

NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force *Can the VJTF give new élan to the NATO Response Force?*

by Jan Abts¹



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Introduction

As ethnic Russian separatists, backed by disguised Russian troops, occupied the Crimean Peninsula in the last days of February 2014 and Russia subsequently annexed a part of Ukraine against the international rule of law, NATO witnessed further proof of a more assertive Russian foreign policy. In the following months, this policy led to numerous other breaches of international law. Almost overnight, NATO's agenda changed drastically, including its plans for the Wales Summit. NATO needed a new focus on collective defence and one question overshadowed all the other themes in Newport: how to react to Russia's aggression and hybrid warfare model?² The new geopolitical circumstances stirred some cynical reactions by political scientists: "*It gives the aging alliance something to do.*"³ Others urged the Alliance "*not to squander the opportunity the crisis provides to address some fundamental problems.*"⁴

To counter the hybrid warfare model, planning teams at NATO Headquarters, at Allied Command Operations (ACO) and at Allied Command Transformation (ACT) developed the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), consisting of assurance and adaptation measures. The RAP was approved at the Wales Summit on 5 September 2014: "*In order to*

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² Hybrid warfare doesn't have a universally accepted definition. The term has been used to describe the type of warfare "which encompasses a simultaneous mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behaviour in the same time and theatre of operations," according to the NDC's academic portal. The Russian policies "are aimed at pulling countries or parts of it in their sphere of authoritarian institutions, governance, judiciary and police" and "they use political, civilian and military instruments to achieve their aims", according to KRUIT, Peter, *Hybrid Warfare: How the Russians used Western Methods*, dated 3 September 2014 (see warbits.wordpress.com/2014/09/03/hybrid-warfare-how-the-russians-used-western-methods.htm).

³ Stephen M. Walt, "NATO Owes Putin a Big Thank-You," *Foreign Policy*, 4 September 14, p. 1.

⁴ John R. Deni, "What NATO Needs to Do in the Wake of the Ukraine Crisis," *Defense One*, 22 July 2014.

ensure that our Alliance is ready to respond swiftly and firmly to the new security challenges, today we have approved the NATO Readiness Action Plan. 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 posed by Russia and their strategic implications.”⁵

The RAP addresses both readiness and responsiveness. It is aimed at a rapid adaptation of NATO's strategic military posture, but also fits into the NATO Forces 2020 project.⁶ An essential part of it is the creation of a new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), which will be part of the decade-old NATO Response Force (NRF). Creating another stand-by force, even as part of an existing one, may seem surprising. The experience with other stand-by forces, like the NRF and the European Union Battle Groups (EUBGs), hasn't been entirely positive. So there is room for some scepticism about the idea of the VJTF.

It must be stressed that creating the VJTF is a work in progress. The concept has not been finalized yet. As these lines are being written, the NATO Military Committee and national delegations are looking into the proposals of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). Well-informed sources have said that the discussions are not going smoothly and – hardly surprising – that not all nations are singing from the same sheet of music, even to the extent that the initial deadline for approval could be missed.⁷ Hence, many details still have to be worked out and the unclassified nature of this paper does not allow for discussion on these pages of the different proposals. However, it is not the intention here to answer

all the open questions. To do so would be premature, as subsequent developments would in any case quickly consign any account of current attitudes to the history books.

Rather, the goal of this report is to look at some “flaws” in existing stand-by forces and, based on this analysis, to make some recommendations, in order to ensure that mistakes from the past are not repeated. The thesis of this paper is that the new VJTF will only be successful when some basic conditions and needs are met – e.g., an overhaul of the current funding rules for NATO's stand-by forces, an adequate activation mechanism and robust command and control system, and broad political support for the concept.

