NATO and the Ukraine Crisis

ABSTRACT Russia’s new assertiveness forces the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to put greater emphasis on reassuring its easternmost member states about the credibility of the Allies’ collective defense commitment. This is to be accomplished through the “Readiness Action Plan,” which foresees a greater rotational military presence in Central and Eastern Europe. However, the Allies will seek to ensure that this reemphasis on collective defense in Europe will not come at the expense of expeditionary missions at Europe’s periphery or beyond. Finding a compromise between collective defense and crisis management, as well as between hedging against Russia and seeking ways to constructively reengage, amount to a complex double balancing act. Hence, the idea that NATO could somehow be rejuvenated by the Ukraine crisis is underestimating the challenges that the Allies now confront.

KEYWORDS collective defense; crisis management; defense spending; NATO; Readiness Action Plan; Russia

The Ukraine crisis has led many observers to conclude that the European security landscape is undergoing a sea change. Terms such as game changer, wake up call (former NATO Secretary General Rasmussen), and paradigm shift (General Breedlove, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]’s Supreme Allied Commander) imply that Russia’s actions vis-à-vis Ukraine are not just an isolated event but part of a profound transformation of Russia’s attitude and policy vis-à-vis the West. After all, part of the Russian choreography in annexing Crimea, where Moscow employed unmarked armed forces inside Ukraine while concentrating regular Russian forces at Ukraine’s border with surprising speed, was an information warfare campaign that demonstrated a baffling degree of long-standing anti-Western resentment.

Reflectively, some observers have interpreted these developments as giving NATO a new lease on life. With Russia re-emerging as a common threat, so the argument goes, Allies would draw closer together and the cohesion of NATO would be strengthened. Moreover, with the mission of the International Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan having come to an end, and given the Allies’ little appetite to embark on other major expeditionary operations, a shift of NATO’s military focus back to the European theater almost appeared like the logical conclusion of a period of two decades of operations. The Central and Eastern European Allies, so
the argument continues, would finally get the enhanced NATO presence in their territories that they had been craving since they joined the Alliance, thus ending their self-perception as second-class members. And, all Allies would be under pressure to review their defense budgets by again taking a serious look at the 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) benchmark that most of them had not met for decades. In sum, NATO would emerge reinvigorated from the crisis as an Alliance with a new sense of common purpose.

However, such a view misses the mark. True, the Ukraine crisis did provide a tangible theme for the September 2014 Wales Summit, replacing Afghanistan as the original—and inevitably bittersweet—major issue at the summit. Moreover, NATO’s initial moves to quickly increase its military presence in Eastern Europe demonstrated that the Allies had understood the importance of not being seen as dithering in the face of Russian aggression against a neighboring state. Yet the assumption that the Ukraine crisis would rejuvenate NATO is far too simplistic. The crisis may have indeed brought home to many the continuing need for a collective defense framework, but it also confronts NATO with a series of political and military challenges that will put Alliance solidarity to the test.

**THE RUSSIA CHALLENGE**

With respect to Russia, two questions arise. First, is Russia’s current behavior a passing phase or has it durably changed the relationship between Moscow and NATO? Second, even assuming that the changes in Russia’s policies are set to last, how much of a military threat are they to NATO?

Regarding Russia’s policy, most observers agree that a shift toward greater assertiveness had been visible for quite some time: Moscow’s attempts to prevent Georgia from realizing its NATO ambitions; the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union, which appeared like a thinly veiled attempt to regain Moscow’s erstwhile sphere of influence; the de facto end of the U.S.–Russia “reset” after Putin’s return to the presidency; the continuing support for Syrian President Assad; Russia’s granting of asylum to the wayward National Security Agency (NSA) employee Edward Snowden; Russia’s withdrawal from the missile defense talks with the United States and NATO; its willingness to put arms control agreements at risk by testing new weapons systems; and, not least, the considerable increase in Russia’s military budget, coupled with offensive military exercises (including the simulated use of nuclear weapons against NATO Allies); and increasingly bellicose rhetoric.

