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## NATO on Edge

How can NATO transform itself into a global security alliance and yet respond to the local challenges posed by a resurgent Russia? In anticipation of the Alliance Summit scheduled for next September, Richard Weitz outlines the steps Brussels needs to take if it wants to be 'dual capable'.

By Richard Weitz for ISN

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The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has provided NATO with fresh impetus and new challenges. It has certainly renewed interest in the Alliance just at a time when it risked fading into [strategic irrelevance](#). However, renewed confrontation with Russia also complicates NATO's efforts to transform itself into a global security institution.

Before the crisis, the Alliance was in the process of rebalancing commitments and rebuilding capabilities following a long and frustrating war in Afghanistan. Whether NATO keeps a modest force in that country or withdraws entirely, the September 2014 heads-of-state summit in Wales had been intended to empower the Alliance to address [new threats](#) emanating from outside the North Atlantic region. The European allies even seemed willing to accept Obama's Asian pivot given the growing risk of conflict here and how it might impact upon their ties with the region.

Instead, the Ukraine crisis is driving a 'NATO 3.0' designed to manage global threats in partnership with new countries back to the 'NATO 2.0' of the 1990s, which focused on advancing stability and security to the former Soviet bloc. There's even a possibility that NATO might return to its original mandate, when the Alliance was structured to keep the Russians out and the Americans in. Nevertheless, NATO must remain vigilant of focusing too much on averting further Russian military aggression at the expense of tackling problems that extend beyond Europe.

### Responding to Ukraine

On April 16, Anders Fogh Rasmussen [confirmed](#) that the Alliance would augment its air patrols, naval deployments, and ground forces to deter Moscow and reassure nervous allies and partners located close to Russian territory. The NATO Secretary General's statement followed the United States' decision to increase its air and ground force rotations in the Baltic States and Poland. NATO's civilian and military leaders are also still debating whether to take more assertive counteractions such as deploying more troops to Alliance members bordering Russia or in the Black Sea region. Other issues under consideration are whether to reverse ongoing reductions in the U.S. military presence in Europe and how to deepen ties with the likes of Georgia.

The Alliance has also suspended military cooperation with Russia, including exercises and formal exchanges. In particular, NATO has ceased its protracted and futile efforts to persuade Moscow to

stop opposing its missile defense program, to reduce the number of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons located near NATO territory, or to rejoin the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, which Russia abandoned years ago.

## **Revising the Summit Agenda**

However, deteriorating relations with Russia is not without its advantages. As a result of the Crimea crisis, the Alliance no longer sees the need to reach a deal with Russia over ballistic missile defense (BMD), which has remained elusive. After years of debate, there is now a consensus among NATO governments and experts that missile defenses will invariably be a component of the Alliance's new force mix, along with a modest nuclear weapons arsenal, robust conventional forces, and other capabilities.

Instead, the main challenge now facing NATO's BMD program comes from the perception in Congress that the European partners are not bearing their share of the transatlantic missile defense burden. Accordingly, NATO's European wing should use the autumn summit to counter this perception by increasing their contributions to the Alliance's BMD program. This might entail the collective purchase of BMD interceptors, sensors, and other assets to complement the systems already provided by the United States.

Cyber security has also gained new prominence thanks to the Edward Snowden affair. Although NATO's Computer Incident Response Center, designed to protect the Alliance's dedicated networks, has achieved full operational capability, members remain divided over whether to treat cyber security as an Article 5 issue entailing a collective response to an attack on a member. At present, cyber defense remains a national responsibility among NATO partners, despite the interconnectedness of members' networks and their vulnerability to the weakest defense link. However, the Snowden affair has made Europeans distrustful about allowing the United States full access to their national cyber infrastructure, even under the pretext of defending it from Chinese or Russian penetration.

