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Permanent NATO deployment is not the answer to European security

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Abstract Calls for the permanent deployment of substantial combat forces in Eastern European NATO states, primarily in the Baltics and Poland, have been part of the debates on strategy among the member states for years. In the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, the defence capabilities of the Eastern European allies must undoubtedly be strengthened. However, in light of the yet-to-be-implemented measures that the allies decided upon at the Wales Summit, a more general shift of international security challenges towards ‘hybrid’ warfare scenarios, Russia’s centrality in the Middle East peace process and the long-term viability of the Alliance, permanently deploying substantial combat forces in Eastern Europe would not strengthen the security of Europe and the coherence of NATO.

Keywords Hybrid warfare | NATO | Ukraine | Resilience | Deterrence | Rapid reaction forces

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Challenges to NATO's security

In the wake of Russia's aggression in connection with the territorial integrity of Ukraine, calls for a permanent NATO deployment of substantial combat units in Eastern European member states have been widespread. Richard Shirreff has argued that a permanent presence in the Baltics would 'deter any Russian encroachment' and that a permanent land presence is 'required to prevent any Russian *coup de main* operation that could achieve its aims before any NATO reserves are able to react' (Benitez et al. 2016, 7). Polish President Andrzej Duda has argued that NATO would be treating Poland like a 'buffer zone' between the West and Russia if it did not agree to the deployment of permanent bases on its eastern flanks (Foy 2015).

The Polish and Baltic calls for a permanent deployment of substantial combat forces derive from various considerations. First, Poland and the Baltics have had a long and troublesome history with their eastern neighbour. Russian aggression towards these states has extended into the post-Cold War era, mostly consisting of attempts to pressurise the countries into a friendlier attitude towards Moscow's interests. A second reason for the scepticism of these states relates to the content of the NATO–Russia Founding Act of 1997. Under this agreement both sides pledged to seek long-term stability in the Euro-Atlantic security space through cooperation and confidence-building measures. However, Poland, the Baltic states and other Eastern European NATO members have had little influence on this NATO–Russian settlement, which was initially based on the desire to slowly integrate Russia into Alliance structures.

In the past, divergent threat perceptions have led to frictions within the Alliance. Noetzel and Schreer (2009) observed that the Alliance has developed into a three-tiered organisation, with the Eastern European states (mainly Poland, the Baltic states and the Czech Republic) urging for a tougher line towards Russia; the status quo powers (Germany and France) pushing for a more nuanced position; and the 'reformers' (Great Britain and the US) supporting a more global role for NATO, beyond the immediate task of defending Eastern Europe. Since 2014, this division has been marginalised. In particular, Germany's stance towards Russia has become significantly more sceptical and confrontational (Forsberg 2016). Given the potential ramifications of Russia's destabilising efforts, the urge to strengthen European and NATO defences against a potential replication of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy is undoubtedly essential for the reassurance of the Alliance and the protection of the most vulnerable allies in the East. Europe's defence efforts must continue to stress the liberal character of the post-Cold War order without outside interference.

However, effective military deterrence and appropriate defence infrastructures do not necessarily translate into an abrogation of the NATO–Russia Founding Act of 1997 (even though Russia has violated the prerogatives of its commitments). The case against substantial permanent deployments of NATO troops in Eastern Europe is not derived from the lack of a need to prepare against Russian aggression, but from the sufficiency of current military measures (if thoroughly implemented), the changing nature of the threat in the post-Cold War environment, and the fundamental challenges

posed by revolutions and wars in the Middle East, as well as the need to balance the security requirements of all 28 NATO member states. Unless a broader political and economic *modus vivendi* between NATO and Russia can be reached, Europe remains vulnerable to Russian aggression irrespective of the forces that the Alliance deploys on its soil. As Mölling and Major (2015) have argued, ‘Hectic activism risks a two-pronged security policy miscalculation: first, overemphasising the military dimension, both in the analysis of threats and the choice of instruments; and, second, planning to fight the last war all over again.’

Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and NATO response force: a viable deterrent

Whilst most measures that NATO has agreed upon are currently being implemented, some of the measures have already substantially increased the operational readiness of the Alliance. The Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) will be capable of reacting within a couple of days to external acts of aggression. For NATO’s land-based VJTF units, three parallel forces (Stand-up, Stand-by and Stand-down) are currently being set up. Yet-to-be-defined sea-based, air-based and special forces will accompany the land-based component of the rapid reaction force. One of the greatest advantages of the VJTF is its flexibility with regard to potential battle areas. As General Philip Breedlove, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, has argued, the VJTF is ‘a clear indication that our Alliance has the capability and will to respond to emerging security challenges on our southern and eastern flanks’ (NATO 2015).

In June 2015, NATO’s defence ministers also agreed to increase the NATO Response Force from 19,000 to 40,000 soldiers. Additionally, the Multi-National Corps Northeast is undergoing an upgrade to the status of a regional headquarters, which will bring oversight of the regional NATO Force Integration Units as well as land-based VJTF forces into its purview. These measures are being accompanied by extended air policing by NATO in the Baltics to deter Russian aggression in the short term. Adaptation measures for the NATO Response Force also include the implementation of NATO Force Integration Units in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Romania and Bulgaria. Germany and the US have also initiated the Transatlantic Capability Enhancement and Training Initiative, seeking to foster the military resilience of Poland and the Baltic states.¹

The US has implemented the European Reassurance Initiative, enabling the US both to maintain a continual rotational unit presence in the Baltics and Poland and to increase the number of bilateral exercises it carries out (Glatz and Zapfe 2016, 2–3). In June 2015, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced the pre-positioning of approximately 250 armoured vehicles in Central and Eastern Europe. Some of this

¹ To appropriately frame current measures, NATO is operating under a formula of ‘persistent presence’, implying the continual presence of NATO units for joint and combined exercises and training on a rotational basis.

military equipment is deployed in the territory of the new member states. The *equipment* of the so-called European Activity Set will serve to supply a Heavy Brigade Combat Team of up to 5,000 soldiers, both for exercises in the context of the rotating presence and for deployments in the region.

The above measures serve to significantly augment the security of the Eastern European allies, even though Glatz and Zapfe (2015) have rightly pointed out that the Baltic states remain under the threat of potential Russian aggression. In fact, at its core, NATO's policy has sought to refrain from openly breaking the NATO–Russia Council commitment to not station substantial military combat forces on a permanent basis in Eastern Europe. The steps taken to ensure a substantial strengthening of NATO's military capabilities whilst preserving the 'Western' commitment of the 1990s has led some observers to conclude that NATO's policies are contradictory (Glatz and Zapfe 2015).

However, such observation disregards the close connection between military preparedness and the need to pursue political solutions. Without a broad *modus vivendi* with Russia on conventional arms control and military codes of conduct, the Baltics would remain vulnerable to Russian aggression irrespective of the deployment of substantial NATO combat forces. Whilst the potential risks for the Baltic states continue to exist and should not be treated lightly, a more promising approach would link deployments in the Baltics and Poland with enhanced Euro-Atlantic arms control efforts. A report by the European Leadership Network (Kulesa 2016) has argued that a more stable security framework with Russia is most likely if both sides participate in confidence-building measures. Such measures could include the enhanced predictability of military exercises, dialogues on military doctrines and the restraining of forward conventional military deployments, as well as the downscaling of the importance of nuclear weapons and establishing a shared understanding of the new mutually binding rules (Kulesa 2016). As Richter (2014) has argued, the Euro-Atlantic security space would also benefit from the revival of an ambitious conventional arms control regime that could potentially eliminate the blurry characterisation of 'substantial combat forces' in the framework of the NATO–Russia Council. In the past decade, Russia has signalled its willingness to enter into mutual arms control agreements, primarily because they would guarantee Moscow an equal status in its relationship with the West and facilitate defence planning in Moscow in light of the substantial economic challenges it faces in the years to come.

