The NATO Response Force

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From Prague to Istanbul

Over the past two years the Alliance has taken some important steps in realizing its agenda for the twenty-first century. The transformation of NATO’s military capabilities has taken definite shape with the introduction of the Prague Capabilities Commitment (PCC), the reform of the command structure and the establishment of the NATO Response Force (NRF). Especially developments taking place at the level of the NRF have been called remarkable by many. Within less than a year of its creation, the Force officially reached initial operating capability in October 2004. Full operational capability is expected as soon as 2006, and some insiders do not rule out the possibility that the Force will be deployed for the first time by the second half of 2005. But although substantial progress seems to have been made with regard to this Force, this part of the transformation process is still far from complete. And it remains to be seen whether the objectives that NATO has set out for the NRF will be realized in the near future.

Toward a NATO Response Force

At the Prague Summit in November 2002, NATO leaders unanimously agreed to the creation of the NATO Response Force - a fully interoperable and integrated high-readiness capability, able to act as “the first boots on the ground” in the Alliance’s full conflict spectrum. The Force has the form of a Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF), which means that sea, land and air components from a multitude of countries are all united in the concept. The NRF must be ready for deployment within five days, and be able to sustain itself for at least thirty days under extremely difficult conditions. At the moment the NRF has an initial capability of 5,000 men, but the Force will eventually comprise approximately 20,000 military personnel.

According to the Prague Summit’s Final Declaration, the creation of the NATO Response Force serves two purposes.

First, the establishment of the NRF is an answer to changes taking place in the international security environment, which is marked by a globalization of threats, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism. These new threats require a force that can be deployed quickly to wherever it might be needed, regardless of the intensity and geographical position of the conflict at hand. For this purpose NATO decided on the creation of a “technologically advanced, flexible, deployable, interoperable and sustainable force,” which should be able to carry out “operations over distance and time, including in an environment where they might be faced with nuclear, biological and chemical threats.”

Second, the NRF has to be regarded as an instrument to streamline European defense expenditure, thereby enhancing interoperability among NATO forces and military means, not only between the United States and Europe, but also among the European NATO member states themselves. Complete interoperability is absolutely essential in facing these new security challenges. Joint NATO operations in the 1990s had already revealed major differences in military technology between the United States and Europe. At a time when the Americans were spending large sums of money on new, more advanced military capabilities, European defense expenditure stagnated. The asymmetrical development in capabilities that followed led to what one now calls “the transatlantic capabilities gap.” As was noted in the Final Declaration of the Prague Summit, the NRF should serve as a “catalyst for supporting improvements in NATO’s military capabilities,” an instrument to persuade European NATO partners to transform their military capabilities, thereby ensuring effective cooperation with
the United States in the future. NATO consequently hopes that the NRF will act as a means to close the capabilities’ gap.

Two years after its creation, a lot of work still needs to be done before the Force can be effectively deployed in cases of crisis. It remains to be seen whether the NATO Response Force will reach the goals set out for it to achieve. Lack of clarity as to the nature of the threats that the NRF is supposed to counter, the lengthy decision-making procedures that precede its deployment, the current economic situation in the member states, the ambiguous relationship between the NRF and its European brother - the European Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF) - and the current state of transatlantic relations are aspects that influence the developments taking place at the level of the NRF. These issues therefore deserve further indepth discussion at the coming NATO Summit that is to take place on June 28-29, 2004 in Istanbul, Turkey.

**Nature of Threats**

The NATO Response Force has been specially designed to act as an “initial entry force,” well equipped to fight conflicts at the higher end of the spectrum, outside the Alliance’s own geographical borders. It has been intended for pre-emptive warfare and will in principle not depend on a UN mandate. Although all leaders approved of the proposal, there is still no real consensus on the nature of threats that the NRF will have to counter. Did the Europeans really agree to the use of the NRF as part of a pre-emptive action? Is it likely that the NRF will ever be used without the presence of a UN mandate? Will the NRF fight in high-intensity conflict situations?

- First, most European NATO member states will prefer a UN mandate when engaging in military activities abroad. The continuous disagreement over how to deal with the current situation in Iraq is a clear example of how many countries demand UN involvement before they are willing to play any military role in a conflict situation.
- Second, most European NATO member states do not like the idea of pre-emptive warfare. Germany even goes one step further and does not approve of the use of any form of “hard power” and prefers the NRF to be assigned “softer” tasks, such as peacekeeping or peace enforcement.
- Third, there is still some disagreement over whether NATO should engage in military activities outside its geographical borders. France, in particular, still has a problem with out-of-area operations.
- And, fourth, the NRF will have to carry out the full range of the Alliance’s missions, both at the higher end as well as the lower end of the conflict spectrum. Observers, however, rightly doubt whether the NATO Response Force will ever be deployed in situations of high-intensity battles, especially as an initial entry force. Interestingly enough, however, a lot of emphasis has been and still is being put on exactly this role.