In addition, the summit still must decide what mandate and other support to give to the Alliance's existing military operations, which include the continued internal security presence in Afghanistan and Kosovo, maritime security patrols in the eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf of Aden, and various support missions to African Union forces fighting terrorists and other security threats on their continent. NATO's Afghan mission will undoubtedly remain its most important campaign, but also its most uncertain. The Alliance hopes to maintain a modest contingent of forces in Afghanistan beyond 2014 to train, assist, and advise the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Despite their impressive performance before Afghanistan's national elections earlier this month, the ANSF still lacks critical intelligence, logistics, and aviation capabilities envisioned by the NATO transition plan developed in 2010 and reaffirmed at the May 2012 Chicago summit. However, NATO cannot finalize its collective status of forces agreement with the Afghan government - a prerequisite for keeping troops in the country after 2014 - until Kabul ratifies the Bilateral Security Agreement. If all U.S. forces must leave Afghanistan within the next few months, its NATO allies would depart as well.

## **Conflicts and Capabilities**

Still, the shock and awe caused by Russia's seizure of the Crimean Peninsula means that deterring potential Russian military aggression in Europe will become one of NATO's most important missions over the years ahead. Indeed, in a prominent public speech in Washington last month, [Rasmussen affirmed that](#), following the Crimea crisis, NATO would focus on protecting its members through deterrence based on shows of strength and unity

The Alliance would most likely win any major European-wide conventional war with Russia due to its

superior human and financial resources, its greater combat experience, and more extensive enabling technologies. And let's not forget that [Russia's armed forces](#) remain in a state of flux two decades on from the breakup of the Soviet Union. Even so, the margin of safety would be better if the allies made greater progress with [Smart Defense](#) and other capacity building initiatives. The main features of Smart Defense include aligning national capability priorities with those of NATO, promoting specialization by design rather than by default, and pursuing cooperation in the development, acquisition, maintenance, and operation of critical capabilities. However, some NATO members continue to experience difficulties in reducing redundant capabilities and instead, try to field a full spectrum of national military capabilities rather than making sensible purchases and sharing defense assets collectively.

In addition, NATO member-states need to coordinate their national defense plans more closely to ensure that they have the critical capabilities needed for collective defense and other missions. Britain, France, the United States and other NATO governments have been announcing major defense cuts for years without seemingly coordinating their decisions to ensure that other members will make up the slack. "NATO Force 2020," the Alliance's new vision statement, identifies key capabilities it will need to acquire over the next decade. NATO should use the Wales Summit to emphasize the importance of realizing this vision.

### **Uncertain Times, Still**

However, coordination should not necessarily be a problem, given that NATO is perhaps the world's most integrated military alliance. For instance, NATO's renewed exercise program seeks to maintain the Alliance's ability to fight as a collective entity, and incorporate partners when they are available. In fact, Moscow's actions now make it easier for NATO planners to discard the pretense that these exercises do not rehearse defending its members from Russian aggression. Until last November's [STEADFAST JAZZ](#), designed to test the Alliance's ability to mobilize and deploy reinforcements to Central Europe, NATO had not held an Article 5 collective defense exercise in more than a decade. Yet, while NATO has the military capacity to defeat a Russian conventional offensive almost anywhere in Europe, the will to defend non-members is currently lacking. At present, there is little consensus among all 28 NATO members to intervene militarily to defend t Georgia, Moldova or other closely aligned states in the event of a Russian attack against them.

The key equation here is the relative balance of interests rather than the balance of capabilities. Controlling the former Soviet space is a vital national interest for Moscow, for which Russia's leaders might be willing to engage in major conflict, whereas for NATO's most influential members in Western Europe, it is not. Instead, NATO member-states have the collective capacity to inflict great damage on Russia's economic interests. What is uncertain, however, is whether the Western powers are willing to endure sufficiently large economic costs themselves in order to inflict enough pain on Russia, which recalls the transience and ineffectiveness of previous sanctions that aimed to compel Moscow into changing its course.

Another uncertainty is whether the Crimea crisis will finally reverse Europe's defense spending freefall, which has been ongoing since the end of the Cold War. According to a recent report published by the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#) (SIPRI), military spending among most NATO allies continues to be outstripped by Russia, China and other emerging powers. Rectifying this imbalance should also be an important feature of the upcoming NATO summit. The Alliance needs to make major funding commitments as soon as possible in order to develop cyber defenses, renew nuclear-capable aircraft and expand its missile defense capabilities.

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