Rather than unilaterally abrogating the pledges of the Founding Act in the field of combat force deployments, these could be utilised as a bargaining chip should Moscow prove unwilling to enter into a mutually acceptable conventional arms control regime. However, this option should only be used at the end of the process, not at the beginning. In the current absence of NATO–Russian negotiations, a transitional compromise could be found by establishing an adequate infrastructure for the substantial pre-positioning of military equipment without the deployment of actual forces. Irrespective of the permanent deployment of NATO combat forces in Eastern Europe, NATO's deterrence posture would significantly increase if European NATO states qualitatively improved the components of national armed forces (Glatz and Zapfe 2015, 7).

The changing nature of the threat

At the same time, purely military measures against potential Russian aggression will not suffice to account for the evolving threat to NATO's security. In fact, focusing on hard military factors might undermine necessary adaptation to the more likely conflict scenarios of the future. Today, Russia's foreign policy behaviour is mainly derived from its weakness. Deyermond (2014) has argued that Russia, 'with a narrow economic base, a declining population and continuing security troubles inside its borders . . . doesn't look either as secure as other established, powerful states or as economically dynamic as the rising powers.' From the Russian perspective, Deyermond argues, all great power prerogatives have come under threat in the past two decades. The current Russian approach thus originates in a predominantly defensive mindset that interprets the self-determination of the states on Russia's periphery, as well as Western support of civil society movements in those states, as part of an 'encroachment strategy'. Moscow translates this mindset into aggressive efforts to undermine state sovereignty, as well as attempts to sow disagreement among Western audiences.

Based on Russia's persistent economic and relative military weakness, the central element of Russia's current strategy is an attempt to force the US and the EU onto Russia's playing field. In contrast to the Cold War, the development of Russia's current foreign policy suggests that 'hybrid warfare' will be central to possible conflicts with Europe. Through a combination of military, political and economic tools—including cyber-attacks and enhanced intelligence measures—Russia is pursuing an asymmetrical strategy that antagonises the West without provoking a full-scale confrontation with NATO (Kiesewetter and Zielke 2015). As Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov has argued, 'The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of weapons in their effectiveness' (Coalson 2014).

Mölling and Major (2015) have therefore argued that 'The objective of using irregular tools is to exploit the weaknesses of the target community in order to destabilize a state and polarize its society. It expands the gray area between peace and conflict—force can still play a part, but is not directly attributable to any party to the conflict, nor does it have a clear military character.' Russia's attempt to utilise regional and global institutions (the Eurasian Union and the UN) to foster its security agenda can be interpreted as part of a broader development away from military conflicts towards escalation scenarios in which the global hyper-connectivity shifts confrontations towards areas such as economic warfare, the weaponisation of institutions, and physical and virtual infrastructure competition (Leonard 2016). In fact, according to Monaghan (2013), Russia's greatest foreign policy achievements prior to the annexation of Crimea were the creation of a customs union and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Given these broader trends and Russia's strategy to asymmetrically respond to Western weaknesses, the societal, economic and democratic resilience of European states and populations will be as important as military preparations for Russian aggression. Ukraine would arguably have been less exposed to destabilising efforts from

within if the elites had fostered an economically successful free market economy and an inclusive societal approach in the post–Cold War decades. In this regard, the economic vulnerability of Ukraine is as alarming as its lack of military capability to counter Russian aggression (Petro and Speedie 2016). Likewise, from a broader perspective, media freedom, the independence of constitutional courts, the functioning of multicultural societies and economic reforms in indebted European states are key to closing potential vulnerabilities to Russian hybrid warfare strategies.

Cohesiveness of the Alliance

Lastly, rather than deepening the cohesiveness of NATO, a permanent stationing of NATO’s military equipment and troops in Eastern Europe might cause a rift within the Alliance. Whereas Poland and the Baltic states have voiced their desire to permanently deploy substantial combat forces in Eastern Europe, other Eastern European member states have been more cautious in echoing such plans.