The NATO Response Force: A Mixed Success

The NATO Response Force (NRF) came into being as a result of the Prague Summit in November 2002. The proposal, which came from the US Delegation, was consistent with the ambition of the political leaders of the Alliance to adapt to the needs of the 21st century and to equip NATO with more expeditionary forces. The events in the Balkans in the 1990s, the attacks of 9/11, and the start of the war in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 had shown that the future relevance of NATO would be linked to its potential to react rapidly, efficiently and in a flexible way to emerging crisis situations. The NRF was intended to provide the Alliance with a quickly deployable, highly capable reaction force of some 25,000 troops, consisting of land, air, maritime and special forces components, with specific enablers and logistic support. The force had to be able to be en-

⁵ “Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, 05 Sep. 2014,” Press Release (2014) 120, para. 5, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm

⁶ At the 2012 Chicago Summit, Allied leaders set the goal of “NATO Forces 2020.” According to NATO's website, this concept is “designed to be a coherent set of deployable, interoperable and sustainable forces equipped, trained, exercised and commanded so as to be able to meet NATO's level of ambition and able to operate together and with partners in any environment.” See www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_98527.htm for more information on the related “Connected Forces Initiative.”

⁷ The aim was to obtain the approval of the Defence Ministers in February 2015, so as to have the VJTF achieve Initial Operational Capability (IOC) in 2016 and Full Operational Capability (FOC) in 2017.

gaged anywhere in the world within 5 to 30 days following a political decision to deploy it. After a national and international training period from 6 to 18 months, each NRF rotation would be on stand-by for six months.

The creation of the NRF fit the post-Cold War transformation process.⁸ The spiritual fathers of the NRF, Hans Binnendijk and Richard Kugler,⁹ wanted to create a vehicle for rapid modernization of the European pillar within NATO and improve interoperability. Stephen Mariano and Brendan Wilson described the purpose of the new forces as follows: “*This force [...] is intended not only to have fairly sharp teeth but also to be the vehicle that brings other Alliance forces and concepts further out of the Cold War and into the 21st century.*”¹⁰

From the beginning, however, the NRF suffered from important shortfalls in the required manning (called the Combined Joint Statement of Requirements, or CJSOR).¹¹ Even NRF 8 – the rotation that was declared fully operational (FOC) at the Riga Summit in 2006 – was filled only to 81% of the scheduled capacity.¹² At a time of high operational tempo in Iraq and Afghanistan, the prolonged unavailability for other tasks of troops committed to the NRF, due to the extensive train-up, stand-by and stand-down periods,¹³ was certainly the major factor in the poor reception of the concept. The “strategic overstretch” of the Alliance and its largest member

state reduced commitments to the NRF to an average of 47% between 2004 and 2008.¹⁴ Stanley Sloan pointed to another reason for the limited success of the NRF: “*The absence of serious U.S. participation in the force was a major factor limiting its credibility and effectiveness.*”¹⁵

Did the NRF improve interoperability between national armed forces? It is clear that the extensive certification process and the numerous exercises had a very positive impact on it. The NRF helped establish qualitative standards for training, as most units and headquarters today have gone through the certification procedure.¹⁶ Some argue, however, that the development of this interoperability has benefited more from the combined participation in NATO’s ISAF operation.¹⁷

More critical in judging the success of the concept is the absence of deployments for operations. Apart from some duties for the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004 and for humanitarian relief after Hurricane Katrina and the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, the NRF has never been used “as such.” Different lecturers at the NATO Defense College have attributed this to the “absence of political will.” Some argue that the US idea of such a force, proposed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, received a cool reception from some European Allies from the very outset. This argument can be countered by the fact that the much smaller EUBGs have struggled with a

⁸ Michael Mihalka, “NATO Response Force: Rapid? Responsive? A Force?,” *The Quarterly Journal*, Summer 2005, p. 67.

⁹ See Hans Binnendijk and Richard Kugler, “Transforming European Forces,” *Survival*, Autumn 2002, p. 117-132.

¹⁰ Stephen Mariano and Brendan Wilson, “NATO Response Force,” *Militaire Spectator*, Jaargang 173, Nr. 1, p. 34.

