

BRIEF

MILITARY COMMAND AND CONTROL

VILNIUS SUMMIT SERIES, NO. 5

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NATO's current military Command and Control (C2) structure was designed for forces engaged in crisis management and expeditionary operations, not territorial defence. It will thus not be suitable for implementing NATO's new regional defence plans, or for building credible deterrence and defence. A new military C2 structure that clarifies the geographical areas of responsibility of the Joint Force Commands (JFCs) and treats the Baltic Sea region as indivisible is needed. NATO must also improve C2 at the tactical level through the establishment of tactical- (component-) level commands, perhaps building upon the existing corps headquarters. The Baltic states, meanwhile, are establishing divisional structures which will further develop their military capabilities and give them new opportunities to act with Allies under corps command. They may, however, face challenges in implementing these ambitious plans due to a shortage of resources.

NATO MILITARY C2

In the face of the threat from Russia and its ongoing war in Ukraine, strengthening deterrence and defence will be one of the most pressing issues on the agenda of the Vilnius Summit. NATO Secretary General Jens

NATO will have to update its C2 structures in line with its new defence plans

Stoltenberg recently noted the summit should "complete the fundamental transition we started after Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014."¹ He also explained that as part of this

NATO would, for the first time since the Cold War, bring together force planning, capabilities, and C2 under the framework of the revised regional defence plans. Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Christopher G Cavoli, has also observed that NATO will have to update its C2 structures in line with its new defence plans, stating that it would be necessary to update the responsibilities of headquarters "to fit the new purpose, which will undoubtedly lead to organisational changes."²

At last year's Madrid Summit, Allied leaders endorsed a new force model, which, they said, "will strengthen and modernise the NATO Force Structure and will resource our new generation of military plans."³ They also decided to increase the number of battalion-sized battlegroups on the eastern flank (enhanced Forward Presence (eFP)) and to scale these up to brigade-sized units if necessary. Furthermore, they agreed to the forward prepositioning of equipment and the strengthening of C2 and welcomed the establishment by Allies of division-level structures.⁴

Throughout its 74-year history, NATO has modified its military structures and C2 to meet changes in the security environment and emerging challenges. The most recent reform of the C2 structure, in 2017-2018, established a new operational-level headquarters—Joint Force Command Norfolk—and a few other lower-level organisations.⁵ Through several reviews, the military C2 structure has evolved from 33 commands at the end of the Cold War, most with specific territorial responsibilities, to the 2018 structure, which has seven commands

with a mix of (semi-) territorial and functional responsibilities, plus a handful of organisations providing technical, analysis, and training services.⁶

Strategic military command is provided by Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE). SHAPE has three subordinate commands at the operational level: JFC Brunssum (in the Netherlands); JFC Naples (in Italy); and JFC Norfolk (in Virginia, USA).⁷ The C2 structure also includes, at the tactical level, nine Corps headquarters, each of which may command up to 60 000 personnel and the NATO Response Force (NRF), which reports directly to SACEUR.⁸ NRF operations are commanded on a yearly rotational basis by JFC Brunssum and JFC Naples.⁹

OPERATIONAL C2

This military C2 structure was designed for the C2 of forces engaged in crisis management and expeditionary operations. It was organised on a functional rather than a geographical basis to give NATO commanders the flexibility to build tailored command arrangements for (potentially) multiple operations taking place inside and beyond NATO's area of responsibility. NATO is, however, renewing its focus on collective defence as its primary task. The existing command structure will not be suitable for this purpose: new arrangements will be needed.

Unity of command should be a key principle in designing a new structure. Meeting this principle will be most challenging at the operational level, and especially difficult in the Nordic-Baltic region where Finland's accession and Sweden's presumed accession to NATO raise questions about how the territorial responsibilities of JFC Brunssum, JFC Naples and JFC Norfolk can best be allocated to ensure that SACEUR can command most effectively the forces below him.

It is hard to disagree with Franklin D Kramer's proposal that, in the event of a war with Russia, JFC Brunssum's area of responsibility should cover the entire Baltic Sea region: that it should be "responsible for both sides of the Baltic Sea and its waters."¹⁰ Kramer adds that JFC Brunssum should focus on the eastern and northern regions of Europe, while JFC Naples

should be responsible for the area around the Mediterranean Sea from Portugal to Turkey, including on the land and in the air. JFC Norfolk, meanwhile, should lead maritime forces in the Atlantic, but command of forces on the ground, and those on the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean should be the responsibility of JFC Brunssum or JFC Naples.

The Baltic states also believe that any revision of NATO's C2 arrangements should recognise the indivisibility of the Baltic Sea region's operational area and make JFC Brunssum responsible for its defence, including the sea itself.¹¹ The Baltic states lack military-strategic depth and for them, the principle of unified C2 overshadows logistic and other considerations.

However, as is usual when Allies look at the NATO command structure, there is undoubtedly a political angle to this question. Finland and Sweden are not just Baltic region countries but also high north/Arctic countries that have cooperated closely, including militarily, with their Nordic neighbours over decades. Both countries have expressed a strong desire for Nordic solidarity to be preserved and for their own territories not to be divided in any new command structure.¹² Norway, meanwhile, has built strong naval and political links with the US, and has indicated a preference for JFC Norfolk to be responsible for its defence under the new regional plans.¹³ There is thus something of a tension regarding where responsibility for Finland and Sweden should be located in any new command structure. A further option, raised by Kramer and others, would be to create a new 'Northern Command'.¹⁴

Unity of command will be a key principle in designing a new structure

There may also be practical benefits, for example in terms of logistical supply, that favour the two new Allies joining Norway (and Iceland) under the responsibility of JFC Norfolk.¹⁵ But one important practical limitation is that, at present at least, JFC Norfolk has far too few personnel to take on such a role.¹⁶ For this reason, according to press reports, Finland has, for now, been

placed under the responsibility of JFC Brunssum.¹⁷

TACTICAL C2

At the tactical level, at least two problems need to be addressed in any new command structure. First, in the present structure, the operational-level JFCs in Brunssum and Naples exercise C2 over eight eFP battlegroups as well as eight NATO Force Integration Units (which are responsible for coordination with the national commands). These tactical units should, however, be commanded at the tactical level, not the operational level.