Overall, it seems that the debate on the nature of threats has been postponed in order to make sure that all countries would accept the proposal, so as to avoid possible failure at the Prague Summit. Over the last two years nothing has changed with regard to these views, meaning that in Istanbul this will have to be discussed.

**Decision-making Procedure**

Current decision-making procedures at the North Atlantic Council (NAC) will further complicate the deployment of troops under an NRF flag. The fact is that a rapid response force also requires rapid decision-making procedures. With the enlargement of NATO from 19 to 26 member states, a discussion about the rule of decision-making by consensus is inevitable. The current decision-making process at the NAC does not compare to the
requirements of the NRF, which has to be deployed as quickly as possible. NATO commander General James Jones was right when he stated that “in the future nations would have to consider whether the opposition of one or two nations could continually stymie the will of the majority.” \(^3\) Lengthy procedures will damage the NRF’s image as a quick and responsive force. Although striving for consensus is always a good thing because it enhances solidarity and legitimacy, the lack of it should never stand in the way of NRF deployment.

At a national level, governments are currently bringing their own procedures in line with NRF requirements after a crisis management seminar, which took place on 7 October 2003 in Colorado Springs, had highlighted tensions between the national decision-making procedures used in some countries on the one hand, and the need for rapid action on the other. The surplus value of the NATO Response Force must in the first place be sought in its ability to deploy rapidly, anywhere at anytime. However, being presented with a situation that was changing by the hour, ministers were not able to comply with national procedures, such as parliamentary approval, fast enough. Especially Germany had a problem, because the deployment of its troops depends on parliamentary consent. After the crisis management seminar, German Defense Minister Peter Struck pointed out that Germany would have a serious problem if the NATO Response Force were deployed tomorrow. At the moment Germany is still in the progress of adapting its Constitution so as to speed up its decision-making process.

An equally important discussion that still has to take place at the Council is about who will bare the costs related to the actual deployment of the NATO Response Force? If the Force goes into battle, this will result in high additional costs. There are two options available in dealing with this issue: the first is “the costs lie where they fall principle;” and the other is the principle of burden-sharing. According to the first principle, only the countries that are deployed as part of the NRF will pay for the costs that result from engaging in action. Some countries strongly oppose this option. Besides having to fight the battle and bear possible loss of lives, they would also have to pay for the mission. This conflicts with the NATO principle of collective action. Quite a few countries have until now also strongly opposed the second principle, that of collective burden-sharing, either because they cannot afford it (for example Belgium), or because they did not joint the NRF in the first place (Luxembourg and Iceland). Sharing the burden collectively might lead to countries overspending because they do not have to pay for it anyway. This money discussion is yet to take place and will not be easily resolved.

**Budgetary Restraints**

The gap in capabilities between the United States and its Allies has been apparent for a long time, and the fear that in the near future NATO Allies will no longer be able to work together is real. The chances that this problem can be solved in the near future and that the NRF can play any role of importance are small.

If one takes into account the current economic situation as well as the political unwillingness of some countries to spend more money on defense, it seems unlikely that the necessary investments to close this gap can, and will in fact, be made. The United States has always spent more money on defense than its European Allies, and is expected to raise the budget even more over the next decade. In Europe, on the other hand, some European member states have decided to make deep cuts in their defense expenditure. It seems unlikely that those European countries that did take the American pleas for reform to heart will be able to make the difference. Only a collective European response, promoting closer military cooperation through tasks’ division, pooling of means and joint buying could end up with savings. But in the short run it will only cost participants a lot of money because of the extremely high initial costs. Besides that, European NATO member states spend far less on
research and development, and the research that is being done is fragmented. Again, a collective response is necessary. Unfortunately, even if European member states started to spend the equivalent of what the Americans are spending on their defense apparatus, especially on new military techniques, it would take years to catch up.

With regard to the NATO Response Force, this means that instead of being able to contribute to closing this capabilities’ gap, the Force will probably find itself struggling with it in terms of ensuring interoperability between forces and means, especially on the level of the ground forces. Problems will consequently arise, including:

- ensuring multilateral representativeness inside the NRF (more than three to four countries working together could enhance a lack of interoperability);
- ensuring equal contributions to the NRF (the same countries will have to assign their capabilities more often to the NRF because others do not have the capabilities themselves);
- ensuring flexibility and effectiveness of the NRF (a lack of interoperability enhances inflexibility and ineffectiveness).

