$720 billion) by

² B. Górká-Winter, "NATO in Afghanistan: An Enduring Commitment?," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, no. 1, 2012.

³ T. Valasek, *NATO, Russia and European Security*, Centre for European Reform, London, 2009.

the end of this decade for new armaments, including 2,300 new battle tanks. There is also potential for a conflict in the resources-rich Arctic, even though the eight states that have territorial claims there, including Russia and six NATO countries, downplay such a possibility. Most recently, the risk to the territory of the Alliance and the need for credible deterrence and defence have been displayed by mortar attacks against Turkey from civil-war engulfed Syria.

The new Strategic Concept approved at the NATO Lisbon Summit in 2010 and the Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR) published at the NATO Chicago Summit in May 2012 signalled that the member states have reached consensus on the primary role of the Alliance and the common threat perception. Advocates of territorial defence accepted the statement that the risk of an attack on NATO territory is low and that NATO should play a prominent role in crisis management and cooperative security. The proponents of expeditionary forces accepted that Article 5 should remain the bedrock of the Alliance.⁴ Three functions—collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security—have been mentioned as equally important core tasks of NATO. To meet these tasks, the allies agreed that the appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities for deterrence and defence will be developed. To avoid the negative effect of the financial crisis on its capabilities, NATO approved the concept of “smart defence,” which implies improved coordination of investments, common procurements and specialisation by countries in certain military tasks.

Not Fully Compatible Requirements

Now, this political compromise should find its practical dimension in the Defence Planning Process (NDPP)⁵ initiated in 2009, through which NATO decides which capabilities it should develop. The whole planning process used to last 10 years but was shortened to four-year cycles to speed adjustments of NATO capabilities to new challenges. During the first two of the five phases, NATO planners have already tried to identify the adequate amount of forces, assets, facilities and capabilities required to perform the politically agreed tasks. The third phase is in progress. Envoys from NATO headquarters are visiting member state capitals and trying to gain agreement on national contributions to NATO capabilities. Countries not only should declare which assets they can provide but also receive suggestions for which capabilities they should develop for the common benefit of the Alliance. The fourth phase, which is an ongoing process, is focused on assisting countries with the development of the agreed assets. In the final phase, NATO will review the plans and capabilities and make recommendations on removing the weakest links in the Alliance’s defence, for example, advising how to fill gaps in capabilities with the help of civilian contractors or “smart defence” projects.

⁴ J. Durkalec, “NATO Defence and Deterrence Posture: Central and Eastern European Perspectives,” *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 29, May 2012.

⁵ “The NATO Defense Planning Process,” http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49202.htm.

Through this process, the planning teams should maintain a proper balance between capabilities for expeditionary missions and territorial defence. Although both require sizeable ground forces, air and naval forces, advanced weaponry and multinational logistics, territorial defence is more based on armoured ground forces while expeditionary irregular warfare relies on light, mechanised forces.⁶ Thus, for NATO to be able to conduct both Article 5 operations and out-of-area missions it will require the development of two sets of capabilities that overlap only to a certain extent.⁷

Meanwhile, as NATO embarks on developing expeditionary capabilities, it is scrapping assets crucial for territorial defence. As indicated by military reforms in Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands—the biggest defence spenders in Europe that traditionally have played a key role in the security of the continent—cuts in defence budgets have not been balanced with investments in new, multipurpose equipment. Although experts indicate that heavy armoured forces, comprising tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, are far from irrelevant,⁸ the Allies are scrapping such assets as they deem them too expensive to maintain. Consequently, not only have European allies reduced their ability to meet their Article 5 obligations but also they have become less capable to project power beyond NATO territory.

