

BRIEF

NATO'S FORCE STRUCTURE
AND POSTURE

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The forces and capabilities that will be available for NATO operations in 2030 have, to a great extent, already been decided through the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP—the mechanism by which the Allies collectively define and review, and individually commit to provide contributions to, the NATO force structure). It is now up to individual Allies to deliver on their commitments. The European Allies in particular have to prove that they are reliable. Many of the forces requested by NATO already exist, although their readiness and capabilities need to be improved. Some forces and capabilities will have to be fundamentally modernised and some established from scratch, requiring considerable investment of funding, personnel, and time.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The forces and capabilities available to NATO in the first decade after the end of the Cold War had primarily been designed to counter the Soviet threat. The First Gulf War against Iraq was

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won using the same forces that had originally been intended to stop Soviet armour from advancing into Western Europe. These heavy forces were not always suited for operations at the lower end of the threat spectrum, for example for the peace support operations in Bosnia and Kosovo. The 9/11 attacks triggered a new war in Afghanistan, where the International Security Assistance Force also required relatively

light and deployable forces that were easier to sustain compared to the armour-heavy forces of the Cold War.

Similarly, in the maritime domain, scenarios involving high-intensity operations against Soviet forces gave way to real-world operations requiring less sophisticated capabilities. These operations included counter-piracy off the Horn of Africa and in the Western Indian Ocean, operations to neutralise refugee smuggling routes in the Mediterranean, and operations to enforce the United Nations arms embargo on Libya.

An increasing need to engage in low-intensity expeditionary operations, the absence of a perceived high-end threat, and the global recession that started in late 2007 together led to reduced investment in capabilities that were not required for operations against pirates, human traffickers, Al-Qaeda, and Taliban forces. Financial constraints also meant decreasing stockpiles of ammunition and spare parts that were made available primarily to deployed units. The decline in warfighting capabilities during this period is clearly expressed in the Summary of the 2018 US National Defense Strategy, according to which “we are emerging from a period of strategic atrophy, aware that our competitive military advantage has been eroding.”¹

Alongside the decline in capabilities NATO's posture also changed significantly during this period. In the Cold War, NATO relied on forward defence, with significant numbers of very high readiness forces deployed to West Germany

under the command of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, and ready to defend against a Soviet attack from the outset. In the 1990s this gradually changed to a more backward leaning posture with Allied forces remaining under national command and, in most cases, located on their own territory at readiness levels ranging from months to even years. Decisions to deploy for the discretionary operations of the period could be subject of lengthy political debate.

The rise and spread of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern Ukraine made 2014 a watershed in transatlantic security. NATO was now confronted by two very different threats: one that called for counterinsurgency operations like those required to neutralise Al-Qaeda and the Taliban; and one that faced an adversary equipped with modernised full-spectrum capabilities, including nuclear weapons. NATO needed to retain its capability to conduct crisis management operations while at the same time strengthening its capabilities for collective defence.

Since then, NATO has also recognised that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that need to be addressed.² The fact that NATO has not yet publicly acknowledged China as a threat, while the US has, does not mean that China is not a problem for other Allies. China challenges all Allies through cyber-attacks, espionage, and influence operations, but it also poses an indirect military threat by drawing US attention and military capabilities away from the Euro-Atlantic area to counter its activities in the Indo-Pacific region.

TECHNOLOGY AND MILITARY MODERNISATION

Advances in technology and innovation will accelerate as they are fuelled by continued exponential increases in computing power and advances that augment human intelligence.³ Emerging and disruptive technologies, which include artificial intelligence, autonomy, space, quantum, hypersonics, biotechnologies and materials, can both enhance NATO's defence

capabilities and, when deployed by an adversary, pose a threat.⁴ In some of these areas, significant or revolutionary disruption of military capabilities is either already ongoing, or will have a substantial impact over the next 5-10 years.⁵ The US National Defense Strategy states that "without sustained and predictable investment to restore readiness and modernize our military to make it fit for our time, we will rapidly lose our military advantage, resulting in a Joint Force that has legacy systems irrelevant to the defense of our people."⁶ The very same is true also for most, if not all, other Allies.

NATO'S FUTURE FORCES, CAPABILITIES AND POSTURE

Having focused for almost two decades on operations against low-tech, non-state adversaries, to the detriment of high-end forces and capabilities, many Allies now need to take a significant leap in their national capability development to counter the threat posed by Russia. While this requires a focus on quality more than quantity, there is once again a need for larger formations able to participate in large-scale manoeuvre warfare.

At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO Heads of State and Government committed to ensuring that NATO has the full range of capabilities

Many Allies now need to take a significant leap in their national capability development

necessary for all Alliance missions, including deterrence and defence against potential adversaries, and management of the full spectrum of threats that could confront the Alliance from any direction. They also committed to deliver more and heavier high-end forces and capabilities, and more forces at higher readiness.⁷ In the following year, NATO defence ministers agreed to accept new capability targets to meet this level of ambition.⁸ The complete and timely implementation of this package of capability targets, together with the targets likely to be identified in future NDPP cycles will, without doubt, be demanding. In addition, the adaptation of the NATO Command Structure also agreed by defence ministers in 2017, will require

Allies to contribute some 1 200 personnel on top of existing commitments.⁹

Germany, for example, has agreed to deliver the first of three land force divisions at 30 days readiness by 2027, and the other two divisions by 2032.¹⁰ Germany must also replace its increasingly obsolete Tornado dual-capable aircraft, which are central to NATO's nuclear deterrence mission.¹¹ Delivering against these commitments will require significant effort and resources. Ensuring that German forces have 30 days' worth of ammunition and spare parts, for instance, will cost around €30 billion.¹² Germany, and several other Allies, have thus been granted very generous deadlines to meet their NATO capability targets. By 2032, almost 20 years will have passed since the 2014 events that triggered this modernisation, clearly indicating a lack of responsiveness to changes in the security environment.