Second, LANDCOM, the land component command, is “responsible for coordinating and synchronizing NATO [...] Land Forces by enabling land domain readiness, interoperability, standardization, and competency.”¹⁸ Its tasks include the provision of expertise to NATO’s Graduated Readiness Forces, which include High Readiness Forces (HRF) and Forces for Lower Readiness. According to LANDCOM, the headquarters of nine corps and two multinational divisions can be made available to NATO to generate HRFs if required.¹⁹ It seems unlikely that such a large C2 structure based on expertise ‘outsourced’ from LANDCOM will be efficient, or indeed whether NATO really needs nine corps headquarters.

DIVISIONAL STRUCTURES

The three Baltic States are all developing divisional structures that will be subordinates of Multinational Corps North-East, (MNC NE) headquartered in Szczecin, Poland. The headquarters of Multinational Division North, which includes Danish, Estonian and Latvian

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units, was inaugurated at Camp Ādaži in Latvia on 8 March 2023, Estonia announced the establishment of a land forces division in its armed forces in December 2022, while Lithuania’s land forces division is expected to achieve full operational capability by 2030.²⁰

Estonia has already declared its new division to be part of MNC NE.²¹

These divisional structures will strengthen Baltic defence, including through the additional experience that personnel will gain at this level of command, the access to military capabilities that are usually commanded at the divisional level, and the improvement of interoperability between the divisional manoeuvre units and their enabling units (such as engineering, artillery, logistics, intelligence, and aviation). The Baltic divisions will also improve operational readiness and allow the three states to act with the divisions of other Allies in operations under corps command.

However, it must be acknowledged that to realise these ambitious plans, the Baltic states may face challenges in raising and allocating the necessary resources, both personnel and financial.

CONCLUSION

Effective C2 structures connecting military force structures and capabilities will be fundamental to NATO’s new regional defence plans. NATO leaders are expected to endorse the new defence plans that will be presented to them by the Alliance’s military leadership at the Vilnius Summit.²² Through the process of developing these plans, it is most likely that the C2 challenges discussed in this brief have at least been identified, and perhaps also that the means to address some of them have been put in place.

It is crucial that the new plans should recognise the principle that a single commander must operate in a single information space, and that the division of any operational region would have a negative impact on both information integrity and C2. In strengthening defence in the Baltic region, it will be vital to organise an operationally unified C2, under one JFC. Further, the defence of the Baltic states, one of the most vulnerable regions of the Alliance, is particularly dependent on supply routes which will need to be organised via the Baltic Sea. Both combat operations and these maritime lines of communication should be at the disposal of one commander only—the operation commander for the region.

Nonetheless, one of the biggest challenges for NATO C2 is the inadequate level of resources—especially personnel—provided by the Allies. This has often left the present C2 structures understaffed. Part of the solution is adequate defence funding, another key topic for Vilnius.

Other solutions include reviewing the existing NATO military structures. It seems likely, for example, that at least some of NATO's nine corps headquarters are consuming resources that could be better directed at strengthening deterrence and defence in the face of the Russian threat.

ENDNOTES

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- ² NATO, SHAPE, "[SACEUR Cavoli - Remarks at Rikskonferensen, Sälen, Sweden](#)."
- ³ NATO, "[Madrid Summit Declaration](#)," press release (2022) 095, 29 June 2022, para. 9.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ NATO, "[Allied Command Operations \(ACO\)](#)," 4 May. 2023.
- ⁶ NATO, "[The NATO Command Structure](#)," fact sheet, February 2018.
- ⁷ NATO, SHAPE, "[Military Command Structure](#)."
- ⁸ NATO, "[Rapid Deployable Corps](#)," 22 June 2022.
- ⁹ NATO, "[Readiness Action Plan](#)," 1 September 2022.
- ¹⁰ Franklin D Kramer, "[NATO deterrence and defense: Military priorities for the Vilnius Summit](#)," *Atlantic Council*, 18 April 2023.
- ¹¹ Interview with representative of the Lithuanian MoND.
- ¹² "[Finland joins Nato's Brunssum HQ in the Netherlands](#)," *Yle*, 24 May 2023.
- ¹³ Hilde-Gunn Bye, "[With All the Nordic Countries in NATO, the Region Will Have a Formidable Air Force](#)," *High North News*, 8 December 2022.
- ¹⁴ Franklin D Kramer, "NATO deterrence and defense".
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Lithuanian military personnel.
- ¹⁷ "Finland joins Nato's Brunssum HQ".
- ¹⁸ NATO, LANDCOM, "[LANDCOM Mission](#)."
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ministry of Defence (Latvia), "[Inauguration of Headquarters Multinational Division North in Camp Ādaži](#)," 7 March 2023; "[Estonia establishes a division within its defence forces](#)," *estonian world*, 8 December 2022; Ministry of National Defence (Lithuania), "[Establishment of a national division marks a historic step towards a new quality of the Lithuanian Armed Forces](#)," 8 May 2023.
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