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NATO's Ability to Respond to Crisis: the New Rapid Reaction Force

What crisis-responding capabilities should NATO's new 'spearhead force' have? As Brett Friedman sees it, the force must combine 'middleweight' fighting ability with strategic flexibility and rapid deployability, which in practical terms means that it should be modeled on the US Marine Corps' Expeditionary Brigade.

By Brett Friedman for ISN

In response to Russia's continuing incursions into Eastern Ukraine, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen [has announced that the alliance will form a new "spearhead force"](#) that will be capable of responding to crises on very short notice. This is not the first time NATO has employed such a force. [A NATO Response Force \(NRF\) has existed since 2003](#) and has participated in real world missions – involving both combat and non-combat actions – throughout its existence. It seems clear, however, that NATO is now interested in 'beefing up' its crisis response capabilities. Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe has refocused the alliance on its role and responsibilities. The new Rapid Reaction initiative is an opportunity for NATO to revamp and improve its existing capabilities.

An expeditionary force needs to be nimble enough to move quickly but strong enough to punch hard. It does not need the ability to win a war, but it does need the ability to hold off a large conventional force until a more robust NATO response can be organized. It also needs to be able to respond to a wide variety of crises: from humanitarian aid to embassy evacuations, riot control, and combat. It needs to be ready to respond at a moment's notice, but it must also be logistically sustainable. A reaction force built around air transportation, for example, is fast but more difficult to supply and sustain once it arrives. In short, NATO needs a "middleweight" force that combines fighting ability, flexibility, and rapid- deployment capability. As it happens, these are exactly the characteristics the United States Marine Corps strives to provide to the United States. With some modifications, the model that NATO should use to build its new reaction force is the Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB): a flexible, combined arms organization that can deploy quickly and sustain itself for a reasonable amount of time.

The [Marine Expeditionary Brigade](#) is a task force built around an infantry regiment. That infantry regiment core is reinforced with various enablers: an artillery battalion, a reinforced tank company, and various armored vehicles such as amphibious assault vehicles and light armored reconnaissance vehicles. Additionally, the MEB includes a Marine Aircraft Group with numerous aviation squadrons of both fixed-wing and rotary-wing combat aircraft, assault support aircraft for transportation and

logistics, as well as air defense capabilities. Finally, it includes a Combat Logistics Element that contains various engineering, maintenance, and logistics assets. These three elements fall under a headquarters known as the Command Element. Importantly, all of these various units operate on common doctrine and frequently will train together prior to a deployment.

What NATO planners should glean from the MEB concept is a basic idea of what a rapid response force needs, i.e., a mixture of various arms and capabilities that allow the force to be flexible enough to perform any of the variety of missions it could be called upon to complete. Since NATO countries must rotate forces through the new response force rather than assign them permanently, just as the US Marine Corps does with MEBs, it is the most appropriate model that planners can use as they design the new force. Below are more specific recommendations based on the MEB concept.

Capabilities

Maneuver

A rapid reaction force needs to move, and fast. Pure straight-leg infantry forces will need access to some sort of conveyance, but that comes at a cost. Motorized units need trucks. Armored units require tanks or infantry fighting vehicles. This weight makes the unit slower in the operational sense – deploying from a home station to a crisis area – but faster tactically. This is a trade-off the new force will need to consider.

Fires

Surface fire support is another area which involves trade-offs. Fire support is essential for maneuver forces, but a bigger bang means a bigger logistical burden. The common 155mm howitzer is probably more firepower and weight than the new force needs, but typical medium mortars are not enough. A great compromise would be the [French rifled 120mm towed mortar system](#), now also in use by the United States.

Armor

Armored assets are always a tough issue for rapid deployment. They are not always needed in significant numbers, but even a few tanks are a potent and flexible asset for any commander to have. The problem is their weight and their astronomically high rate of fuel consumption.

Aviation

The best way for a rapid reaction force to balance out its small size is a robust and integrated aviation element that provides air-to-surface fires, air assault and transportation capabilities, aerial resupply, and casualty and medical evacuation assets. This means a mix of both fixed-wing and rotary-wing platforms capable of providing fires and support.

Logistics

Member-nations should also consider providing the vital enablers that are essential to modern warfare. Logisticians, supply experts, medical and dental teams, combat engineers, and maintainers for the force's gear will be needed.

Force generation

A force built around a regiment can produce three “reaction battalions.” The purpose of these three battalions is not to provide a brigade all the time, but rather to keep one battalion “on alert,” i.e. fully

trained and ready to deploy; another in a “workup” status, i.e. training together in preparation to go “on alert”; and a third organizing, refining doctrine, planning training, and rebuilding. This would allow contributing nations to commit certain forces for about a year and half to the Rapid Response Force timeline, where they would complete organization, train with forces from other contributing nations, and complete a deployment. At that point, they would then return to their normal military duties while another unit takes their place. This minimizes the impact on member nations’ individual military readiness while providing each with additional training and experience that would be disseminated to the rest of the force through promotions and transfers of personnel.

If more than a reinforced battalion task force is needed, this arrangement allows the surging of all three battalion task forces to deploy to a crisis area and act as a reinforced brigade-sized task force.

This plan also allows for member-nations that make a minimal contribution—even just a company or platoon sized element—to be effective. The year of organizing and training prior to deployment will allow smaller contingents time to brush up on NATO doctrine and get used to working with other contingents so that the deployment task force consists of a cohesive unit. This would be [an improvement over the current NRF](#) which originally operated on a six month deployment cycle but, since 2012, has used a twelve month cycle.

Deployment and sustainment

When the Reaction Force is needed, it will have to first move itself to the crisis area and then be able to sustain itself in that area. There are two major ways to accomplish this: via air and via sea.

The aerial option has attractive advantages. It is typically faster and less limited by terrain. Planes can obviously go where ships cannot. The disadvantage, however, is that it is more difficult to keep the ground forces supplied via air and those supplies must be staged farther away from the fight.

If the force used amphibious shipping or other naval capabilities, it would have access to a movable base than can be stationed in any of the various waterways surrounding Europe. Even if the ground forces move inland, it would be easier to generate aerial resupply sorties from the amphibious ships stationed nearby than to reach back to bases in home countries. This is especially key for humanitarian aid missions. Amphibious ships can store a great number of medical supplies and stocks of food and fresh water that the Reaction Force can draw on to provide for distressed victims of a humanitarian disaster.

Basing

The home station for this force should be central, austere, and coastal. It should be central to allow it to reach any point in Europe as quickly as possible. It should be austere to give the force ample training space. Urban sprawl hinders military training. It should be coastal because—even if the force is not amphibiously focused—the sea is a highway and naval assets may still be used to transport troops, gear, and supplies for the force if needed. Additionally, an aviation-transported force can fly over international waters thus avoiding difficult negotiations over airspace.

The alliance has an opportunity to renew itself after the confusion about its place in the international community since the fall of the Soviet Union. By creating a new rapid response force in a prudent manner, NATO can use this opportunity not just to increase its own capabilities but also to further develop military forces throughout the European community by offering training and experience that some European militaries may not otherwise have access to. The specific capabilities provided by member-countries are not as important as a robust pipeline that facilitates the formation, training, and deployment of a force as outlined above, rather than along the lines of previous NATO response

organizations.

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