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NATO's Posture after the Wales Summit

by Guillaume Lasconjarias

ABSTRACT

The recent NATO Summit in Wales has been viewed as a watershed event not just because of the particular moment at which it took place, but because of the pledges taken by heads of states and governments. For sure, the still ongoing Ukraine crisis and the rising insurgency in Syria-Iraq might have acted as true "wake-up calls", calling the Alliance to step up its posture and show its determination, especially in terms of commitments towards bolstering the main pillars of the Alliance. The initiatives announced in terms of readiness and defence posture, the Readiness Action Plan in particular, belong to a series of reassurance measures towards Eastern allies, but also revitalize the NATO Response Force through an expeditionary spearhead, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. Although some might consider these measures as "too little too late", they prove the Alliance's cohesion and the commitment to the transatlantic link.

NATO | Summits | Russia | Ukraine crisis | Defence budget | Burden sharing

keywords

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Introduction

The NATO Summit in Wales had raised high expectations, with NATO head of states and partners set to discuss key issues ranging from Russia's aggressive behaviour in Eastern Ukraine and to the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Indeed, the two-day Summit (4-5 September 2014) can be judged as a success as it showed solidarity among NATO members and recalled that it is not just Article 5 of the Washington Treaty of 1949 (stating that an attack on one ally can be regarded as an attack on all) that matters, but also Article 4, by which any member state can convene a meeting of NATO members when it feels its independence or security are threatened.[1] Henceforth, Allies took measures that are not only supposed to prove an immediate commitment to a particular situation, but decided to renew its tools to deal with new forms of warfare and pragmatically live up to a commitment to spend 2 percent of their GDP for defence.

"Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace."[2] NATO's Wales Summit declaration seems to acknowledge that the time to continue to reap what Europeans used to call "the peace dividends" is over and instability is no longer a remote and purely hypothetical prospect for the West but becomes a matter requiring urgent attention. This Summit communiqué was eagerly awaited and expectations were high. This being the first meeting of the 28 Heads of State and Government since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the start of the conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine between separatists and pro-government troops, certain outcomes were anticipated. Obviously, Ukraine dominated the debate, as press sources had

[1] Stanley R. Sloan, "A Successful NATO Summit? Proof Will Be in the Pudding", in *War on the Rocks*, 10 September 2014, http://warontherocks.com/?p=6291.

[2] NATO, *Wales Summit Declaration*, 5 September 2014, paragraph 1, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm.

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suggested before the event, stating that NATO would take all necessary measures to beef up its readiness and reorient its longer-term strategic approach and defence posture toward Russia. The presence of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in Newport also sent out a strong signal of NATO's commitment.

However, reading the account of the decisions taken by the 28 nations prompts the question of whether anything has really changed at all. Indeed, the Ukrainian crisis might just be an additional challenge that the Alliance is now faced with, in the midst of other challenges ranging from instability in the Greater Middle East to (not so) new threats such as cyber attacks and missile proliferation. One could argue that all of this combines in a matrix that reinforces NATO's posture, helping the organization to pursue a path that involves no major departure from its tasks. Alternatively, the crisis could be seen as a shift back to (old) "business as usual", with a greater focus on Euro-Atlantic security. Others, more intent on criticizing the Alliance at all costs, have gone further, pointing out that some in Brussels might have been "glad" about the crisis in Ukraine, as it was "giv[ing] the aging alliance something to do."[3]

Of course, this has to do with the traditional discussions on NATO's relevance in a unipolar world and its ability to survive the Cold War and the collapse of its former foe, the Soviet Union. NATO's story in the last twenty years could be summarized as a quest for a convincing rationale.[4] The out-of-area missions were a first answer. NATO has never been as active as in the last twenty years: it has engaged in operations in Bosnia and over Kosovo and, after 2001, in Afghanistan, the Mediterranean Sea, Iraq, off the Horn of Africa and Libya. In doing so, NATO has evolved from maintaining an exclusive focus on territorial defence in Europe to overseeing a range of military and crisis management operations across the globe. For sure, the criteria for determining whether these missions were successes or failures can still be discussed, as some of these operations are still ongoing.[5] However, a turning point might have occurred in 2007-2008 when, against a background of ever-tightening budget restrictions, most of the Allies were also facing increasing difficulties in Afghanistan. The Libyan campaign in 2011 was considered a success before the chaos that has followed the intervention cast a shadow on it. Finally, the Obama administration's pivot to the Asia-Pacific region left the European member states unable to reach any consensus on what the Alliance could or should do next. The combination of these developments has clearly diminished the appetite for large-scale interventions in the vast majority of European NATO members. The 2012 Summit in Chicago had already shown that their main focus was to end combat missions (especially in Afghanistan) and refocus on core tasks.