In the context of the Ukraine crisis, Russia also stepped up its nuclear exercises, had its bombers flying closer to Allied borders, and boasted the development of new nuclear weapons. In the fall of 2014, Moscow announced that it would not participate in the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit. At the end of that same year, Moscow released a new military doctrine that named NATO and NATO’s enlargement as major threats to Russia. While that document did not contain many surprises and was, indeed, status quo in some areas such as nuclear policy, it was noteworthy not least for its references to the threat of foreign-inspired regime change—a reference to the protests on Kiev’s Maidan Square in early 2014 that had led to the demise of the Russia-friendly Yanukovich government and had convinced Moscow to intervene. In this sense, the new military doctrine has turned the siege mentality that had been visible for some time into Russia’s official foreign and security policy narrative.

All of these moves happened against the backdrop of Russian complaints about a West bent on marginalizing Russia’s political and military status, be it by enlarging NATO or by deliberately misinterpreting UN Security Council resolutions (e.g., on Libya), and Putin’s increasing domestic repression of certain societal groups, mixed with populist sentiments. Russia’s “patriotic awakening”—like so much in Russia, orchestrated from the top down—has resulted in soaring approval ratings for President Putin. Given Russia’s economic and social decline, now hastened by falling oil prices, Putin’s appeal to “Russian values” and Russia’s military strength appears like a calculated gamble: by playing on deep-seated anti-Western resentment among parts of the Russian population, and by defining the West and NATO as adversaries, he has chosen a path that he will not (and probably cannot) reverse quickly. Moreover, since a serious challenger to President Putin and his vision of Russia does not seem in sight, current trends in Russian policy may well continue.

Whether these developments amount to a concrete military threat to NATO, however, is less clear. For
one, Ukraine does not belong to NATO, which makes Russia’s harassment of that country most worrisome, but does not necessarily translate into a direct threat to the Alliance. Russia’s actions against Ukraine evolved in the context of Ukraine’s association negotiations with the European Union—a process that threatened to invalidate President Putin’s already shaky concept of a “Eurasian Economic Union.” In this sense, Putin’s decision to annex Crimea appeared like a decision made in desperation rather than out of a desire to enlarge Russian territory. Avoiding losses—and loss of face—appeared to have been more important than making gains.

Second, the means employed by Russia, namely economic coercion, propaganda, regular and irregular forces, and rendering support to separatist groups, were tailored to Ukraine’s specific situation. This form of “hybrid warfare” may be employed against other states as well (e.g., Moldova), but in the specific European context it works only once the targeted state is internally divided or otherwise weak. It appears unrealistic to assume that a hybrid warfare approach could amount to a direct threat to NATO, whose member states are much more stable and resilient than Ukraine.

Third, and perhaps most important, Russia’s military activism cannot hide the fact that Russia’s forces are still recovering from their post-Soviet crisis. While Russia has stated ambitious goals in terms of force modernization, and while many experts conclude that Russian forces are in much better shape today than they were during the 2008 war with Georgia, doubts remain about their performance in a more demanding environment and their in-depth strength. Hence, whatever Russia may think of the cohesion of the Alliance, the prospect of facing 28 NATO member countries that are bound by a mutual commitment to collective defense, underwritten by the superior conventional power of the United States, cannot inspire confidence in Russian military planners.

NATO has carefully avoided labeling Russia a military threat. The Allies avoided confrontational rhetoric, expressing instead their disappointment about lost opportunities and emphasizing the self-defeating consequences of Russia’s actions. Moreover, NATO’s response to Russia’s at times rather reckless military activities close to NATO territory remained low-key. Indeed, from the outset of the Ukraine crisis, Allies refrained from creating irreversible facts in their relationship to Russia. Hence, while cooperation with Russia was suspended, the NATO–Russia Council remained open. As long as hope remains that Russia could revert to a less-confrontational stance, NATO wants to keep the doors open.

However, from the outset of the crisis, Allies expressed concern about Russia’s ability to achieve rapid-force concentrations along Ukraine’s borders, as demonstrated in the so-called snap exercises. This ability, particularly when seen in the context of Russia’s quasi-religious commitment to defend “Russian peoples” elsewhere, could constitute a challenge—especially for those Allies with sizable Russian minorities. Discussions on how to minimize the risk of a limited Russian military advance into the territory of one or more Allies are nothing new. During the cold war, NATO was worried that by a rapid but limited military advance into NATO territory (e.g., West Berlin) the Soviet Union could achieve a fait accompli that would undermine a serious NATO response. Accordingly, NATO needs to take measures that would demonstrate to Russian planners the futility of such an approach. At the same time, these measures need to convince NATO’s geographically most exposed Allies that the Alliance’s collective defense commitment applies to them just as much as to any other NATO member.

