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Deterrence from the Ground Up: Understanding NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence

Martin Zapfe

As a nuclear alliance, NATO's deterrence is ultimately based on the threat of nuclear retaliation. However, Russia under President Vladimir Putin seems to have rejected the established Western playbook, opting instead for 'cross-domain coercion'[1] that transcends conventions in deterrence, most importantly the balance between conventional and nuclear forces. NATO's answer since 2014 has been largely based on conventional adaptation mirroring similar evolutionary steps in the Alliance's history. Important as these measures may be, there is a danger that they will fall short of enhancing allied deterrence, and may even be harmful to it, if they do not take into account the essentially political nature of the Russian threat.

At its 2016 summit in Warsaw, NATO agreed on an Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) of four multinational battalion task forces in the Baltics. This allied force posture will necessarily form an integral part of NATO's deterrence for the years ahead. Yet recent analyses have consistently failed to demonstrate sufficient understanding of the deterrence value of a limited conventional forward presence in NATO's east, and of its conceptual limits in sub-conventional ('hybrid') and conventional scenarios.

The purpose of this article is thus to answer one key question: what is the politico-military logic of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic states given the nature of the threats it faces there, and what are its strategic effects and conceptual limits in non-nuclear deterrence? Assuming that, by

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mid-2017, all four multinational battalion battle groups will be complete, combat ready and in position – what then?

Neither war nor peace

The most important decision taken in Warsaw was to permanently station allied soldiers close to the Russian border – a step that, only two years earlier, would have seemed utterly unrealistic. Beyond the repositioning of troops, NATO agreed to upgrade its posture in the form of the EFP, planning to deploy nominal combat units by May 2017 where once it had only engaged in the rotational deployment of units for exercises and signalling.[2] The four battalion-sized battle groups of the EFP are built around a single lead nation for each of the three Baltic states plus Poland: the UK covers Estonia; Canada has sent troops to Latvia; and Germany is responsible for Lithuania. The US has based its battalion in Poland. While the lead nations will provide the core of the battalions, numerous other allies will contribute troops and capabilities to the task forces.[3]

The decision to establish the EFP was intended to address the shortcomings of the adaptation measures agreed upon at the 2014 Wales Summit.[4] Until Warsaw, NATO conventional planning focused on the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), also known as the 'Spearhead Force'. Doubts concerning the efficacy of this 'mobile tripwire' mostly centred on the fact that it might not be where it was needed most. It was also unclear how rapidly this non-resident force could be deployed. As such, it was liable to be unsuited to its main task – namely to symbolise allied solidarity at potential points of conflict. With the establishment of the EFP, the tripwire is finally in the right place: NATO's Baltic battalions are unequivocally intended to help deter Russia.

Much has been written about how Putin's Russia could be a military threat to exposed NATO territory. As valuable as these studies may be, many seem to miss a key aspect of the threat. NATO's conventional military posture should be conceived of and analysed with an eye to a Russia that is, above all, a political threat to allied cohesion. This threat is embodied in the 'fog of peace' postulated by the Russian concept of New Generation War.[5]

The core military threat to NATO is relatively clear-cut and boils down to two well-known scenarios: subversion and fait accompli. The former is primarily sub-conventional (hybrid), while the latter is primarily conventional.[6] In the first scenario, Russia would seek to undermine individual Alliance partners through societal subversion, possibly by mobilising Russian-speaking minorities, and backed up by an impressive threat of military force. In this way, Russia might achieve a creeping destabilisation of a member state without necessarily triggering an invocation of NATO's Article V. In the second, Moscow would seize territory – either the entire Baltic region or just parts of it – through a *coup de main* in order to present the Alliance with a fait accompli. NATO would then face the choice between open warfare for the re-conquest of that territory or acquiescence to the new status quo.

