NATO's Rebirth

Assessing NATO's Eastern European "Flank"

Luis Simón

ABSTRACT: Russia's annexation of Crimea and ongoing efforts to de-stabilize Eastern Ukraine have led NATO and the US to adopt a number of initiatives aimed at "reassuring" Eastern and Central European allies. This article assesses the implications of those initiatives for NATO's evolving position in Eastern Europe. It also appraises the Alliance's renewed focus on defense and deterrence with respect to European and transatlantic capabilities.

The aim of this article is to assess NATO's evolving geostrategic position in Eastern Europe in the context of a resurgent Russia.[1] Admittedly, the military-strategic level is but one aspect of Russia's resurgence. Although Russian military power did play an important part in the annexation of Crimea and subsequent de-stabilization of Eastern Ukraine, Moscow is showing a clear preference for "non-traditional" ways and means when it comes to expanding its influence across Eastern Europe, including energy blackmail, the use of undercover assets (the so-called "little green men"), financial penetration, cyber-attacks, and information warfare. This is particularly true in the case of Eastern and Central European countries covered by NATO's mutual defense guarantee. In this regard, economic and political means are likely to become central to any Western response or strategy aimed at countering Russian influence in Eastern Europe. Having said this, Central and Eastern European perceptions of Russian power are largely mediated by the evolving military-strategic balance. Thus, the latter provides a sort of "superstructure" or framework within which geopolitical competition in Eastern Europe plays out.

This article looks at Europe's "Eastern Flank" primarily from a geostrategic perspective. The opening section examines some of the main initiatives adopted by NATO's Heads of State and Government at the September 2014 Summit in Wales, and assesses their contribution to defense and deterrence in Eastern Europe. The second section seeks to place these initiatives within a broader geostrategic context, by breaking down the so-called eastern flank into three sub-components or sub-theaters: the Baltic Sea; the Black Sea; and the "continental" northeastern European flank. It identifies the main geostrategic vulnerabilities NATO faces in each sub-theater and suggests possible ways to overcome them. The third and final section looks at the implications

Luis Simón is a Research Professor at the Institute for European Studies (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and co-founder and senior editor of European Geostrategy. He obtained his PhD at Royal Holloway (University of London) in 2010.

of NATO's renewed emphasis on defense and deterrence for European and transatlantic discussions on capability development, and offers some broader reflections on what the crisis of the "crisis management" paradigm might mean for Western military strategy.

NATO Reloaded? The 2014 Wales Summit

Arguably, the main outcome from the 2014 Wales summit was the return of defense and deterrence in Eastern Europe to the center of NATO debates.[2] This does not mean the era of Western expeditionary military operations has come to pass. However, Russia's annexation of Crimea in February 2014 and subsequent meddling in Eastern Ukraine has aggravated a sense of insecurity amongst NATO's Central and Eastern European allies, and prompted the Alliance to place a renewed emphasis on defense and deterrence in an Eastern Flank context. A clear illustration of this fact was NATO's decision in Wales to adopt the Readiness Action Plan, to ensure the Alliance will be able to react to crises swiftly and firmly.

The backbone of the Readiness Action Plan will be a new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force of some 4,000-6,000 troops, which should be able to deploy to the front line within a matter of days.[3] Credibility will hinge on the existence of appropriate reception facilities, logistics and equipment in each of the allied countries situated on the Eastern European "front-line." It will also require the construction of bases and fuel and ammunition depots that can be used on short notice. More particularly, streamlining the Alliance's command and control infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe will be key to the success of the Readiness Action Plan. Hence NATO's recent efforts to strengthen the role of Multinational Corps Northeast (Szczecin, Poland) in the planning, command, and control of Eastern European-related contingencies and in ensuring high readiness.