From Germany’s perspective, an abrogation of the NATO–Russia Founding Act would also raise doubts and questions about Berlin’s diplomatic resolve, which has so far been quite successful at navigating between imposing significant economic sanctions on the one hand, and serving as a mediator in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict on the other (Forsberg 2016). Andrew Monaghan (2013, 200) has argued that Europe’s sanctions on Moscow have undermined Russia’s actions, which he characterises as counterproductive as they ‘left Ukraine severely injured but alive, and even more alienated from its former protector. The policy brought Moscow a whole set of new economic problems: in particular, it prompted the EU to reinvigorate the slow and indecisive process of diversifying hydrocarbon suppliers away from Russia.’

In the run-up to the Warsaw Summit at the beginning of July, multiple allies have called for a more ambitious strengthening of NATO engagement on its southern frontiers. In contrast to a permanent stationing of military equipment in Eastern Europe, the existence of the VJTF sends a more balanced message to the whole of NATO as it avoids focusing on one single region of concern. Member states such as Italy and France are seeking to place a greater focus on stability in Central and North African states such as Tunisia. Again, this is not to say that NATO members should not be reassured. However, in contrast to permanent deployments, rapid reaction forces would not tilt the balance towards one single threat, but would keep more options open. The concept takes into account the justified security demands in Eastern Europe and Southern Europe, helps to balance the divergent security preferences within the Alliance, and strengthens efforts to foster economic and military deterrence towards Russia.

Challenges in the Middle East and cooperation with Russia

In addition to setting the wrong priorities, the abrogation of the NATO–Russia Council pledges could undermine stabilisation efforts in the Middle East. Whilst it would be wrong to neglect the fate of Ukraine, in the face of the severe challenges to NATO’s coherence in the Turkish–Russian conflict over Syria and the migration crisis, solutions to the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars are only possible if the West pursues cooperation with Russia. As Anatol Lieven (2015) has recognised, an increasing number of US intelligence and policymakers has realised that Washington and NATO would benefit from cooperation with Moscow and other states in order to restructure Iraq and Syria by implementing autonomous Sunni regions in Eastern Syria and Northern Iraq, as well as a Kurdish area in Northern Iraq. Russian participation in Europe’s Middle East strategy is essential for two reasons: first, because Russia has a highly effective air force based in Syria, no political solution can be reached without Moscow’s agreement. Second, because Iran’s agreement to any settlement in Syria will also be essential, Russia’s influence in Tehran will be necessary to its achievement (Lieven 2015).

Preventing a further deterioration in the bilateral relationship will only be possible if Germany and the EU as a whole preserve diplomatic and economic ties with both the long-standing NATO ally Turkey, as well as Russia. Whilst a NATO–Russian rapprochement on Syria might play to Russia’s desire to make up for its failures in Ukraine (Lukyanov 2016), a confrontation with Russia over the permanent deployment of NATO infrastructure in Eastern Europe would unnecessarily undermine diplomatic opportunities that could emerge when dealing with the Turkish–Russian conflict.

Conclusion

As argued in this article, NATO’s responses in the wake of Russia’s aggression have demonstrated the cohesiveness and willingness of its member states to defend themselves against Moscow’s aggression. However, NATO cannot provide economic and societal resilience. It is the EU that must take the lead in this, by fostering political developments at the member-state level. As Mölling and Major (2015) have stressed, ‘Most opportunities to take action on hybrid security are at the national and regional levels, putting particular responsibility for such policies on states.’

In the short term, a permanent NATO deployment could undermine US–Russian efforts to find common solutions in Syria without significantly enhancing the safety of the Baltic states. In contrast, a rapprochement between the US and Russia on the internal peace process in Syria might spill over into a more stable bilateral relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, thereby making the broader region more peaceful. The decision to permanently deploy significant military infrastructure in the Baltics and Poland would unnecessarily jeopardise the Syrian peace process and the medium-term cohesiveness

of the transatlantic alliance, without adding much to the security of NATO's Eastern European allies.

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