¹¹ Combined Joint Statement of Requirements.

¹² This percentage was reached thanks to a last minute agreement between General James L. Jones, then SACEUR, and then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Earlier the CHODs of all the member states had subscribed to the intention of SACEUR not to declare the NRF FOC unless the CJSOR was completely filled.

¹³ A stand-by force of 25,000 troops requires the availability of 75,000 soldiers in order to take into account the train-up and stand-down periods, and even more when considering that the training and certification take more time than the stand-by period.

¹⁴ Letter from SACEUR, General John Craddock, to the North Atlantic Council and the Military Committee, dated 25 July 2007.

¹⁵ Stanley R. Sloan, “A Successful NATO Summit? Proof will be in the Pudding,” *War on the Rocks*, 10 September 2014.

¹⁶ Guillaume Lasconjarias, “The NRF: from a Key Driver of Transformation to a Laboratory of the Connected Forces Initiative,” *NDC Research Paper*, No 88, January 2013, p. 2.

¹⁷ This was also the idea of the former chief of staff of Joint Forces Command-Brunssum, the late LTG Jean-Pierre BOVY.

similar lack of troops and resources.¹⁸ But there were also differing opinions with respect to the tasks and the possible scenarios in which the NRF – and the EUBGs – could be engaged. Some argued that the NRF was not suitable for stabilization and reconstruction missions. The issue was never clarified at the political level and was one of the reasons for the inability to reach consensus among allies whenever the possibility of a deployment was discussed.¹⁹

Transforming the NRF

The lack of troops pledged by the nations proved to be the Achilles heel of the concept and led to the revocation of the NRF's FOC status by General John Craddock, then SACEUR, just eight months after the Riga Summit declaration. Force generation remained low in the following years.²⁰ In 2008-2009 there was even speculation about possibly disbanding the NRF, but this was not seriously discussed. In an attempt to adapt the concept to hard reality, changes were approved in 2008. Further changes followed in 2010, creating a core of deployable forces – the Immediate Response Force (IRF) – and a Response Forces Pool (RFP). The force requirements for the IRF were reduced to some 13,000 troops, with a Land Component roughly the size of a brigade. The stand-by period was extended to 12 months, in order to limit the financial burden linked to training and certification of the participating units. It was important, however, that neither the missions nor the philosophy of the NRF changed.²¹

Despite the changes described above, force generation for the NRF remained a challenge, as the initial successes in this respect did not prove sustainable. For example, in NRF 16 – the rotation undergoing training now for stand-by in 2016 – the CJSOR has so far been filled to roughly 70% of its scheduled capacity. This may lead to the conclusion that the size of a new stand-by force should not be too ambitious and that other factors, like funding, activation, and command and control are also important in determining its success.

Funding Stand-By Forces

For many years, NATO has been functioning in an environment characterized by growing fiscal austerity and declining defence budgets.²² In this environment, the appetite of some nations to spend money on the readiness and deployment of stand-by forces has been severely affected.

Some nations have been reluctant to commit troops to the NRF. The question of whether this has been caused by the basic funding principle within the Alliance (“costs lie where they fall”) has never been thoroughly researched. Some argue that funding has played only a limited role in the lack of force generation success for the NRF – and the EUBGs. They claim, for instance, that the expansion of common funding has not made critical capabilities available for NATO operations, like ISAF.²³ Furthermore, nations like Germany, the United Kingdom, the Neth-

¹⁸ The EU's ambition is to have two Battle Groups ready for engagement every six months. One EUBG consists on average of some 2,500 troops.

¹⁹ Countries like France opposed the idea of using the NRF as a strategic reserve force for ongoing operations, while Germany was of the opinion that the NRF was to be used only for operations at the lower end of the spectrum.

²⁰ For NRF 13, the Land Component was filled to only 27% of the target. For other examples, see Lasconjarias, p. 4.