Great Britain

The Strategic Defence and Security Review published in 2010⁹ asserts that Britain is to remain one of the few countries able to deploy a self-sustaining brigade-size force anywhere in the world and sustain it indefinitely. The UK forces want to be able to carry out simultaneously two small, one mid-size and one large operation with up to 30,000 soldiers. This large operation, however, would be a third smaller than what was used in Iraq, where the UK deployed 46,000 troops. The British army plans to significantly reduce its regular army from 104,000 to 84,000 by 2020, and compensate for that by increasing its territorial army. It has decommissioned one of its two aircraft carriers five years ahead of schedule. The other carrier will serve until 2014 as a helicopter carrier, since the entire fleet of 74 Harrier jets carried by those ships have been retired. Thus, Great Britain lost the capability to project power until at least 2019, when a new aircraft carrier should come into service. Britain also scrapped aircraft for maritime patrols and search-and-rescue helicopters, with the latter provided by civilian companies.

⁶ R. Kugler, *NATO Military Requirements for Territorial Defense and Expeditionary Operations—Similarities and Differences*, National Defence University, 2010.

⁷ E.B. Eide, "Collective Defence in Today's Security Environment," http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/fd/whats-new/Speeches-and-articles/Speeches-and-articles-by-other-apolitica/statssekretaer_espen_barth_eide/2009/collective-defence-in-todays-security-en.html?id=582015.

⁸ D.E. Johnson, "Heavy Armor in the Future Security Environment," RAND Corporation, 2011, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2011/RAND_OP334.pdf.

⁹ "Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review," http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_191634.pdf.

The UK will also have fewer tanks and artillery. The number of Challenger 2 tanks decreased by 40% to 250. Instead of 380 state-of-the-art combat planes, the UK will have fewer than 300, and possibly closer to 200. Its order for 232 Eurofighter Typhoons has been limited to 160 and F35 Joint Strike Fighters from 150 to 138, with the government so far committing to buy only 48. As a result, the UK will have a smaller force available for both the defence of NATO territory under Article 5 and for expeditionary operations.¹⁰

Italy

Similar to the UK, Italy has embarked on reforms that are intended to create “leaner but better-equipped forces.” The government admits it will spend less on defence but stresses that within the smaller budget expenditures on operations will be increased. Yet again, the Italian Ministry of Defence is cutting equipment crucial for both expeditionary forces and territorial defence, with patrol vessels dropping from 18 to 10 and submarines from six to four. Its order of F35 fighters was scaled back from 131 to 90. The Italian army will disband two of its 11 combat brigades, and military personnel will be reduced from 180,000 to 150,000 by 2024.

Germany

Germany, which was a backbone of territorial defence during the Cold War, is facing rapid disarmament. The Bundeswehr is set to shrink from 220,000 to about 185,000 soldiers. The country’s order for Eurofighters will be cut from 177 to 140, and the air force will reduce the number of Tornado fighter bombers in operation from 185 to 85 faster than planned. Germany’s orders for transport and combat helicopters has been reduced from 200 to 120. Germany also plans to limit the number of active tanks from 350 to 225.

France

In recent years, France has already lowered the number of its troops from 350,000 to 270,000. A French White Paper on Defence and National Security from 2008 calls for further reductions to 225,000 troops. By the end of this year, the new government is set to publish another White Paper that is likely to suggest additional reductions.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands, one of the few allies in Europe able to deploy forces, is giving up capabilities crucial for territorial defence and out-of-area operations. Its two tank battalions will be disbanded and the 80 newly upgraded Leopard tanks mothballed. The Dutch armed forces has also eliminated the P-3 Orion aircraft, losing crucial maritime reconnaissance capability for the Alliance.

¹⁰ The RAND Corporation. “NATO and the Challenge of Austerity,” p. 7, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2012/RAND_MG1196.pdf.

The overall changes may have serious implications for NATO defence posture in Europe and the credibility of conventional deterrence. The number of active military personnel in the nine European NATO countries with the traditionally strongest armed forces (Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, and Poland), which was estimated at 1.2 million in 2009, will shrink by 350,000 during this decade. Although cuts were supposed to be compensated for by an increase in the percentage of deployable troops, the British example indicates the net number of deployable soldiers may actually decrease.