[3] Stephen M. Walt, "NATO Owes Putin a Big Thank-You", in *Foreign Policy Voices*, 4 September 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/09/04/nato_owes_putin_a_big_thank_you_russia_ukraine.

[4] Julian Lindley-French, "NATO's Post-2014 Strategic Narrative", in *NDC Conference Reports*, July 2014, http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=418.

[5] The International Stabilization and Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, for instance, is due to evolve by 1 January 2015 into a new training and support mission called *Resolute Support*.

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"Then came the Ukraine crisis."[6] This turned things upside down in a way no one could have predicted. Until quite recently, NATO nations and Russia were discussing issues of common interest through formal arrangements. Suddenly, everything fell to pieces as the Russian bear raised its head again. Those who were caught off-guard were those who had firmly believed Russia was a possible partner, with which one could do business.[7] The US administration, for instance, was clearly surprised. Despite Obama's efforts to reset US-Russia relations in recent years, some analysts were convinced that his policy had been "badly thought out and somewhat naïve."[8] Other Allies were criticized for selling weapons and technological enablers; France, with the prospect of delivering two *Mistral*-class warships, came under fire (especially from Poland, the US and the UK), leading President François Hollande to release a statement prior to the Wales Summit, saying that the conditions under which France could authorize the delivery of the first helicopter carrier "were not in place but that the delivery was not put off".[9] Clearly, the perception has changed: Russian actions prompted a reassessment of what could have been a Cold War *déjà-vu*,[10] leading the Alliance to suspend all practical civilian and military cooperation with Moscow. However, regarding their relations with Russia and their geopolitical environment, NATO countries continue to perceive the threat differently. Legitimately, those countries sharing common borders with Russia, or belonging to the so-called "post-soviet space"[11] might consider Putin's Russia as the primary threat, while Southern European countries are preoccupied with their own difficult neighbourhood. Undermining the principle of solidarity and purpose, these divergences leave the Allies wavering between containment, isolation and deterrence.[12]

Hence the crucial importance of the Wales Summit, which had previously been seen as a "reflective" summit for debating the drawdown of NATO combat forces after more than a decade of combat in Afghanistan. Because of the Ukraine crisis, it became a "turning point" summit, essential in re-energizing NATO into an Alliance

[6] Judy Dempsey, "Why Defense Matters. A New Narrative for NATO", in *Carnegie Papers*, 24 June 2014, p. 3, http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=55979.

[7] Transatlantic Strategy Group on the Future of US Global Leadership, *Responding to A Revanchist Russia*, 12 September 2014, p. 2, http://www.chathamhouse.org/node/15676. In this case, European interests are more directly involved, as the total EU trade with Russia totals over 460 billion dollars (compared to the US trade with Russia, which is around 40 billion dollars).

[8] Ibidem, p. 3.

[9] "Hollande: Le Mistral sera livré en cas de 'règlement politique' de la crise ukrainienne", in *Le Monde*, 4 September 2014, http://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2014/09/04/paris-conditionne-la-livraison-du-mistral-a-un-cessez-le-feu-et-a-un-accord-politique_4482269_3234.html.

[10] Roger McDermott, Heidi Reisinger, Brooke Smith-Windsor, "Cold War Déjà Vu? NATO Russia and the Crisis in Ukraine", in *NDC Research Reports*, 5 March 2014, http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=406.

[11] Heidi Reisinger and Aleksandr Golts, Russia's Hybrid Warfare. Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence, in *NDC Research Papers*, No. 105 (November 2014), p. 1-2, http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=426.

[12] Judy Dempsey, "Why Defense Matters. A New Narrative for NATO", cit.

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and marking a return to basics, without prejudice however to the Alliance's international commitments and its position as a the hub of a global security network.

1. NATO's military response

While everyone agrees that Russia has illegally annexed Crimea and played a crucial role in aggravating the conflict in Eastern Ukraine by a smart "plausible denial" policy, it has also been clear from the very beginning that NATO would take no military action vis-à-vis Russia. Therefore, the true challenge that the Wales Summit had to overcome was to adequately reinvent the Alliance in a way that would deter further aggressive steps, maintain credibility and demonstrate its resolution without reverting to Cold War attitudes,[13] while incurring no more than minimal costs for nations that are both war-weary and in economic disarray.

