

# Expectations for the Warsaw Summit: Conventional and nuclear responses to Russian belligerence

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The past two years have been challenging for European security and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia's behaviour on the international scene changed the nature of the debate about the future of European relations with Moscow. At the same time, a new and dangerous threat known as the Islamic State arose in the deserts south of NATO, leading to the return of terrorist attacks on major cities in the West and a dramatic surge of refugees from the Middle East to Europe. This presents a another long-term challenge to Europe.

This paper describes two aspects of the changed security environment. First, it discusses NATO's response to the new threats on its eastern and southern borders. The Alliance took a number of modest steps at the Wales Summit in September 2014 to deal with those, but were they enough? Will it announce a more robust response at the Warsaw Summit this summer?

Second, what is the role for NATO nuclear policy in strategic deterrence? Why is this topic back in discussion after years of benign neglect within the Alliance? Given its sensitivity, this subject is unlikely to be discussed at the next summit—but perhaps it should be. This paper addresses some of the key elements of deterrence strategy in an alliance that has not had to think about the subject for more than two decades.

## **NATO's Adaptation to the New Threat Environment Russia**

Moscow today has a 19th century balance of power view of the world.<sup>1</sup> That includes the belief that great powers should

be accorded spheres of influence in which they can determine how neighbouring states behave. Russia has repeatedly stated its opposition to NATO enlargement, arguing that this moves the Alliance eastward into Moscow's supposed sphere of influence. This reflects several aspects of Russian political culture: its fear of the West; concern over conventional inferiority in terms of military forces; and unwillingness to accept Western norms or values as equivalent to Russian values. These attitudes, when expressed by a country that most analysts consider to be at least nominally European, can be seen as a combination of xenophobia, paranoia, and cultural exclusivity. Combined with a preference for strong autocratic leadership rather than democracy and a rules-based system, some Russians claim that theirs is a different civilization than that espoused by the West.

What drives Russian foreign policy under President Putin? Is it genuine fear of the West and a quest for security? Or is it opportunism, wherein Moscow sees a weakness and moves to exploit it, without consideration of the consequences for international stability? The answer one gives to this question has major policy implications for NATO. If Putin genuinely fears the West, then NATO should avoid strong military actions that would exacerbate that fear and which could lead to an action-reaction arms race, or that could cause a crisis to spiral out of control. Rather, the Alliance should emphasize dialogue, soft power, and regular discourse to assure Moscow that the West's intentions are benevolent.

On the other hand, if Putin and his cohort are opportunistic, then the Alliance must respond with military force to show that it will not allow such behaviour, to reinforce the knowledge that NATO is a cohesive military alliance that cannot be intimidated. This dilemma explains much of the reason

<sup>1</sup> An overview of Russia and its internal dynamics can be found in Nicholas Burns and Jonathon Price, editors, *The Crisis with Russia* (Washington: The Aspen Institute, 2014).

for NATO's slow and modest response to Moscow's belligerence: because it simply does not know which type of Russia it is dealing with. This problem is exacerbated by the loss of expertise in understanding Russia among academics, intellectuals, and policy makers over the past 25 years.

### NATO's Response

The events of 2014 forced the Alliance to reconsider its 15 year emphasis on out of area expeditionary operations and its focus on the crisis management and cooperative security pillars of the 2010 Strategic Concept at the expense of the core responsibility of collective defense.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the rise of surprising new threats on two flanks, the allies find themselves having to reassess the importance and centrality of collective defense and deterrence.

NATO's initial reaction to the events of 2014 was modest. Russian foreign policy behaviour in Crimea, in Ukraine, and in public statements attacking the Alliance, came as a shock to most member states. NATO had grown to think of Russia as a strategic partner, not an adversary. Obviously the hoped-for post-Afghanistan "peace dividend" was no longer going to happen. Instead, with Russian behaviour in the East and the rise of a new threat to the South, it was necessary for the Alliance to respond in some way. It could not sit still. The threat had returned, and most Alliance members were not immediately prepared to deal with it, either militarily or psychologically.

The most difficult concept to come to grips with was that there was now a clear, growing, and dangerous military imbalance in Eastern Europe that could potentially be exploited by Moscow. This had to be addressed, and much of the Wales Summit declaration did just that.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, NATO policy toward Russia in the first two years after Crimea has been relatively cautious: modest conventional force enhancements in the region, cessation of all practical cooperation with Russia, economic sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States, and so on. The debate within the Alliance had been whether to emphasize defense or dialogue. Yet over the past two years the return of Russia as an existential threat against Alliance interests has become obvious to all members.