Even before the biggest cuts across the militaries were introduced, sending 45,000 troops to Afghanistan proved to be a challenging task for European countries, and the mission revealed critical shortages in manpower and capabilities. With that operation ongoing, Europe encountered difficulty with generating enough forces and assets for another operation, in Libya in 2011. The air campaign, in which France and Great Britain took the leading role, blatantly indicated that their forces were stretched thin. Both countries had to rely on U.S. surveillance, air-to-air refuelling and smart munitions as well as strategic and tactical transport. The moribund condition of the European militaries was further exposed when Italy decided to withdraw its aircraft carrier in the middle of the Libya mission to save money, since it costs 200,000 euros a day to maintain the ship when on cruise and half that when docked.

Fewer American assets in Europe

The haemorrhaging of European resources is accompanied by the removal of U.S. military assets from Europe. Although the United States guarantees support for Europe's territorial defence, it is changing the nature of its military presence on the continent. In 2004, President George W. Bush announced the withdrawal of two of four Brigade Combat Teams (BCT) from Europe. Although President Barack Obama decided in 2011 to limit the scope of the cuts to only one brigade, in January 2012 his administration announced that it would stick to the previous plan and shift its attention from Europe towards the Asia-Pacific region. The number of U.S. soldiers available in Europe will decrease from more than 80,000 to around 70,000, resulting in the complete removal of American heavy armour from the continent. The 170th Infantry BCT, which has just been disbanded, and the 172nd BCT, which is to be de-activated in 2013, were the only U.S. units in Europe equipped with tanks, each having around 50 vehicles. The U.S. also decided to eliminate two Air Force squadrons, among them the 81st Fighter Squadron, which was able to support the Allies with up to 20 Thunderbolt fighters (so called tank busters) and which played a crucial role during the air campaign against Serbian forces in Kosovo in 1990.

These cuts can only be the beginning. Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned during the Libya campaign that America may no longer be willing to invest in Europe's defence if NATO's European allies do not take responsibility for their own

security.¹¹ The U.S. House of Representatives recently passed an amendment that calls for all four BCTs based in Europe to be replaced by rotational forces.

Although NATO is trying to address critical capability shortfalls through pooling and sharing of resources and “smart defence” initiatives, most of the approved projects are focused on soft capabilities.¹² Many past projects have been plagued by delays and new ones will take years to complete. Moreover, their positive effect on capabilities may be overestimated, as indicated by the programme crucial for the improvement of the strategic airlift capabilities of the European allies. Since agreed in 2003, the order of more than 220 Airbus A400M transport planes has been limited to 170 planes, but even this number does not reflect the real impact on capabilities. Germany ordered 53 A400Ms but has already announced that it plans to sell 13 of the aircraft to cut costs. In many countries, new planes will simply replace old ones. Britain plans to acquire 22 A400Ms, in addition to eight other aircraft it has already bought, but will decommission 30 Hercules C-130s so overall capabilities will remain level.

Compensation with Interoperability

The withdrawal of 10,000 U.S. troops from Europe and the adaptation of NATO forces to expeditionary operations is to be compensated for by new forms of reaffirming Article 5 commitments. NATO planners drafted contingency plans for the Baltic States and Poland. Under American pressure, the Alliance agreed to indefinitely extend the Baltic Air Policing mission over Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, which is the only NATO military presence in the territory of the former Soviet republics. Exercises in the Baltic Sea region are to be more frequent and more visible, with the large-scale “Steadfast Jazz” exercise in Poland planned for 2013. The U.S. decided to place an air detachment wing in Poland to support the periodic rotation of U.S. planes. America also contributes to the NATO Ballistic Missile Defence system, which is supposed to defend not only troops but also the territories and populations of NATO countries as well.