### THE REASSURANCE CHALLENGE

To meet this reassurance challenge, NATO’s Wales Summit of early September 2014 agreed on the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) to enhance the military protection of NATO’s easternmost members. The RAP consists of “Assurance Measures,” such as increased military presence and activity for assurance and deterrence, and “Adaptation Measures,” meaning changes to the Alliance’s long-term military posture and capabilities. In essence, the plan foresees increasing the readiness level of NATO’s reaction forces as well as pre-deploying equipment and holding more and more complex exercises in Central and Eastern Europe. An about-4,000 strong Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) consisting of land, air, maritime, and special operations forces will act as a “spearhead” force capable of deploying within a matter of days.

The RAP also foresees the establishment of a multinational NATO command and control presence and reception facilities on the territories of the eastern
Allies (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania) at all times, with Allied personnel staffing on a rotational basis and focusing on planning and exercising collective defense. The readiness and capabilities of the Headquarters Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin (Poland) are to be increased, thus expanding its role as a hub for regional cooperation. The RAP also entails the pre-positioning of military equipment and supplies and the improvement of NATO’s ability to reinforce its eastern Allies through preparation of national infrastructure, such as airfields and ports; the updating of defense plans for Eastern Europe; and more exercises focused both on crisis management and collective defense.

The RAP is an important signal to both the NATO Allies and Russia. Its rapid implementation will thus be crucial—all the more so as more agile forces may also be needed for other contingencies, for example, along NATO’s southern borders. However, the challenges of implementing the RAP are significant. Keeping forces on high readiness is something only the larger nations can do and only at considerable cost. The logistical challenges are also formidable. The days when NATO was regularly exercising large-scale reinforcements—during the cold war, the United States used to bring an entire corps across the Atlantic—are long gone. Short warning times would also require NATO’s “frontline states” to invest in capacities that would enable them to hold out long enough for reinforcements to arrive. And NATO’s command structure, which has been considerably reduced in size, might also have to be adjusted to handle the new collective defense emphasis. In short, to implement the RAP, NATO will have to relearn certain skills that over the past 20 years had not been in demand. Above all, Allies will have to bear additional costs—which will require them to make good on their Wales Summit pledge to increase defense expenditures over time.

The Readiness Action Plan stops short of a permanent NATO presence in Central and Eastern Europe. As of today, the region has no substantial NATO military presence—a fact that has long been worrying some Central and Eastern European member states. The reasoning behind having only a “thin” military NATO presence dates back to the specific situation of the mid-1990s. To prepare the ground for NATO enlargement and to not antagonize Russia, NATO had declared in 1996 and 1997 that it would put neither nuclear weapons nor substantial combat forces and infrastructure on the territory of its future members. This was also reflected in the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act.

Russia’s actions against Ukraine have invalidated many of the assumptions on which these NATO statements were based. However, establishing a truly permanent NATO military presence in the Central and Eastern European member states would be of such enormous political and military significance that the Allies are not likely to agree to doing so except in exceptional circumstances. Militarily, it would signal NATO’s reorientation toward a cold war–type collective defense emphasis that would inevitably carry connotations of a new cold war. Politically and militarily, it would signal that NATO had concluded that Russia was once again its military adversary—a signal that Allies are trying to avoid sending. Hence, as long as Russia does not become more confrontational, NATO will put the emphasis on measures that are largely temporary and scalable. The term chosen by the United States for its reassurance measures aptly expresses this fine line: persistent presence is similar to but not identical with permanent presence.

Another challenge that NATO needs to address is that of “hybrid threats.” To destabilize Ukraine, Russia combined military, paramilitary, cyber-, economic, energy, and strategic communications tools. While this form of hybrid warfare may only succeed against states that are internally fragile and divided, it could introduce sufficient ambiguity to make NATO’s strategic assessment and decision making difficult, while, at the same time, marginalizing elements of the full spectrum of NATO's defensive capabilities. This is of particular concern to the Baltic nations, with their large Russian minorities. NATO must, therefore, examine how best to prepare for such scenarios. Cooperation with other institutions will be a crucial element of any response, but NATO will also have to review its intelligence sharing and political decision making and processes and seek to overcome eventual disconnects.