The first and major outcome of the Summit is the so-called NATO Readiness Action Plan (RAP), which looks as though it could be the most fundamental realignment of the NATO force structure since the end of the Cold War. It is, above all, a political measure needed to provide a renewed "reassurance policy" and send out a reminder that NATO could – and would – provide help and assistance if one of its member states were to come under attack. The notion of "reassurance" focuses on the principle of collective defence, with the Alliance taking all necessary steps to reassure its member states that feel at risk. As early as March and April 2014, the then Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and SACEUR General Philip Breedlove moved quickly to reassure their Eastern European allies, by deploying fighter jets and ships to the Baltic and discussing new plans to hold exercises as a sign of reassurance in relation to Article 5. Obama's visit to Poland in June was also an opportunity to reaffirm US commitment to Europe: "Poland will never stand alone. [...] Estonia will never stand alone. Latvia will never stand alone. Lithuania will never stand alone. Romania will never stand alone."[14] This was reinforced by promising to deploy US military personnel on a rotational basis, and increase both the training and capabilities of Poland, the Baltic states and Romania. Thus, the US reassurance package and NATO's Readiness Action Plan go hand in hand, even if the RAP is not specifically aimed at Russia:

> "It provides a coherent and comprehensive package of necessary measures to respond to the changes in the security environment on NATO's borders and further afield that are of concern to Allies. It responds to the challenges

[13] This is especially relevant, as Russia is not the former Soviet Union: its population, its armed forces and its economy are no match for NATO or the USA. To quote some specialists, it can be a local troublemaker or a spoiler, but lacks the size and power of a peer competitor. This leads to Russia not being considered as threatening the vital interests of most of European states or the United States.

[14] White House, *Remarks by President Obama at 25th Anniversary of Freedom Day*, Warsaw, 4 June 2014, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/04/remarks-president-obama-25th-anniversary-freedom-day-warsaw-poland.

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> posed by Russia and their strategic implications. It also responds to the risks and threats emanating from our southern neighbourhood, the Middle East and North Africa. [... It] will contribute to ensuring that NATO remains a strong, ready, robust, and responsive Alliance capable of meeting current and future challenges from wherever they may arise."[15]

Seen as a bold move, the RAP insists on responsiveness and, above all, on the mutation of the NATO Response Force (NRF) into a new, revitalized model. Established at the Prague Summit in 2002 as a robust, rapid, interoperable and integrated response capacity to emerging crises all over the world, the NRF suffered some criticism but regained credit in February 2012, when it was mentioned as one of the mainstays of the new Connected Forces Initiative (CFI), i.e. as a driver to transformation.[16] With a renewed focus on what was the core of its primary mission, this "NRF 2.0" focuses on a spearhead element, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) capable of deploying within a matter of days. Established around a land component with enablers (air, maritime and special forces), the 4,000-strong force will be able to deploy anywhere to both reassure allies and deter potential adversaries.[17]

What is not stated is that the spearhead might be mighty but is still limited in size, up to a tailored brigade, while its missions have still to be clearly and precisely defined.[18] Notwithstanding the difficulty of setting up from scratch a powerful contingent able to act decisively, what is needed is a change of mindset after a decade in which land forces were highly effective in counterinsurgency operations but may be not at ease with other courses of action, especially what is known as hybrid or non-linear warfare. Future discussions within the military community will have to make the project sustainable, while answering key questions: what is the nature of the VJTF, and what will be its main tasks – deterrence or reassurance? If the emphasis is to be on reassurance, this component will be deployed to participate in various reassurance exercises. If the priority is supposed to be deterrence, something very different in nature and volume is called for. Will the VJTF be multinational? In theory, yes, for it has to wave the NATO flag. It harks back to the defunct Allied Command Europe Mobile Force-Land (AMF-L).[19] To be effective and deployable at short notice, it would require a rotation of high-readiness certified units made

[15] NATO, Wales Summit Declaration, cit., paragraph 5.

[16] Guillaume Lasconjarias, "The NRF: from a Key Driver of Transformation to a Laboratory of the Connected Forces Initiative", in *NDC Research Papers*, No. 88 (January 2013), http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=363.

[17] NATO, *Wales Summit Declaration*, cit., paragraph 8.

[18] All things that already hampered the NRF: lack of visibility, with implications in terms of volume, structure, organization and potential missions. Cf. Jens Ringsmose, "Taking Stock of NATO's Response Force", in *NDC Research Papers*, No. 54 (January 2010), http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=159.