Within the framework of New Generation War, both scenarios are best understood as essentially *political* challenges to NATO's cohesion, with the military threat to NATO being of only secondary importance. Both the subversion of a Baltic state and the seizure of territory would be primarily aimed at rendering NATO irrelevant: a *coup de main* against the Baltics would seek to call the bluff of NATO solidarity, doing little to degrade the Alliance's military capabilities but undermining its core purpose. For a regime intent on weakening Western cohesion as both a means and an end of its foreign policy, achieving this goal without a battle would indeed be the highest form of strategy.

The Russian leadership appears to perceive international politics as part of a continuum of warfare, making no clear distinction between war and peace. This is most visible in its notably non-military threat perception of 'colour revolutions' in the post-Soviet space and beyond.[7] Similarly, New Generation Warfare places great importance on 'non-military deterrence',[8] positing a ratio of non-military to military measures of four to one.[9] In this view, there is no such thing as a purely military, or purely political, threat. This blurring of the lines between what most Westerners would regard as distinct spheres of statecraft lies at the heart of the current Russian concept of 'cross-domain coercion', a concept that has overburdened the West's ability to quickly formulate policy responses, and to precisely assess the value of conventional forces in allied deterrence.[10]

Simply falling back on conventional deployments and deterrence recipes from a more dangerous yet less ambiguous time – including the forward positioning of forces – might not do the trick. Under the logic of New Generation War, the question of the deterrent value of NATO's presence in the Baltics requires more than a simple military appraisal of capabilities. Instead, consideration must be given to how this presence could be used by a revanchist, strategically opportunist and tactically unpredictable Russia to undermine Western cohesion.

Forward presence in 'hybrid' scenarios

The main function of NATO's EFP is to help deter a conventional Russian attack by providing a tripwire, the engagement of which would all but guarantee that the Alliance as a whole would respond in some way. It is thus intended as a symbol of allied strength and cohesion. However, like all strengths, the EFP could be turned into a weakness by an adversary willing to employ unconventional means. Attacking an enemy's weak points at unforeseen times and places is a recurring theme in the contemporary Russian debate.[11]

Indeed, the EFP could potentially increase NATO's *political* vulnerability in the east by exposing fault lines for determined adversaries to exploit. The members of those units deployed in the Baltics will not be static placeholders like figures in a game of chess, but will be living, moving and training in an environment vulnerable to Russian subversion and agitation by and through non-state actors, a preferred Russian approach.[12] Three scenarios serve to illustrate the danger. While none of them are necessarily all that likely, all are more likely than a direct conventional attack on the Baltics, the deterrence of which is the primary reason for the EFP's existence.

In the first scenario, NATO troops might cause local civilian casualties through accidents or (real or alleged) crimes by NATO soldiers. Tragic events like these are always a possibility when thousands of young men and women find themselves living in a foreign environment, and they can have a significant effect on the attitude of the host nation, even if not amplified by a hostile and concerted media campaign. The anger directed by the population of Okinawa toward the US garrison there in the wake of criminal

acts committed by some of its members demonstrates the potential political consequences of such incidents. In February 2017, a disinformation campaign attributed to Russia spread the apparently fabricated allegations that German soldiers had raped a local minor in Lithuania, showing that this concern is not just theoretical.[13]

In a second scenario, NATO troops might face unrest among their host nations' Russian-speaking minorities, supported and guided by Russia.[14] Demonstrations could be staged close to the barracks of NATO troops, perhaps even blocking troop movements into and out of these barracks. The possibility of NATO tanks facing civilian protesters is not far-fetched – nor is the assumption that this could cause serious problems for troop-contributing nations.

Thirdly, NATO troops might become the targets of organised violence below the conventional threshold. Of particular concern would be a terror campaign by a supposedly indigenous movement against 'occupying forces' – their barracks, vehicles and soldiers. The violence perpetrated by Irish nationalists against British soldiers stationed not only in Northern Ireland, but also in Germany and the Netherlands, shows how such a campaign could unfold.[15]