²¹ Lasconjarias, p. 5. Increasing the stand-by period means NATO can reduce the number of units and headquarters that must go through the expensive national and international training for the NRF. A longer stand-by period is therefore more cost-effective.

²² John Gordon, Stuart Johnson, Stephen Larrabee and Peter Wilson, “NATO and the Challenge of Austerity,” *Survival*, Vol. 54 No. 4, August-September 2012, pp. 121-142.

²³ Common funding allows NATO authorities to identify the requirements and set the priorities in line with overarching Alliance objectives and priorities. All member states participate in the costs and the budget includes the NATO Civil and Military Budgets and the NATO Security Investment Programme (NSIP). With respect to operations, common funding is used to cover expenses that are truly common (e.g. linked to the NCS) and requirements which are “over and above those which could reasonably be expected to be made available from national resources”. Direct contributions are made by members in accordance with an agreed cost-sharing formula based on Gross National Income. They represent a very small percentage of each member's total defense budget. For more details, see www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_67655.htm

erlands, and Belgium are reluctant to expand common funding, and some even use the term “force generation myth.”²⁴ Nations like France, Italy, and Greece, on the other hand, are of the opinion that the expansion of common funding may increase the success of force generation.

The former Chief of Defence of Luxembourg, General Gaston Reinig, has also stressed financial reasons for some nations opposing the deployment of stand-by forces, once they have committed troops to it.²⁵ In 2006, Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer described this funding problem as follows: *“Right now, participation in the NRF is something like a reverse lottery: If your numbers come up, you actually lose money. If the NRF deploys while you happen to be in the rotation, you pay the full cost of the deployment of your forces. [...] Most Alliance members, particularly the larger ones, believe the system is not only unfair and inefficient but makes nonsense of any notion of solidarity by allowing some countries to ride in the slipstream of the others.”*²⁶

Funding rules are probably not the only reason to explain the lack of success of stand-by forces. Strategic overstretch also plays a role, and financial considerations are only one aspect in the national decision-making processes, as pointed out by the J8 of the Belgian Defence Staff.²⁷ There are also questions of political interest, availability of capabilities, risk sharing, and a balance of commitments with respect

to other international organizations.

It seems logical, however, that the financial burden for a political decision made by 28 nations should not be shouldered only by those nations which actually commit troops or assets in the period concerned.²⁸ Opposition to expansion of common funding is sometimes based on purely national, political motives.²⁹ Although the basic rule that “costs lie where they fall” should not be changed, an expansion of common funding to those aspects of activation and deployment covered by the Athena Mechanism of the EU³⁰ should be taken into consideration for future deployments of the VJTF and the NRF. Further extension should also be discussed to cover costs for redeployment, in-theatre functioning, and international exercises. Common funding only represents 0.3% of all the defence budgets within the Alliance. A small increase could make a huge difference to the readiness and credibility of NATO and its stand-by forces. Unwillingness to acknowledge this, on the other hand, could have major consequences: *“If nations object to maintaining or expanding common funding as a matter of principle, they unwittingly forgo access to core enabling capabilities and contribute to military fragmentation.”*³¹

²⁴ Leon Symoens, “Het Athena-mechanisme,” in *Belgisch Militair Tijdschrift*, Nr 5, Jaargang 2012, p. 100.

²⁵ Discussion with General Reinig, Military Advisor to the Luxembourg Ambassador to the UN, dated 4 November 2014.

²⁶ Speech of Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the Munich Security Conference, dated 4 February 2006.

²⁷ The J8 is the staff officer in charge of financial resources in the Staff Department Operations and Training.

²⁸ The prime example is the airlift of humanitarian goods after the earthquake in Pakistan in October 2005. The bill had to be picked up by Spain. See Jens Ringsmose, “Taking Stock of NATO’s Response Force,” *NDC Research Paper*, No 54, January 2010, p. 5

²⁹ As one Belgian defence official stated: “we don’t want to transfer competences to a level without any budgetary responsibility” and “an expansion of common funding will have a cost that will have to be covered by the national defense budget.” Interview with author.