[19] The Allied Command Europe Mobile Force-Land was a small NATO quick reaction force, stationed in Germany and active from 1960 to 2002, when it was disbanded and replaced by the NRF. Multinational, this force was intended to demonstrate NATO solidarity and could be dispatched to any part of ACE's area of responsibility. It was a brigade-size formation composed of units of 14 countries.

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available by the nations, but only a small number of member states can currently do so. Finally, the command and control structure has to be decided and the role of SACEUR has to be clarified.

In short, the RAP and VJTF are supposed to reinvigorate the NRF, bolstering what already exists and making it more usable, ready and deployable. One key issue might still be the need for a decision by the NAC to deploy the NRF, which presupposes consensus (probably as difficult to achieve in future as it has always been). However, the proposal does demonstrate NATO's unity and commitment to act, which says a lot.

In the meantime, additional measures tend to identify this summit as a turning point. All through the fall, the Alliance has increased the size, volume and nature of its exercises: more than 40 have been organized throughout fall... These are part of a vast and comprehensive training programme, concentrating on capability and interoperability. *Noble Justification 14*, held in Poland and Lithuania in early September 2014, saw more than 1700 soldiers (mainly special forces operators) from 15 countries involved in the certification process of the NATO Special Operations Component (SOC),[20] while Exercise *Anakonda* (24 September-3 October 2014) saw a massive participation of 12,500 Polish and 750 multinational forces from nine countries in a live-fire demonstration in Orzysz, 90 km south of Kaliningrad in Russia.[21] And next year's high-visibility exercise, *Trident Juncture* 2015, aims at gathering 25,000 soldiers, including the NRF, in an exercise spread over three countries (Italy, Spain and Portugal) – one of the largest live exercises since the end of the Cold War. All these exercises share the same purpose and goal: they are part of NATO's efforts to reassure its members of its Article 5 commitment and readiness, and to deter further Russian aggression. All benefit from important media coverage, to be included as an additional strategic communication tool.

2. A true wake-up call? Reversing the trend of declining defence budgets

On a strategic level, the consequences of the Ukraine crisis might be found elsewhere, namely in the decision to "turn the corner" and reverse the trend of declining defence budgets. The decision made by the Heads of State and Government to increase their military spending to 2 percent of each country's gross domestic product (GDP) over the next ten years might indeed be one of the key outcomes of the Summit.[22] Although the commitment is not new, what is interesting is the

[20] For more details see, NATO, *Special Forces train for certification in exercise Noble Justification 14*, 9 September 2014, http://bit.ly/1AvPOib.

[21] See also NATO, *Exercise Anakonda 2014 comes to an End*, 8 October 2014, http://www.aco.nato.int/exercise-anakonda-2014-comes-to-an-end-2.aspx.

[22] NATO, *Wales Summit Declaration*, cit., paragraph 14: "We agree to reverse the trend of declining defence budgets, to make the most effective use of our funds and to further a more balanced

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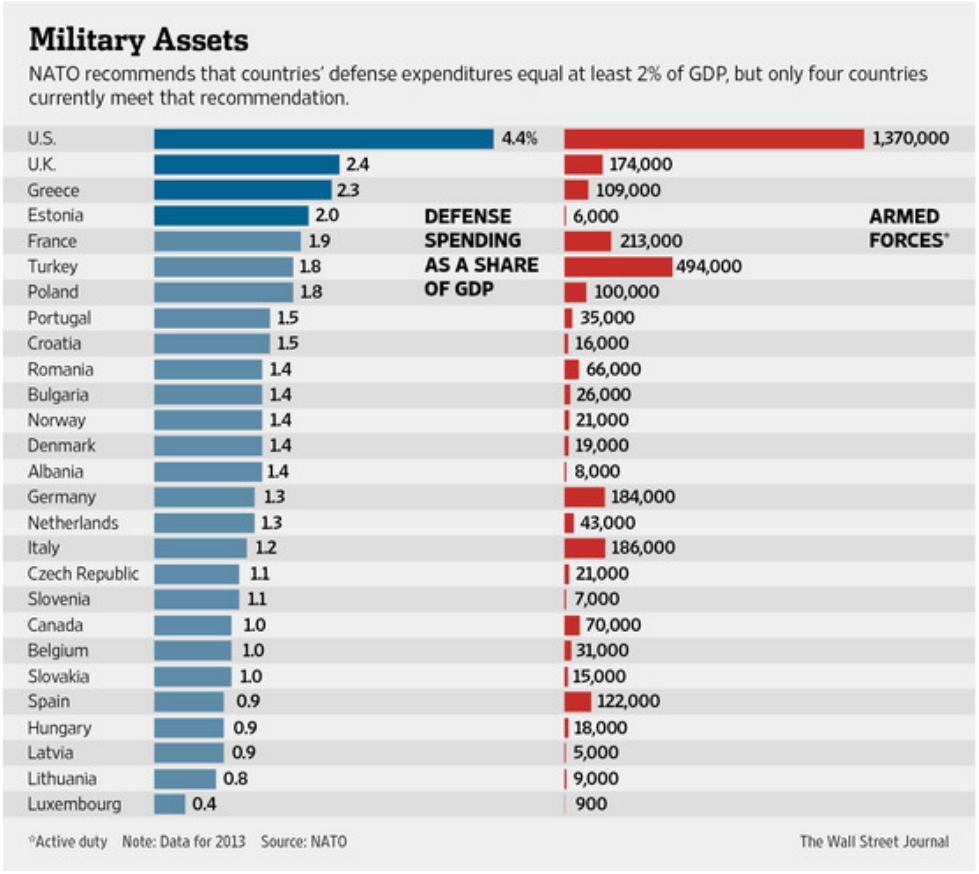
fact that for the first time, NATO leaders have pledged to reach NATO's spending recommended guidelines within a concrete timeline. It is a non-binding political pledge but a first step in the right direction.