Any of these scenarios could well open fault lines in the West. Casualties among the troop-contributing nations would be difficult to explain to domestic audiences already less than enthusiastic about defending the Baltic states against Russia.[16] More importantly, multinational deployments are almost always subject to caveats. What has been an operational nuisance in Afghanistan may well produce a political and strategic cleavage in the Baltics. Due to the integration of troops within the battalions, any major demonstration or civil unrest would very quickly affect numerous allies. Few moments are as culturally and politically sensitive as the interactions between civilians and the military; and while many NATO members routinely deploy soldiers to patrol their streets in times of emergency, others, such as Germany, place strict cultural and legal restrictions on the use of the military in such instances. Moreover, while the prevention of terror attacks is usually the responsibility of the host nation, it seems unlikely that any troop-contributing nation would agree to indefinitely

refrain from taking action first to prevent such attacks and then to engage their attackers – opening the door to potentially disruptive entanglements that could undermine the shaky allied consensus. Previous multinational operations have shown that national capitals are rarely able to resist the temptation of micromanaging their national contingents, thereby effectively bypassing NATO's chain of command.[17] It is unreasonable to assume that the highly politicised environment of NATO's EFP would be any different.

NATO has a duty to minimise the emergence of such fault lines given that they could potentially be exploited by enemies. Most critically, those NATO members contributing to the four EFP battalions will have to harmonise their rules of engagement to the maximum extent. In 2016, reports suggested that the allied chiefs of defence had agreed that the EFP's rules of engagement would vary from country to country due to differences in the circumstances of each host nation and the agreements reached with them, though the details remain classified.[18] Militarily, harmonisation should aim at creating sufficiently effective combat units out of annually rotating, multi-national battalions; politically, this means creating a shared understanding among the troop-contributing nations of the challenges that the troops could face, and an agreement on basic courses of action in various contingencies. Such steps could go a long way toward frustrating Russian divide-and-rule policies in the coming years.[19]

Forward presence in conventional scenarios

The conventional realm is the conceptual comfort zone of the EFP, which has been organised with an eye to conventional conflict scenarios – the feared 'land grab' by Russian forces. Even in conventional scenarios, however, the integrated nature of Russian cross-domain coercion, and its targeting of Western political cohesion, affect the deterrence value of conventional forces, and thus expose the potential shortcomings of the Warsaw compromise.

Firstly, NATO's Baltic battalions constitute a tripwire, not a speed bump. In the absence of prepared and agreed-upon contingency plans, backed up by credible and ready forces with sufficient authority already delegated to operational and tactical commanders, any engagement by the EFP would

guarantee only that NATO is affected, and that its political decision-making process would start to work. It would not necessarily determine how, nor even whether, NATO would react. In the absence of agreed-upon contingency plans, the necessity for unanimous decision-making could well block NATO forces from acting decisively, leaving open the possibility of one or more allies choosing to act outside of the NATO framework.

While the conventional deterrence value of the EFP below the nuclear level lies mostly in its prospective conventional reinforcements, most analyses express doubt that the prime military instruments foreseen to support the EFP – including NATO's 'first wave', the VJTF – could realistically be expected to fulfil that role.[20] While the competences of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) have been broadened and include the staging and preparation of forces,[21] especially with regard to activating the VJTF to support its forward battalions, any significant step beyond these measures, let alone an entire campaign to support and relieve the EFP, would require a unanimous vote of the North Atlantic Council.[22] Current and former high-ranking NATO commanders have explicitly or implicitly expressed serious doubt that NATO's political decision-making processes would be up to the task.[23]

Beyond the VJTF, NATO has placed its faith in its 'second wave' force, the Enhanced NATO Response Force (eNRF). In addition to principled doubts concerning the viability of multinational forces in high-intensity conventional warfare, the same weaknesses that plague the concept of the VJTF caution against counting on the eNRF to come to the rescue should the tripwire be disturbed. The force's ground element is meant to be provided by three brigades, one of which will be the current year's VJTF, while the other two will be formed by the Spearhead Forces of the preceding and following year.[24] While undoubtedly a sound concept for force generation, this also means that NATO's primary combat force will be only as agile as its slowest component. NATO assumes this to be between 30 and 45 days from notice to movement for the additional brigades – as opposed to deployment or employment in theatre, which will take even longer.