Moreover, America is planning to provide a U.S.-based army battalion to bolster the NATO Response Forces (NRF), which is supposed to be the first tool used in crisis situations. The force composed of land, air and sea units consists of 14,000 troops (the initial target was 25,000) and is deployable for between 48 hours and 30 days. It should provide the allies with the capability to act rapidly and effectively, be it a crisis on NATO territory or an out-of-area expedition. In 2012, the rotations of battalions within the NRF have been extended from six to 12 months, to make better use of the long and arduous preparations of participating countries.

¹¹ R. Gates, “The Security and Defense Agenda (Future of NATO),” speech, 10 June 2011, U.S. Department of Defense, <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1581>.

¹² M. Terlikowski, “Not As Smart As It Could Be: the NATO Smart Defence Initiative—Chicago and Beyond,” *PISM Strategic File*, no. 22, May 2012.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The transformation of NATO into a more flexible alliance seems to be driven by budgetary constraints rather than targets set by the Level of Ambition. The scope of the reductions indicate that the reforms are treated as an excuse for cuts in the most expensive capabilities, which are also crucial for territorial defence. The capabilities necessary for NATO to have a credible conventional deterrent against a territorial assault—including fighter aircraft, maritime forces and tank-killing airpower—have been rapidly reduced across all the major European allies forces. Ironically, the European allies are not increasing the number of deployable troops and have cut capabilities crucial for expeditionary missions as well.

Given the announced reductions it seems almost impossible for NATO planners to gather enough resources for two large-scale expeditionary operations, six smaller missions and credible territorial defence at the same time. Referring to the Strategic Concept, which states that the risk to NATO territory is low, planning teams may be encouraged to prioritise missions and to not treat them as equally important. Such prioritisation is even more likely as some member states argue that collective defence manifests itself through expeditionary missions, which are in the interest of the whole Alliance, e.g., combating piracy. Thus, the planners may focus on developing assets for expeditionary operations that will lead to a further erosion of territorial defence capabilities.

This could be interpreted as a departure from the consensus on the balance between territorial defence and out-of-area capabilities. With leaner forces responsible for both territorial defence and expeditionary tasks, sending a large European contingent to such places as the Middle East or Africa would result in a serious weakening of NATO's conventional deterrence on its home territory. Such fears were common during the Afghanistan mission and may become even more valid in the future. In effect, NATO border countries might be tempted to re-nationalise their security sector and become reluctant to develop common capabilities through "smart defence" projects or participate in foreign missions. To avoid such a scenario, Poland should actively advocate that the targets set in defence planning maintain a proper balance between territorial defence and expeditionary missions before they are agreed by NATO defence ministers in June 2013.

Although NATO agreed a set of reassurances for new member states, it remains in dispute to what extent these reassurances can offset uncoordinated defence cuts in Europe and the reduced American presence in Europe because of the strategic shift to the Asia-Pacific region. Apart from NATO Response Forces and ballistic missile defence, most of the reassurances focus on the interoperability of forces and the increased visibility of the Alliance in the new member states. However, after the withdrawal of heavy brigades from Europe, the U.S. may be tempted to send lighter forces for training, which are much cheaper to deploy, enhancing the ability for performing expeditionary missions but limiting the opportunities for armoured forces to train. To avoid this, the NATO Response Force should

focus on Article 5 scenarios in which the U.S. sends not only light forces but also heavy brigades for exercises.

As the U.S. is changing its presence in Europe from permanent to rotational it will be much easier to give up such deployments under political or financial pressure in America. The European allies should try to find legal ways of ensuring that the U.S. stick to its commitments of sending troops for training in Europe on a regular basis.

To speed up the process of filling gaps in capabilities, “smart defence” should become an integral part of the NATO Defence Planning Process. Once the planners agree with the states on their contributions to the Alliance, the areas where possible gaps in capabilities appear should be filled by the rigours of NATO planning. This could help avoid the manifold weaknesses of multinational cooperation from the past.