Predictably, the mere semi-permanence of the measures envisaged by the RAP have disappointed some observers in Central and Eastern Europe, who had hoped for a more substantial military presence in their region. It is, therefore, all the more crucial that the agreed-on measures be implemented “in full
and on time.

The Warsaw Summit in 2016 will be an important opportunity to take stock of the implementation process.

THE EXPEDITIONARY CHALLENGE

The Ukraine crisis is a stark reminder that the post-cold war European security order remains vulnerable and requires more attention than hitherto believed. However, the crisis has not invalidated the globalization of security challenges. The most striking example was provided by the emergence of the “Islamic State” (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIL]). The military advances of these terrorist militias into parts of Iraq and Syria happened around the same time as the Ukraine crisis, underscoring the need for the Allies to maintain a broader strategic view. The Wales Summit reflected this sentiment, becoming a forum for setting up an anti-ISIL coalition under a U.S. lead. As part of this coalition, which also includes countries in the region, many NATO Allies are conducting airstrikes, supplying military equipment, and offering training and other assistance. While such engagements risk provoking reprisals, as demonstrated by the terrorist attacks in France in January 2015, this has not changed the basic agreement among Allies that ISIL needs to be confronted militarily—the result of allowing ISIL to establish permanent training camps in Iraq would certainly be worse. In addition, NATO’s other missions, ranging from counterpiracy operations (“Ocean Shield”) in the Gulf of Aden to the training mission in Afghanistan (“Resolute Support”), will continue, underlining the need to remain engaged in operations beyond collective defense.

Hence, while much has been said about an alleged post-Afghanistan “operational fatigue,” it appears unlikely that the NATO Allies could afford to relinquish their expeditionary focus. They must retain certain expeditionary capabilities if they are to address contingencies at Europe’s periphery and beyond. Not doing so would undo more than 20 years of transatlantic efforts to shift NATO’s traditional geographic approach to security to a functional one. This would decouple Europe from the (global) U.S. security agenda—a strategic regression that is in neither side’s interest. Europe’s forces would also lose the experience gained in 20 years of NATO operations. Moreover, a “return” to collective defense would tie Europe to a mission for which the achievements of the recent past—notably the partnerships with dozens of non-NATO countries—are largely irrelevant. And, finally, the fact that some of the forces dedicated to collective defense (including certain investments foreseen by the RAP) are not going to be used in operations will make their justification difficult to sustain domestically in some Allied countries: as single purpose “deterrence” forces, they will be perceived as a sunken investment.

Given these dilemmas, Allies will try to square the circle by ensuring that changes in NATO’s force posture to bolster collective defense will not happen at the expense of their expeditionary capabilities. Hence, the solution will be in measures such as beefing up of the NATO Response Force, perhaps with a specific “reassurance” component, rather than by entirely new, dedicated collective defense deployments. By the same token, the U.S. “pivot” to Asia will continue. Although the United States has played a crucial reassurance role since the very beginning of the Ukraine crisis, both through NATO and bilaterally, a major reinforcement of the U.S. military presence in Europe is unlikely. Rather than bringing more U.S. forces back to Europe, the United States will opt for a rotational presence while, at the same time, putting pressure on the European Allies to take on a greater share of the collective defense burden.

In sum, as long as Russia does not directly confront NATO, the Allies will seek to balance their collective defense and crisis-management tasks, making sure that one does not come at the expense of the other.

OTHER CHALLENGES

To deter Russia while looking for ways to reengage and to provide reassurance in Europe while also maintaining an expeditionary focus amount to a complex double-balancing act that may be hard to sustain. However, these are not the only challenges confronting NATO as a result of the Ukraine crisis. That crisis will also force the Allies to revisit several other fundamental tenets of NATO’s approach to security.