Source: Stephen Fidler, "NATO Leaders to Vow to Lift Military Spending", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 September 2014, http://on.wsj.com/1rvRWp7.

The figures are clear: most European members have trimmed their defence budget to the bone, and might already have gone too far. At the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, Obama voiced his concerns during the EU-US Summit, warning that "the situation in Ukraine reminds us that our freedom isn't free, and we've got to be willing to pay for the assets, the personnel, the training that's required to make sure

sharing of costs and responsibilities [...]. Allies currently meeting the NATO guideline to spend a minimum of 2% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defence will aim to continue to do so. Likewise, Allies spending more than 20% of their defence budgets on major equipment, including related Research & Development, will continue to do so. Allies whose current proportion of GDP spent on defence is below this level will: halt any decline in defence expenditure; aim to increase defence expenditure in real terms as GDP grows; aim to move towards the 2% guideline within a decade with a view to meeting their NATO Capability Targets and filling NATO's capability shortfalls."

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that we have a credible NATO force and an effective deterrent force."[23] This signifies not only that defence outlay has been constantly reduced since the beginning of the 1990s.[24] It also reflects European spending priorities, where defence has to compete with social and healthcare expenditure. Even if Europe as a whole continues to spend three to four times more than Russia on defence, Russia's defence budget has been constantly on the rise since 2008, and is expected to reach 4 percent of GDP by 2016.[25]

Some of the consequences are already clear: the Libyan campaign exposed shortfalls in the Alliance's capabilities. Even if Europeans provided most of the assets, they had to rely on the United States to deploy critical enablers. The gaps were obvious in capabilities such as refuelling tankers, drones for collecting intelligence and conducting surveillance and reconnaissance, and deployment of the specialists needed to translate the information gleaned into targeting data. Comments made by former US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates in June 2011 – when he stated that the US was tired of engaging in extended, expensive combat missions for those who wouldn't share risks and costs – were a first warning shot, which in turn led to a series of recommendations and new initiatives, such as the Smart Defence and Connected Forces Initiatives.[26] Then NATO Secretary General Rasmussen embarked on a campaign to overcome defence spending reductions, while maintaining the capabilities that NATO needs to ensure its security. The basic objective of this campaign was to do "more with less", in a spirit of pooling and sharing and with a focus on identifying a common set of security priorities and providing necessary capabilities for the Alliance. The initiative were also an attempt to address the problem that European states had in some cases reduced defence expenditure to a level at which it is increasingly difficult to slow down the aging of military equipment, at a time when new tools and assets are becoming more and more expensive.[27]

[23] White House, *Press Conference by President Obama, European Council President Van Rompuy, and European Commission President Barroso*, Brussels, 26 March 2014, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/26/press-conference-president-obama-european-council-president-van-rompuy-a.