**Relations to the ERRF**

Finally, the relationship between the NRF and its European counterpart - the European Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF) - is still not clear. Although it is the official policy of both NATO and the European Union that the two will not overlap or interfere with one another so as to avoid duplication, complete complementarity in the future will ultimately be an illusion. In this light one also has to wonder whether the Europeans will stick to the Petersberg Tasks and remain dependent on the United States and NATO for the completion of their missions. Perhaps the European Union will strive to become more independent of American assistance by wanting to be able to act at the higher end of the spectrum as well? In fact, especially France is a strong advocate of a European defense capability that can perform in high-intensity conflicts without the assistance of NATO (read: the United States). If this was the case, the NRF and ERRF will indeed end up competing with each other for the same means. At the moment this is probably not something to worry about too much. The Europeans still do not have the means and capabilities to perform any of these high-intensity missions by themselves and will remain dependent on NATO and particularly the United States for a long time to come. Besides that, there is still no real agreement between EU member states on what tasks the European Rapid Reaction Force has to perform. The ERRF will therefore remain complementary to NATO and the NRF. It is more likely that the real problem is the other way around. What if the NATO Response Force cannot live up to its expectations and remains at the lower spectrum? This would mean that it would work on the same field as the European Rapid Reaction Force. This latter view seems to be more serious than the one mentioned above.

On a more practical level, only a certain amount of money and troops will be available to both forces. As far as the amount of troops is involved, this is not so much a problem at the moment and could easily be overcome by making a clear schedule. This, however, does not mean that countries that do not have a large pool of available troops will not have problems living up to the expectations of NATO and the EU at the same time. The fact that there is only so much money can become a real problem in the near future, especially considering the economic situation mentioned above. Another issue to be dealt with is what happens to the European Rapid Reaction Force if NATO’s operational planning capabilities have to be used for NATO purposes and cannot be used for EU purposes as was agreed under the so-called Berlin+ Agreement. All of these issues must be dealt with in the future and it remains to be seen whether they can be solved satisfactorily.
Transatlantic Tensions

A more fundamental issue underlying the creation of the NATO Response Force and its possible successful deployment in the future is the difference between the United States and its Allies on how international security issues should be dealt with, and on what role NATO and the NATO Response Force should play. There seems to be widespread consensus amongst observers and analysts that there is no longer a common conception of security and military strategy. Europeans and Americans do not share what can be called a common "strategic culture."

The current transatlantic drift has made these differences painfully visible. Over the last two years US-EU relations have remained strained, which will make NRF deployment more uncertain.

With regard to the NATO Response Force, both objectives - fighting new threats and closing the capabilities' gap - can be reduced in an American perception of how to deal with current international security issues. As far as the first objective is concerned, the NRF fits neatly into the US's conception of how to fight today's battles, thereby not shying away from the use of pre-emptive or preventive action, and passing over the United Nations. Holding on to the NRF concept in this particular form might eventually only strengthen the differences between the Allies. Especially with regard to the formulation of the concept and the nature of threats that the NRF has to counter, the United States should have a better eye for the differences in strategic culture, and should understand that most European member states will not want to deploy their troops in that particular way. On the other hand, a more proactive European attitude with regard to fighting new threats is desirable.

With regard to the second objective, one can subsequently argue that the US's perception requires a certain type of capabilities that the Europeans do not have. Convincing the Europeans to make more effort to close the gap has more to do with ensuring a NATO that is capable of US-type warfare in the future instead of bringing Allies closer together. At the Prague Summit the European NATO member states approved of the NRF, and thus of the American way, but it remains to be seen whether this approval can and will be translated into concrete action, making the NRF as successful as especially the Americans intended. The United States should make more of the technology available to Europe and should at the same time understand that a real transformation will take a very long time. Besides that, they should accept that some of the differences on the level of these capabilities will not be solved.

Moving Forward to Istanbul

During June 2004, NATO member states will meet in Istanbul for what will be the seventeenth Summit in the Alliance’s history. NATO’s transformation process will once more color the agenda. With regard to the NATO Response Force, important developments have taken place over the last two years, but clearly a lot of work remains to be done. Hopefully, the Istanbul Summit can remove some of the tensions and serve as an impetus in the realization and successful implementation of the NATO Response Force.

Manuela Stoop was an intern at the Netherlands Atlantic Association from September 2003 until January 2004. This article is based on her thesis, which is entitled: The NATO Response Force: The United States’ Final Attempt to Keep the Alliance Alive?

Notes