³⁰ Operational expenses eligible for common funding are divided into four categories: fixed administrative expenses, always eligible; expenses linked to the preparation of an operation, like for Fact Finding Missions and reconnaissance missions, always eligible; expenses made during the execution of an operation, like the cost of the deployment of the OHQ and FHQ, critical infrastructure, medical installations on an APOD, satellite imagery, expenses for the transportation of the force, expenses for lodging facilities, etc.; expenses made during the winding-up phase of an operation. The use of common funding for some of the expenses during the execution phase sometimes requires a specific approval of the ‘Council’ or of the ‘Special Committee’. See Act of the EU Special Committee 12-0392 (*nature and scope of the incremental costs eligible for common funding incurred during a Battle Group deployment*), dated 29 May 2012.

³¹ Alexander Mattelaer, “Preparing NATO for the Next Defence-Planning Cycle,” *RUSI Journal*, June/July 2014, p. 34.

Activation Mechanism and Command and Control

In order to be of real value and suitably credible in the case of an erupting crisis, the new VJTF should be able to be activated and deployed quickly. This may be an enormous challenge, as the decision to activate the NRF requires a consensus decision amongst 28 nations in the North Atlantic Council (NAC). Furthermore, the ultimate decision to engage troops lies with the national political authorities. The mechanism is different from country to country, as in some nations the competence lies with the executive body,³² while in others a decision by the legislative body is required.³³ How to reconcile the (by definition) lengthy process of parliamentary approval with a reaction time of a few days remains a problematic issue, as seen in the experience of the NRF and the EUBGs. An experienced planner in Brussels mentioned that activation of the NRF during exercises sometimes took 14 days.³⁴

Linked to this point is another financial hurdle, adding a further dimension to the funding discussion in the previous paragraph: to keep a major force in a state of very high readiness requires considerable financial resources. The larger the force, the more resources will be needed to train it and to keep it ready. This may be another argument for ensuring that the new VJTF is kept to an affordable size and a realistic level of ambition.

A further point of discussion is command and control, and more specifically the competences of SACEUR to train, certify and deploy the new stand-by force. The Wales Summit declaration stated the importance of adequate command and control arrangements to deal with the emerging threats in the East:

*“We will ensure that the current NATO Command Structure remains robust, agile, and able to undertake all elements of effective command and control for simultaneous challenges.”*³⁵ The NATO Command Structure (NCS) is in the process of being transformed after the decisions made at the Lisbon Summit in 2010, involving a reduction of manpower from 13,000 to 8,800. It remains to be seen whether NATO Allies will be ready to review some of the earlier decisions in light of their commitment to keep a robust, agile, and able NCS. This may also require an effort from the Allies to fill all allocated posts, another challenge to the ambitious Wales Summit statements of intent in times of continued austerity.

Dr John Deni of the US Army War College has stressed the need for more robust command and control of the NRF. In an op-ed a few weeks before the Wales Summit, Deni stated that *“NATO should either disband the NRF or give SACEUR greater peacetime operational control and authority over its use.”*³⁶ He recommends an arrangement that reconciles the need for more robust command and control and flexible activation with continued political oversight and respect for national prerogatives. NATO leaders can achieve this by granting SACEUR extended authority to train (e.g. the authority to activate the VJTF for “snap exercises”), but also to *deploy*. The decision to *employ* the VJTF would remain a prerogative of the NAC and the national authorities.

“Use It or Lose It” – The Issue of Political Will

The shocking finding that the NRF “as such” has never been used for real operations, despite the abundance of crises in the world over the last ten

³² Examples are Belgium, France and the United States.

³³ Examples are the Netherlands and Germany.

³⁴ Interview with author in October 2014.

