Section: Analysis

Credible deterrence?

NATO’s new spearhead force

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When the NATO Allies met at their Wales summit in September 2014, the D-word was back in vogue. Not in a muttering, shy or implicit way, but unambiguously and straightforwardly. For the first time in more than two decades NATO’s heads of state and government openly discussed how best to “deter” a distinct strategic rival — Russia.

Chief among the Welsh summit initiatives was the decision to set up a new multinational spearhead force — the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) — as part of an enhanced NATO Response Force (NRF) and within the framework of a so-called Readiness Action Plan (RAP). The VJTF will likely be deemed an “operational capacity” at NATO’s coming summit in Warsaw, in July 2016, as an indicator of a serious approach to deterrence.

While the Alliance thus has taken important first steps toward establishing credible deterrence, it needs to do more. Credible deterrence requires not only adequate military capacities, such as the VJTF; it equally requires a proper doctrine that pulls the capacities credibly together, and then a culture of decision-making and communication that establishes NATO’s reputation for resolve. Capacities, doctrine, and culture — these are key dimensions of NATO’s deterrence posture. We shall examine them in turn and pinpoint where NATO has work to do.

Capacity: the VJTF and the “enhanced NRF”

Since Wales, NATO’s leadership has repeatedly trumpeted the VJTF as a rapid response force that will substantially enhance the Alliance’s ability to counter military aggression against its members. Unfortunately, this claim involves a stretch of imagination. The VJTF might be quicker and punch with greater weight than yesterday’s force, but it is still too small to prevent a determined Russia from moving into, say, Latvia. Despite the magnificent headlines — “adaptation”, “the biggest reinforcement of our collective defense”, and “force enhancement” — the VJTF does not represent a dramatic break with what NATO is already doing in military terms. The VJTF adds readiness but not much real muscle to NATO and is in this sense mostly old wine in new bottles.

True, when fully implemented the new Enhanced NRF (of which the VJTF will be the high-readiness element) will appear to be three times as strong as yesterday’s quick reaction force, the old NRF. As announced by NATO’s secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, the Enhanced NRF will consist of up to 40,000 personnel, while the rapidly deployable parts of the pre-Wales NRF (the so-called Immediate Response Force — IRF) consisted of about 13,000 personnel.

However, to get to the “up to 40,000 personnel”, NATO has resorted to somewhat creative bookkeeping. When the Alliance counted its high-readiness forces before Wales, it focused...
solely on the 13,000 troops that were on “stand-by” as part of the IRF — not the 13,000 personnel that were preparing to be part of the IRF the next year (standing up) nor the 13,000 personnel that had just been on stand-by as part of the NRF the year before (standing down).

The new Enhanced NRF really does two things. First, it speeds up the reaction time of the stand-by forces (the spearhead 13,000). Second, it puts the other two teams on call for deployment — the 13,000 personnel training for stand-by and the 13,000 personnel winding down after stand-by. Together these latter approximately 26,000 troops will be labeled the “Initial Follow-On Forces Group” — or IFFG. The IFFG are meant to be “high-readiness forces that deploy quickly following the VJTF, in response to a crisis”. In reality, the IFFG will be able to deploy within 45 days, which hardly makes it a “high-readiness force”.

To be fair, the new NRF is a more agile military tool than its predecessor. While troop numbers have certainly been somewhat artificially inflated, the VJTF and the IFFG are on much higher alert than the old NRF. Parts of the VJTF will be ready for deployment within 48 hours; the old IRF needed a full month (30 days) to deploy. Moreover, both the VJTF and the IFFG will be subjected to a much more rigorous and demanding training program than the old NRF troops. Future NRF rotations will see many more snap-exercises and short-notice inspections. Being on higher alert will unquestionably make the NRF a more relevant tool; on the other hand, it will make the NRF a lot more expensive.

What is really new about NATO’s spearhead force is not the projected (modest) military improvements, however, but the fact that the NRF is for the first time being linked explicitly to collective defense and thus to Article 5. Since its creation in 2002, the NRF was always perceived as a vehicle for transformation and — if need be — an operational capacity for out-of-area operations. However, the events in Ukraine made it clear to policymakers that the Allies on the periphery of NATO needed assurances, and the political reframing of the NRF became the obvious answer. As the Alliance’s geostrategic pendulum swung back towards “regional NATO”, so did the NRF. The next question is whether the Alliance can shape the right doctrine for the new force.

**Doctrine: back to deterrence**

Deterrence is a question of sending a strong signal to would-be aggressors — such as Russia — that the NATO realm is off limits. Deterrence can take distinctively different forms, though.

The politically convenient option for NATO is “deterrence by denial” — by which NATO would deny Russia access to its territory and riches. The political appeal lies in the promise of upholding the inviolability — the sanctity — of all NATO territory. It is the equivalent of building a wall so high that Russia would be discouraged from climbing it. Deterrence by denial involves three things: first, a potent NATO force on the Alliance’s eastern border, deployed, ready and strong enough to respond to Russian aggression and to dig in and fight; second, a prepared insurgency for the eventuality that Russian forces penetrate part of the border in order to deny them the ability to settle in; finally, a capacity to move people and capital out of the contested area so that Russia would not be able to count on capturing riches.
There are at least two problems with this option of denial. One concerns the intensity of Russian interests. If Russia were really set on capturing one or more of the Baltic states, it probably would not be dissuaded by the prospect of an insurgency and the loss of some riches. These two dimensions thus fall out of the equation.