The most obvious challenge is NATO enlargement. While the Allies had agreed not to burden the Wales Summit with this potentially controversial issue, the next summit in 2016 may well be the moment of truth: with Ukraine having revoked its nonaligned status in December 2014 as a result of Russia’s intervention, a debate about whether to grant that country the Membership Action Plan (MAP) looks
like a foregone conclusion. At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, the question of whether to offer the MAP to Ukraine and Georgia had led to a public controversy among Allies, resulting in a decision to withhold the MAP in exchange for an unspecific promise that both countries would eventually become NATO members. The Ukraine crisis will make both sides of the argument feel vindicated: those who argued in favor of MAP will claim that not having earmarked Ukraine in 2008 as a prospective NATO member signaled to Russia that it could act against Ukraine with impunity. Those who opposed the MAP in 2008 will argue that the entire crisis only proved once again that granting NATO membership to countries such as Georgia or Ukraine would be counterproductive and that the enlargement process will only benefit Allied security if it continues to take place in a non-confrontational environment. As the Warsaw Summit approaches, NATO Allies will have to engage in this discussion with greater intellectual discipline lest they risk a replay of the 2008 controversy.

Another challenge is NATO’s partnerships. One of the major policy innovations post–cold war, this policy of developing military cooperation and political consultation with non-NATO countries has connected NATO with dozens of nations from Northern Africa to the Asia-Pacific region. Some partners have made substantial military contributions to NATO-led operations, others have supported NATO in other ways. The involvement of partner countries has also increased the legitimacy of NATO’s actions. However, the political makeup as well as the expectations and capabilities of NATO’s partner countries differ widely, with some striving to get as close to NATO’s decision-making process as possible and others being content with minimal engagement. As long as stabilizing Afghanistan provided a major common project for most of NATO’s partner countries, these differences did not matter that much. However, the end of ISAF means that NATO’s partnership policy loses a major catalyst. NATO’s eventual shift toward collective defense—which also implies a degree of regionalization—could become another challenge for NATO’s partnership policy, since most partners will be neither interested nor relevant for the accomplishment of this task. Mindful of many partners’ post-ISAF expectations, the NATO Allies used the Wales Summit to send a strong message about their continued interest in working with partner countries: new interoperability initiatives were unveiled and several partners were offered support in defense-capacity building. These initiatives, together with a more flexible partnership policy that emphasizes functional cooperation irrespective of regional groupings, should go a long way to sustain the interest of partner countries in working with NATO. Whether they can also increase NATO’s influence on the domestic reforms of certain partner countries remains to be seen.

Finally, the challenge of defense spending. At the Wales Summit, Allies agreed to halt the decline in defense expenditure and aim to increase defense expenditure in real terms as GDP grows. The aim is to move toward achieving 2 percent of GDP within a decade. Allies also vowed to aim, also within a decade, to increase their annual investments to 20 percent or more of total defense expenditures. This “Wales defense spending pledge” may appear generous regarding the timelines it sets to achieve its goals. Still, its political significance is considerable, as it gives credibility to the expensive measures envisaged by the RAP. It also sends the signal that NATO Allies acknowledge a deterioration of their security environment and are prepared to improve their means to respond. Given the current economic climate, moving toward the 2 percent guideline will not be easy for many Allies. However, four Allies are already at the 2 percent level and eight others have committed to reach this level in the near future. Moreover, some countries have already demonstrated that fiscal discipline and adequate defense spending are not opposites. None of these efforts are likely to overcome the perennial U.S. frustration about the other Allies not pulling their weight. However, to the degree that the Wales defense-spending pledge signals the reversal of a trend, it will go some way toward meeting the challenge of transatlantic burden sharing.

CONCLUSION

The Ukraine crisis is a reminder of Europe’s continued volatility, yet to argue that it could “rejuvenate” NATO goes too far. If anything, the crisis will further increase the challenges for NATO, in particular how to engage Russia, how to provide credible reassurance to NATO’s Eastern Allies, and how to balance the reemphasis on collective defense in Europe with the ongoing requirement for crisis management at
Europe’s periphery and possibly beyond. Other factors, such as a potentially controversial enlargement process or continued transatlantic debates over “fair” burden sharing could further complicate the picture.

Even if Russia’s turn for the worse is more than a passing phase, a “Cold War 2.0” is something the Allies will want to avoid to the extent that it is in their power to do so. A shift toward a posture of “hedging” will be inevitable. However, as long as Russia does not directly confront NATO, Allies are likely to refrain from steps that they would consider to be politically provocative, too militarily ambitious, or too financially expensive. It may have required Stalin to create NATO (to paraphrase former NATO Secretary General Dirk Stikker), but the twenty-first-century NATO does not require an assertive Russia to assure its survival.

Notes


11. Notable exceptions are Finland and Sweden, which share similar interests vis-à-vis Russia.