³⁵ Wales Summit Declaration, para. 99 (emphasis in original).

³⁶ John R. Deni, “What NATO Needs to Do in the Wake of the Ukraine Crisis,” *Defense One*, 22 July 2014.

years, can be related to the financial burden and to disagreements over the philosophy of the concept, as pointed out earlier. As one analyst has written, “*The NRF was conceived as a response to growing threats in a non-permissive environment, that is to say, a highly improbable commitment, as nations may always be reluctant to commit their forces on potential killing grounds.*”³⁷ The same is also true for the EUBG. Asked about the reasons for the reluctance to use this asset, a lecturer at the NDC with experience at decision-making levels in the EU first voiced his disappointment and frustration, and then pointed to “a lack of political will” on the part of some EU member states.³⁸

It is likely, however, that the VJTF may overcome some of this reluctance, as the strategic environment is now different from that of 2004. The threats have become more imminent and are now located in NATO’s neighbourhood. There is also a strong commitment to the concept from the Heads of State and Government. A senior NATO official, who called himself the “father of the RAP,” stressed these changed circumstances to underline his confidence in the future of the VJTF concept.³⁹

Conclusion

NATO leaders made some important decisions at the Summit in Wales. The Summit is perceived by academics and practitioners alike as “historic” and a “turning point for the Alliance.” The guidance that NATO leaders have given to planners with respect to the VJTF is clear: the new force will be part of the NRF; it will be a joint force, and it will have to be able to deploy rapidly.⁴⁰ Also important is the fact

that the new force may be committed on the periphery of NATO’s territory. This should be interpreted as a compromise, in order to obtain the support of those Allies on the southern flank who are more concerned with threats like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) than Russian aggression.

The greater emphasis on collective defence post-Wales could give a second chance to the stand-by forces, as some arguments of the past against employment (for example “*not fit for stabilization and reconstruction missions*”) are thus no longer relevant.⁴¹ The strategic environment may also favour increased funding for defence and security in most of the Alliance’s capitals, which would reduce the weight of the financial arguments.

In order to ensure that this quick reaction force does not suffer the same fate as the NRF and the EUBGs, it is recommended that the following points be implemented:

- a review of funding arrangements to create incentives for commitments, even if this includes an expansion of common funding;
- a flexible but realistic activation mechanism that respects national prerogatives but also reinforces the credibility of the high readiness force;
- robust command and control mechanisms, that may include increased authority for SA-CEUR;
- broad support for the concept prior to declaring the force Initial Operational Capability in order to ensure that the political will to fund and to use the VJTF if necessary is present from the very beginning.

³⁷ Lasconjarias, p. 7.

³⁸ Lecture at NDC, September 2014

³⁹ Presentation to NDC senior course during visit to NATO HQ, November 2014

⁴⁰ Wales Summit Declaration, Par. 8, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm

⁴¹ This kind of criticism is echoed in articles advocating for the creation of a specific NATO force for stabilization and reconstruction. See <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/en/publications/reports/alliance-reborn-an-atlantic-compact-for-the-21st-century> and Hans Binnendijk, “Postwar planning : A new, but necessary, job for NATO,” *International Herald Tribune*, 9 April 2004.



“The key to NATO’s success over more than six decades was its ability to adapt to changed circumstances,” wrote one analyst two months prior to the Summit.⁴² The proof of the pudding is really in the eating, and this is particularly true for the creation of the VJTF. Whether or not the VJTF can reassure Allies in the region will depend on the commitment of sufficient, capable, and ready forces.⁴³ If the Alliance fails, the consequences will be more far-reaching than the fate of just another stand-by force.

⁴² Karl-Heinz Kamp, “Five Long-Term Challenges for NATO beyond the Ukraine Crisis,” *NDC Research Report*, July 2014, p. 5.

⁴³ Stanley Sloan, “A Successful NATO Summit? Proof will be in the Pudding,” *War on the Rocks*, 10 September 2014.