That said, not all members agree on the degree of the threat from the East. Some member states look first to the South for threats, and would prefer to see either multiple strategies that address each flank, or a single strategy that balances NATO's response to threats coming from any direction. This debate threatens the cohesion of the Alliance, risking the creation of a fissure between four groupings of states: those with bor-

ders shared with Russia, who fear any appearance of weakness; those who are more concerned with Mediterranean issues such as migration, maritime security, and ungoverned spaces in North Africa and the Middle East, those who prefer to see a balanced approach with a 360 degree threat assessment; and those that are not sure which approach is best.

At the Wales Summit in September 2014 the Alliance developed a number of initiatives that were meant to serve as a conventional counter to Russian threats to the eastern flank of the Alliance. These all made the Alliance stronger, providing some measure of reassurance to NATO allies in the East, and presumably some measure of deterrence to Russia's military. Some were short term fixes, others will require longer-term adaptation. Nearly all were focused on the Eastern flank. As a result, criticism arose that the Alliance was ignoring the growing threat from the South, and that it had no policies for dealing with two immediate threats: illegal migration and terrorism. Both of these may be addressed in Warsaw.

Officially NATO is "adapting" to the new world. The issues in this adaptation can be placed in three categories: military, political, and institutional. In the political basket, of course Russia dominates current thinking. Policy areas demanding adaptation include crisis management; NATO's partnership policy; enlargement and the Open Door policy; the Defense Capacity Building initiative; support to Ukraine; NATO's future role in Afghanistan; and the Interoperability Initiative with partners. There is also discussion brewing over whether to revise NATO's current Strategic Concept, approved in Lisbon in 2010.

Military issues center around implementation of the Readiness Action Plan, including all its various elements: the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, the expanded and rejuvenated NATO Response Force, the creation of multiple new regional headquarters; enhanced exercising; and the pre-positioning of equipment in threatened regions. Equally important is the issue of hybrid warfare and how to respond to threats on the lower end of the conflict spectrum – for instance, economic measures and strategic communication campaigns. Other military programs and plans under review, possibly in line for enhanced emphasis, include missile defense, cyber defense, joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and nuclear deterrence.

Institutional issues are key to the success of all political and military initiatives. These include ongoing NATO reform measures, including a possible reorganization of the Alliance's operational structure; budgeting and the Defense Investment Pledge; and relations with the European Union. To achieve its security goals, NATO needs to maintain or enhance its relationship with other multinational organizations, including the European Union, United Nations, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, African Union, Gulf Cooperation Council, and Arab League.

<sup>2</sup> "Strategic Engagement, Active Defense: 2010 Strategic Concept," 19 November 2010, at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_82705.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_82705.htm)

<sup>3</sup> "Wales Summit Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales," NATO Press Release (2014)120, 5 September 2014, para. 22, at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm).

### The Warsaw Summit

Most of the initiatives listed above will be recognized at the Warsaw Summit as either successfully implemented or nearing completion. Likely agenda items at the Summit include:

- Wales Summit initiatives. An assessment of their implementation and effectiveness.
- Russia. How shall NATO attempt to deal with Moscow? Should it restore more normalized relations, including exchanges and regular dialogue?
- Ukraine. Can or should the Alliance do more to support this partner state?
- Islamic State. What is NATO's role, if any, in fighting the Islamic state?
- Hybrid warfare. A new NATO strategy on hybrid threats provides guidance when dealing with such challenges lower on the conflict spectrum.
- Collective defense. What additional military responses will the Alliance take in the Baltic States to ensure their protection and assure them of that commitment?
- Deterrence. Will the Alliance make take a public stance on the continued importance of nuclear weapons as one of the foundations for its security?
- Enlargement. Montenegro will join the Alliance this year. Will NATO continue its Open Door policy to further membership?
- Partnerships. How can the Alliance maintain the lessons learned from cooperative operations in Afghanistan?
- Migration. NATO does not have an official role to play in this area, but public demands for controls against embedded terrorists may lead to a reconsideration of its hands-off policy.
- Counterterrorism. The Alliance may find itself under pressure to enhance or expand its counterterrorism policy.
- Alliance cohesion. The Alliance must ensure that it remains a military alliance of "all for one and one for all" by avoiding potential rifts in the consensus over what threats it faces, which of those are most important, and how to respond in a balanced and appropriate manner.

At Warsaw the Alliance must reinforce its credibility as a strong, formidable military machine in the eyes of its allies, partners, and antagonists. At the same time it must remember that it is also a political organization with responsibilities derived from the Washington Treaty that range beyond simply military defense.