That means that “denial” depends almost uniquely on NATO’s forward deployed forces, and the fact of the matter is that they simply will not attain the strength to provide for in-place deterrence. NATO is unwilling to forward deploy anything as large as or larger than a brigade (around 5,000 troops). Deploying a brigade would not only violate the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 (which NATO prefers to keep intact to occupy the moral high ground) and be expensive for Western taxpayers; it would risk pulling Western troops into a static forward-posture inappropriate for the dynamic threats and risks emanating not only from Russia but also from other parts of the world.

NATO must therefore fall back on the other option of “deterrence by punishment”. In this scenario NATO accepts that part of its domain — say, the Baltic states — are vulnerable to Russian aggression, but it promises to meet such aggression with a response in some other place — Kaliningrad, Murmansk, or even Vladivostok out east — so fierce that Russia will desist. It should be noted that the new NRF is a tripwire that can bring the hammer to strike: it will move quickly to border areas of concern and confront Russia, which would have the muscle to defeat the force — kill it, to put it bluntly — but would also know that such aggression would cause NATO to bring its hammer to bear.

The tricky part for NATO is to define its hammer. This hammer must consist of follow-on forces — not the IFFG, which is part of the tripwire, but the whole package of NATO forces, both conventional and nuclear. A hammer is big and therefore both expensive and politically controversial, though in different measures. NATO could organize a mass of conventional forces and tie them into the overall doctrine of deterrence. This conventional option would be expensive on a scale that dwarfs the VJTF expenditure, which is already impressive. Inversely, NATO could fall back on nuclear deterrence, which is much more affordable but frankly beyond the pale of some allies.

NATO is ultimately likely to opt for a mix of forces — its “defense and deterrence posture review” of 2012 talks of an “appropriate mix of conventional and nuclear capabilities”, and this ambiguous wording is likely to endure. Ambiguity can help NATO foster an internal compromise, and it can keep Russia guessing, which can be good for deterrence. But there should be no mistaking: as NATO cannot do “deterrence by denial”, it must confront the fact that “deterrence by punishment” defines the inescapable element in its deterrence posture.

**Culture: establishing NATO’s reputation for resolve**

Soft power is really the backbone of the construct of deterrence, if by soft power we understand the capacity to convey resolve. We shall briefly discuss two facets of this soft deterrent power — decision-making and strategic communication. They tie in with a third facet, namely public opinion. Worryingly for NATO governments, public opinion in some key Allied countries is turning against the idea that their country should come to the defense of other Allies. Policy-makers should take this erosion of public support very seriously, and clear policy in regards to decision-making and strategic communication can help them do so.
Decision-making at NATO level is basically about speed and credibility. Speedy decisions are essential if the VJTF is to move into a danger zone within 48 hours (NATO military authorities can assemble the force, but political approval is necessary for its deployment and engagement). NATO can upgrade its decision-making by improving its “early warning indicators”, but, ultimately, reaching a speedy decision comes down to the ability of each Ally to establish a fast-track procedure for approval in the national capital, especially if parliamentary approval is required. This procedure should involve not only the approval of own force mobilization but also the transit of other NATO forces and especially their lethal equipment — which in peacetime is nearly impossible on account of “dangerous goods” legislation.

Next is the question of decision-making credibility. It begins with an identification of vital interests — or perhaps more commonly, red lines. These should be clearly identified (i.e., no violation of NATO borders) but painted in broad strokes to leave the adversary guessing (i.e., leave open the specific response to small incursions). The adversary should be of the impression that the hammer that could fall on him is exceptionally forceful (i.e., in the logic of deterrence by punishment), which is to say that all options must be kept on the table.

The worst-case scenario begins with NATO authorities taking some options off the table because they are uncomfortable with them — such as the nuclear option. It then continues with a very detailed red line that NATO authorities in fact are unwilling to defend and therefore willing to negotiate. And a cumbersome decision-making process tops it off. All this is to say that NATO has to get its decision-making culture right if its investments in military hardware and doctrine are going to be worth their while.

Finally, culture in the broader sense of strategic communication is likewise crucially important. Modern conflict takes place in a very fundamental way in the cognitive domain. We saw this phenomenon earlier in regards to dwindling support for NATO in public opinion polls. It goes also for the key publics of the conflicts in which NATO or NATO Allies are involved — be they Ukrainians, Muslims drawn to Islamic State, or Pashtuns. They likely experience NATO as reactive and disconnected from their social and political reality. When NATO’s messaging gets online, it is far surpassed by more agile adversaries’ command of media and narratives. NATO — that is, all NATO governments in addition to NATO staff in Brussels — must become better at identifying and communicating to these key publics in order to explain that while their grievances may be justified, they can also be manipulated by actors seeking a confrontation with NATO.

**Conclusion: anticipating the 2016 Warsaw Summit**

At their Warsaw Summit, NATO Allies will discuss whether the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) that was adopted in Wales suffices. The discussion will once again center around assurance and adaption measures, and it will, at least implicitly, involve different positions on how to deter Russia. The Allies neighboring Russia will argue in favor of a RAP II. These nations are not squeamish when it comes to violating the NATO-Russian Founding Act of 1997, and they would prefer a move toward more “deterrence by denial”. Other nations will maintain that the already existing RAP — or RAP I — is enough. As always with NATO, the debate will probably end with a compromise, but a compromise influenced mainly by the Alliance’s
major powers. It will be a RAP 1.5 with a tilt toward trip-wire forces and “deterrence by punishment”.

We should also expect to see the Allies commence a difficult discussion about NATO’s long-term relationship with Russia. It is highly unlikely that the Alliance and Russia can establish a new strategic partnership anytime soon, but neither NATO nor Moscow has an interest in a highly confrontational relationship. So while deterrence is back in vogue, dialogue and détente will also come to the forefront — in the spirit of Pierre Harmel who nearly fifty years ago gave shape to NATO’s initial cooperative deterrence approach.

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