When faced with these doubts over NATO's prime military instruments, officials from the Baltic states and Poland unofficially, yet unequivocally,

allude to the Alliance's 'silent conventional deterrence' – bilateral deployments from selected allies (the US, the UK or Denmark, among others), which are expected to intervene independently of, and earlier than, the VJTF and eNRF. Unburdened by the need for allied consensus, and with potentially faster decision-making processes, willing allies could well play a pivotal role in making NATO's EFP militarily effective. However, three factors urge caution here. Firstly, the bilateral shortcut depends on the credibility of the US in times of crisis. Under President Donald Trump, this credibility, and the American commitment to its Alliance obligations, has been far from rock solid. Secondly, the involvement of allied troops outside of NATO's command structure and contingency plans would raise serious questions concerning conflict stability and inadvertent or accidental escalation implicating the whole Alliance. Thirdly, it is worth asking what message such bilateral deployments would send at a time when Alliance cohesion appears vulnerable to political threats, particularly if there is deadlock within the North Atlantic Council. Would a unilateral US intervention be seen as a sign of the Alliance's strength, or just of its most potent member state? What would it mean if such an intervention were to take place against the explicit objections of other major member states? Thus, while the reliance on an intervention of NATO members outside of the NATO framework is a realistic and important factor in the calculations of any adversary, as long as NATO's official conventional answer to any challenge of its EFP rests on its multinational, rapid-response units, those units must be prepared to respond by themselves to any alarm bells.

Secondly, despite increasing calls to further reinforce the Baltics, NATO will not be able to 'out-presence' Russia in that region.[25] While most debates on the EFP tend to focus on its optimal size – with the RAND Corporation issuing an attention-getting call for up to seven brigades[26] – this question will quickly become irrelevant if NATO cannot maintain its access to the Baltics. Should a small force (such as a multinational battalion) be deployed, it would be vitally reliant on reinforcements. And even if NATO decided to deploy a large, heavy, multinational force designed to credibly defend the Baltics against a Russian attack – assuming that such a deployment would be logistically feasible, which is doubtful – it would still be dependent on

joint and combined support from air and naval forces outside the immediate theatre. Thus, the EFP necessarily falls short of addressing the military challenge as a whole. A military presence in the region is a necessary condition in all of the plausible scenarios, but is sufficient in very few of them, and in all cases assured access is still required.

Thirdly, even within conventional scenarios, the EFP carries with it the risk of potentially dividing allies. For the first time in NATO's history, Russia will have the ability to target a select group of troop-contributing nations within the allied defence posture. Russian conventional advances could be directed against those areas and allies judged by Moscow to be less likely to fight or to opt for escalation. While such an approach would be time-limited and come with very high risks, Russia might well succeed in exploiting NATO's political fault lines to undermine allied cohesion and to sabotage the political decision-making and military planning in Brussels and Mons.

Russia might succeed in exploiting NATO's political fault lines

Such an approach was practically impossible during the Cold War. Facing the multinational force posture under Allied Forces Central Europe (AFCENT), the famous 'layer cake' of largely national army corps, the Soviet Union had little hope of opening a limited war in the sector of a single corps. At the flanks, the Allied Mobile Force (AMF), the conceptual precursor of today's VJTF, included all major NATO allies. And in Berlin, any Soviet advance would have met soldiers from NATO's nuclear powers. It would have been a very risky bet by the Kremlin to assume that an attack on any of these forces would not escalate into a general war with NATO. Not so today. Disunity among the allies could well lead Russia to believe that a limited conventional war with NATO is a realistic possibility.

These considerations imply that the EFP does not necessarily protect against limited Russian invasions, as the allied battalions could, quite literally, be outflanked. This is a function of geography – a single battalion can only be at one place in a vast country – but also a question of how these battalions will be integrated into NATO's defence plans, and how closely they will interact with the armed forces of their host nations. In military

terms, the operational relevance of a single battalion in, say, Estonia, in the face of a limited fait accompli by Russia, is close to zero: whether the battalion was present in the country would not matter militarily. Here, NATO decisions since Warsaw are promising, as it seems the EFP battalions will be integrated into host-nation brigades, which in turn will fall under the command of SACEUR. While NATO will still only exercise limited control, its actions tightly restrained by the member states, this will nevertheless increase the Alliance's ability to respond more flexibly to limited Russian moves. Still, this does not address the question of size: it might actually be possible for Russia to attack a Baltic country without encountering a single multinational battalion for a considerable time. It would be difficult to overestimate the effect on allied cohesion if NATO troops stood by helplessly while Russia called its bluff.