[24] Giri Rajendran, "What now for European defence spending?", in *Military Balance Blog*, 9 April 2014, http://www.iiss.org/en/militarybalanceblog/blogsections/2014-3bea/april-7347/what-now-for-european-defence-spending-e70e: "According to NATO data, real defence expenditure per capita in NATO Europe has fallen to just over half the levels seen in 1990, and is down by more than a fifth since 2000. These long-term reductions were accelerated by the 2008 transatlantic financial crisis, as Western states slashed defence outlays further as governments prioritised fiscal consolidation. Data contained in *The Military Balance 2014* indicates that Europe (including non-NATO states) collectively now spends only about 1.4% of GDP on defence [...]. This average budgetary allocation in NATO Europe is itself down from around 2.5% of GDP in the early 1990s."

[25] This last point should now be assessed regarding the potential effects of the economic sanctions decided by EU members States and the US on Russia.

[26] Jacob Henius and Jacopo Leone MacDonald, "Smart Defense: A Critical Appraisal", in *NDC Forum Papers*, No. 21 (March 2012), http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=326.

[27] Guillaume Garnier, "Les chausse-trapes de la remontée en puissance. Défis et écueils du redressement militaire", in *Focus Stratégique*, n° 52 (mai 2014), http://www.ifri.org/?page=detail-contribution&id=8128.

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The Ukraine crisis, understandably, became part of this debate, forcing European Allies to be more concerned with current and future implications for their security. The 2 percent threshold re-emphasized in Newport is just a crude metric, and does not always take commitments to the Alliance and its operations or actions into account; it might also be misleading, as it says nothing about the absolute value of current economic performances.[28] It does not take into account differences in the efficiency of forces, specific capabilities, force posture and structure. On the other hand, it gives a fair idea of the economic base on which one country can develop military capabilities in case of a sudden military crisis, in other words a "surge capacity". The 20 percent investment requirement refers to the nature of forces; this is where the game played by Russia in Ukraine is interesting. One can argue that Russia waged a hybrid war, making extensive use of Special Forces (Spetsnaz, the famous "little green men"), but that the current state of its conventional forces is way behind the up-to-date modern equipment that some NATO nations used in Iraq and Afghanistan. Clearly, "the 2 percent figure may just be a stake in the ground [...] to rally European NATO to remediate its collective action problem."[29] Thus, the 2 percent threshold is above all a common level of commitment to common defence.

With Russia back in the game, with an ongoing crisis on the eastern border of Europe, it is no surprise to see the Alliance discussing its courses of action and the necessary steps to be taken. Even if the threat assessment is not shared by all countries (Poland and the Baltic states being more concerned than Mediterranean Allies), the Summit at least had the merit of asking the right questions and pushed the Alliance forward in a direction that reinforces NATO's relevance and ability to carry out its core tasks. Despite domestic challenges that tend to hide or overshadow geopolitical transformation, NATO member states seem to have understood that sharing resources or spending a bit more on defence is a necessity, and that it is not enough merely to pay lip service to this requirement.

On paper, the Summit agreement is impressive and illustrates that Allied cohesion exists. However, when it comes to current challenges, one must distinguish between the inability to solve problems in Ukraine, where the country still lies in a

[28] US Secretary of Defense, *Toward a New Responsibility in Responsibility Sharing. An Overview of the 1995 Report on Allied Contributions to the Common Defense*, April 1995, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/allied_contrib95/index.html: "There is no single, universally accepted formula for calculating each nation's 'fair share' of the responsibility for cooperative security. In theory, any contribution that enhances peace and stability is part of a nation's responsibility sharing effort. National contributions assume many forms, requiring different measures and analyses. Some forms of responsibility sharing, such as defense spending and force levels, can be calculated with precision. Evaluating other types of contributions, such as host nation support, involves a mix of quantitative analysis and subjective judgment." To some extent, countries that have a booming economy could maintain a stagnating percentage of GDP dedicated to defence, whilst at the same time, due to an increase of their incomes, the absolute value increases. Norway would be a good example.

[29] James Hasik, "Is NATO's 2% of GDP a Relevant Target?", in *Defense Industrialist*, 8 September 2014, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/defense-industrialist/is-nato-s-2-of-gdp-a-relevant-target.

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state of latent civil war, with possible incursion of Russian forces and daily political developments, and the quick establishment of a Coalition able to strike ISIL in Iraq and over Syria. In the long term, the Wales summit has taken the necessary measures to make sure that NATO has the right forces and the right equipment, in the right place and at the right time. But in order to respond effectively to Russia's hybrid warfare, it requires more than a military alliance can and will do. The main components of the Russian challenge are non-military and need to be addressed with economic and information campaigns which NATO does not and should not control.[30] To avoid future difficulties, it is now up to the nations to be prepared.

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[30] Heidi Reisinger and Aleksandr Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare", cit., p. 11.

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