### Nuclear Deterrence

As a result of Moscow's nuclear sabre-rattling during its exercises over the past two years, the Alliance finds itself focusing not only on the conventional aspects of collective defense and deterrence, but on its nuclear dimensions as well. The Alliance continues to assert that deterrence rests on an appropriate mix of conventional, nuclear, and missile defense forces, and that "as long as nuclear weapons

exist, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance."<sup>4</sup> This requires a robust, well-trained, modern, and reliable nuclear force. The 2012 NATO Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR) stated that NATO's current nuclear sharing arrangements, which include risk- and responsibility sharing across as many member states as possible, remains the best option for the Alliance. That assessment, however, was made before the current troubles with Russia, so some are arguing that the DDPR needs to be reconsidered in light of these changing circumstances. Some analysts have called for modernization of NATO's modest nuclear force of US tactical nuclear warheads forward deployed in Europe, plus the fleet of dual-capable aircraft operated by European member states.

NATO's nuclear policy, based largely on an extended deterrence commitment provided by the United States, has protected member states from attack since 1949. Nuclear weapons today are called "political weapons," whose purpose is to deter aggression against the Alliance and provide an ultimate security insurance policy. There are three nuclear weapons states within NATO, and all NATO members (except France) participate in the Nuclear Planning Group at NATO Headquarters. But the nuclear deterrent has faced reduced interest and attention since about 1990. The end of the Cold War, the disappearance of the adversary (at least temporarily), the rise of expeditionary out-of-area operations, the reorganization and reduction of force planning offices at various headquarters, and the general loss of expertise in nuclear matters all led to the neglect of this leg of NATO's security apparatus. Today the Alliance has no official adversary, no pre-designated targets, no plans on the shelf for contingencies that involve nuclear weapons. Officially, it states that "the circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote."<sup>5</sup>

That said, the importance of nuclear deterrent forces has been made apparent through Russian behaviour the past two years, leading to renewed interest in the subject by military and civilian leaders. But to what extent should the Alliance emphasize its nuclear deterrent in the face of Russian behaviour? There is a difference of opinion within the Alliance over whether to downplay or highlight the nuclear aspects of NATO forces.

At the moment Alliance policy is clear: the ultimate security of NATO rests on an appropriate mix of conventional, nuclear, and missile defense forces. The rationale for retaining these capabilities has changed in recent years, but it is still cogent. Nuclear weapons serve as a deterrent against existential threats, such as those posed by Russia. They serve as an indispensable link between North America

<sup>4</sup> "Deterrence and Defense Posture Review," NATO Press Release (2012) 063, 20 May 2012, at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_87597.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87597.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Wales Summit Declaration, para. 50.

and Europe, coupling the two continents in a single security arrangement. Their existence discourages possible proliferation by allies that might otherwise pursue their own nuclear capabilities. They provide assurance to allies, particularly those feeling most exposed or threatened by a potential adversary. They prevent feelings of abandonment or vulnerability among allies. They create uncertainty in the mind of potential adversaries. They can serve as potential bargaining chips in future arms control negotiations with Russia. Keeping them in Europe can reduce the political strains that would occur if they were to be removed. All of these reasons are in line with those that the United States considered when it drafted the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, which stated that the United States would continue to provide extended deterrence to its allies in Europe (and Asia) using forward-deployable tactical and strategic aircraft.<sup>6</sup> This was part of the justification for a nuclear variant of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter currently in production. President Obama has called for “maintaining military capabilities to deny the objectives of, or impose unacceptable costs on, any aggressor.”<sup>7</sup> Since the 1940s such language has been code for nuclear deterrence.

### Conclusion

The long term adaptation of the Alliance to the new security environment will require steps that will harken back to the days of the Cold War. Some allies may be uncomfortable

with those decisions. But as a military alliance charged with defending its member nations against adversary threats to Europe and North America, it is incumbent upon the Allies to act to meet that responsibility. The world is unlikely to see a quick return to the comfortable way things were just a few years ago. Accepting this reality will have consequences for the Alliance. For example, this may mean increasing its military presence in those parts of the periphery of the Alliance most threatened, perhaps with permanently stationed combat forces in those regions. It may require NATO to strengthen its force structure, including ground forces, airpower, and other long range strike capabilities, with a credible nuclear deterrent as a backstop. It may require improvements to existing command structures. And it will most certainly be expensive, requiring all member states to abide by their defense investment pledge.

NATO remains the ultimate guarantor of European security. The Alliance today is once again placing increased emphasis on its core mission of collective defense. As a political and military alliance charged with defending its member states' territory, people, and vital interests, this is NATO's primary mission. All other missions added since the end of the Cold War are secondary to this. At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016 the Alliance members may choose to remind the world, including potential adversaries and their own publics, of this responsibility.

6 *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (Washington: Office of the Secretary of Defense, April 2010), at [http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010\\_Nuclear\\_Posture\\_Review\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf).

7 *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington: Department of Defense, January 2012), at [http://archive.defense.gov/news/Defense\\_Strategic\\_Guidance.pdf](http://archive.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf).

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