Some Allies have made progress in developing the capabilities requested of them, including ground-based air defence, suppression of enemy air defences, anti-submarine warfare, and electronic warfare. These will go a long way to ensuring that NATO can fulfil its primary task of collective defence at the agreed level defined through the NDPP, though the time taken to reach this goal will depend on the schedule by which resources are made available by individual Allies.

These resource requirements help to explain the need for NATO's Defence Investment Pledge, which requires Allies to spend 2% of their GDP on defence, and 20% of that sum on major equipment, including related research and development. In addition to enabling urgently needed modernisation, defence spending against common targets contributes to a fairer degree of burden sharing between European Allies and the US, thus increasing Europe's relevance in the ongoing great power competition. It is yet to be seen whether the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic will have any impact on defence expenditure.

Even then, there is no guarantee that the 2% and 20% targets will be sufficient to deliver all the forces and capabilities required to address all the

Alliance's capability shortfalls. Time is a further concern. Some Allies will need to streamline their acquisition procedures to enable equipment to be fielded as soon as possible, minimising the risk that it will be obsolete when finally made available to the forces.

At the Warsaw Summit, NATO leaders also decided to establish a limited forward presence in the northeast and the southeast parts of Alliance territory. The idea that in the event of any aggression these forces would be backed up by rapid reinforcement is challenged by the realities of the deployability of many Allied forces, such as low readiness, legal and procedural obstacles to military movement, constraints imposed by the limited capacity of Europe's transport infrastructure, and issues related to coordination, command and control of large military movements.¹³ For example, the brigade declared by Denmark to NATO suffers critical combat deficiencies and is likely to be unusable in practical terms in a high-end conflict (given that it is at only 24 months' notice) until 2024 and will not meet all requirements before

NATO is likely to maintain its current posture and gradually improve its credibility as forces are modernised and new capabilities become available

2032.¹⁴ The NATO Readiness Initiative has been helpful in highlighting existing issues with low readiness.¹⁵

US military presence in Europe and in particular Operation Atlantic Resolve—the enhanced US military stance in Europe prompted by Russia's aggression in Ukraine—contribute significantly to NATO's posture. But there is little appetite in NATO, for both political and financial reasons, to deploy anything more than very limited forces forward to the eastern parts of the Alliance. Furthermore, Berlin and Paris remain committed to the NATO-Russia Founding Act that they interpret in a way that prohibits significant combat forces in the easternmost member states.¹⁶ The Baltic states and Poland have different views and would welcome larger Allied presence on their territories. But they are fully aware of the scale of Host Nation Support requirements that would come with a potential shift from forward presence to forward defence.

Unless the security environment changes significantly, NATO is likely to maintain the principal design of its current posture and gradually improve its credibility as forces are modernised and new capabilities become available. In parallel, efforts to modernise supporting infrastructure are needed to enable timely reinforcement of NATO's east. Allies,

especially the European Allies who are struggling to modernise their forces and capabilities, now need to deliver. This is especially important as the US will continue to pay more interest in an assertive China, even as the Russian threat persists.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁴ NATO, Science & Technology Organization, [Science & Technology Trends 2020-2040. Exploring the S&T Edge](#) (Brussels: NATO STO, 2020), 4.
- ⁵ Ibid., vii.
- ⁶ Department of Defense, [Summary of the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy](#), 1.
- ⁷ NATO, ["Warsaw Summit Communiqué. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016, 9 July 2016,"](#) press release (2016) 100, 9 July 2016, paragraph 45.
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- ⁹ NATO, ["NATO Defence Ministers agree to adapt command structure, boost Afghanistan troop levels, 9 November 2017,"](#) press release (2017), 9 November 2017; Heinrich Brauß and András Rácz, [Russia's Strategic Interests and Actions in the Baltic Region](#) (Berlin: DGAP 2021), 22.
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- ¹¹ Martin Hurt, "Towards a Credible Deterrence and Defence Posture in the Baltics in 2030," in [Towards #NATO2030: The Regional Perspective of the Baltic States and Poland](#), ed. Māris Andžāns, Mārtiņš Vargulis (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2020), 26.
- ¹² Thorsten Jungholt and Jacques Schuster, ["Generalinspekteur sieht Nato-Ziele durch Corona gefährdet | Inspector General sees NATO goals at risk from Corona,"](#) Die Welt, 3 January 2021.
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- ¹⁵ The NATO Readiness Initiative aims to ensure that by 2020, the Alliance has 30 battalions, 30 air squadrons and 30 combat vessels available within 30 days or less: NATO, ["Defence Ministers to agree NATO Readiness Initiative,"](#) 7 June 2018.
- ¹⁶ NATO, ["Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation,"](#) 27 May 1997.

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