Finally, even if the whole EFP were to be attacked by conventional Russian troops, this alone would not ensure an immediate escalation of the war. A near-guaranteed escalation of even minor events into general war was the core premise of allied deterrence during the Cold War. However, NATO is looking for answers to Russia's New Generation War in a politico-military context that is fundamentally different to the one in which it first developed and honed its concepts of conventional and nuclear deterrence.

NATO's presence in the Baltics is a front, not a flank. The distinction is not mere semantics. Throughout NATO's history, the two main military scenarios short of general war – limited land grabs and subversion – have always been threats to NATO's *flanks*. For today's NATO, there are no flanks in the literal sense, understood as extensions of a central front constituting the geographical, political and military focal point of the Alliance, a role played by the inner-German border for four decades. The contemporary usage of the term with regard to the eastern 'flank' conceals the fact that, as it stands, the region cannot rely on such a central escalation dynamic. If an island off the coast of Norway had been seized by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, this might well have triggered an escalation along pre-agreed war plans, engulfing the entire European front and possibly leading to all-out nuclear war. The purpose was clear, the stakes were high, and the confrontation between two highly armed blocs within Germany all but

guaranteed an escalation. This escalatory integration of NATO's flanks, as well as of West Berlin, has not been replicated in today's Baltics.

* * *

The EFP is meant to be a symbol of strength, and it is only to be expected that NATO and its member states will tout their own achievements. Permanently stationing large numbers of combat troops in the Baltics and Poland is an important step with significant historical weight, albeit one that has severely strained the domestic political consensus of major troop contributors. However, it is clear that NATO must not believe its own hype when it comes to sub-conventional and conventional scenarios. As a tripwire force largely taken out of NATO's Cold War playbook, the EFP is not automatically suited to the sub-conventional and conventional challenges of New Generation War.

The EFP's multinational composition, spread out over four countries, offers ample opportunities for Russian subversion, future conflict and threats to cohesion. Treated as another peacetime deployment on allied territory, it may well enhance the threat to NATO's cohesion instead of reducing it. Conventionally, then, the EFP is not by itself a deterrent. It relies on allied reinforcements whose readiness is questionable at best. NATO's 'silent conventional deterrent' – bilateral deployments and plans by selected member states – is critical, yet also symbolic of the potential shortcomings of the Alliance's integrated forces, and fraught with risks of its own. Whereas its Cold War predecessor in West Berlin constituted a near-guarantee that any violation would lead to escalation, this is not true for today's EFP. Thus, its mere existence does not by itself imply that a limited war in the Baltics is unthinkable.

Nothing could be more damaging than for NATO to overestimate the EFP. Misreading the strategic value of a conventional forward presence in an era of New Generation War could cause NATO to stumble into a dangerous 'reassurance dilemma', in which the Alliance might find that it is better at reassuring itself than at credibly deterring the Russian side. NATO's EFP is a necessary condition for credible deterrence, but it is by no means sufficient. The tripwire does not deter; the Alliance does.

The task for NATO is to transform an instrument from a much more dangerous yet simpler time into a force capable of addressing contemporary threats. It must move from 'deterrence by reputation' to 'deterrence by preparedness' by integrating even those minimal, compromise-based measures already decided upon in Warsaw into credible, realistic and rehearsed defence plans with clear responsibilities, pre-delegated authority and maximally harmonised rules of engagement. In the long term, the EFP might develop into a cornerstone of conventional, non-nuclear allied deterrence in the east – a deterrence that embodies, symbolises and ensures allied cohesion.

Notes

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