Pessimists might be tempted to portray the Readiness Action Plan and the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force as yet another "made-in-Brussels" political compromise that comes short of satisfying ongoing demands for a permanent presence of NATO troops in Central and Eastern Europe – and ultimately fails to provide a credible conventional deterrent against Russian military power. The fact that NATO's Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR) will not have full authority to call allied troops into the front-line – as some member states hoped he might – is arguably the greatest shortcoming of the Readiness Action Plan. However, the Alliance's insistence on "all year-round" rotations promises to give the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force a status just short of a permanent presence in Central and Eastern Europe.[4]

The rotations foreseen in a Readiness Action Plan/Very High Readiness Joint Task Force context will complement similar initiatives undertaken by individual allies. Most notably, the United States announced in late April 2014 the redeployment of 600 paratroopers from its 173rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (based in Vicenza) to

2   James Bergeron, "Back to the Future in Wales," *RUSI Journal* 159, No. 3 (June-July 2014): 4-8.
3   "Wales Summit Declaration," issued on September 5, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm
4   Author's interview with NATO official in Brussels, September 22, 2014.

Poland and the Baltic States.[5] These troops will be conducting training and exercises with the armed forces of Poland and the Baltic States and will remain in those countries "until further notice."[6] In addition, the US Air Force has decided to increase the number and size of F-16 rotations into its Aviation Detachment at Lask Air Base (Poland), as part of its post-Crimea effort to reassure Central and Eastern European allies.[7]

All in all, the all-year-round nature of Readiness Action Plan/Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and US force rotations could constitute an allied tripwire of sorts in Central and Eastern Europe. Although it remains to be seen how long these rotations will be maintained, for now they seem to have given the allies a *de facto* permanence in the area. Moreover, it is important to situate the Readiness Action Plan/Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and US initiatives within the framework of a broader trend, namely the increasing presence and visibility of NATO in Central and Eastern Europe following Russia's annexation of Crimea in February 2014. This trend has presided over a higher-tempo of NATO air patrols over the Baltic States, of naval patrols in the Baltic and Black Seas and more frequent and large-scale military exercises in Central and Eastern Europe.[8]

Admittedly, the United States has been the main driving political force behind many of the NATO initiatives aimed at reassuring the Central and Eastern European allies in a post-Crimea context. However, there have not been any major adjustments to US force posture in Europe. Although the Pentagon is currently conducting a review of US force posture and defense strategy in Europe, a significant reintroduction of US military assets to the European theater seems unlikely, not least as sequestration continues to impose budgetary constraints on the Pentagon.[9] The ongoing demand for US military engagement in the Middle East and Washington's intention to rebalance its strategic efforts in favor of the Asia-Pacific constitute additional obstacles to a significant reintroduction of US military assets into the European theater of operations.

In Washington's eyes, Russia's geopolitical resurgence in Eastern Europe represents just one of many global security challenges.[10] This may partly explain why the United States is adopting an increasingly indirect approach to European security, by placing partnerships up front and stepping up its calls to European allies to do more to uphold Europe's security order.[11] Indeed, if NATO's commitment to strengthen the security of the eastern flank is to be meaningful, it is imperative Europeans take defense more seriously. The pledge adopted by NATO's Heads of State and Government to halt any further decline in defense

---

5   "Vincenza-based Paratroops Deploying to Poland, Baltics," *Stars and Stripes*, April 22, 2014.

6   Author's interview with NATO official in Brussels, 12 June 2014.

7   Ibid

8   Luis Simón, "'Back to Basics' and 'Out of Area': Towards a Multi-purpose NATO," *RUSI Journal* 159, No. 3 (June-July 2014): 14-19

9   Multiple interviews with US and NATO officials in Washington and Brussels, June-September 2014. On the impact of sequestration upon the US military see Michael J. Meese, "Strategy and Force Planning in a Time of Austerity," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, No. 3 (Fall 2014), 19-29.

10   Michael G. Roskin, "The New Cold War," *Parameters* 44, No. 1 (Spring 2014): 5-9.

11   Sean Kay, "Rebalancing and the Role of Allies and Partners: Europea, NATO and the Future of American Landpower," in John Deni (ed.), *Augmenting Our Influence: Alliance Revitalization and Partner Development* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2014): 69-115.

spending, move towards the Alliance's 2 percent benchmark within a decade, and devote greater resources to equipment acquisition, research and development is a step in the right direction.[12]

While it remains unclear whether (most) NATO member states will abide by the promises undertaken at Wales, such promises must not be regarded in isolation. Since the annexation of Crimea, the European allies have devoted increasing resources to the Baltic Air Police Mission, to NATO naval task forces in the Baltic and the Black Sea, and to large-scale exercises and training initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe. Additionally, the new NATO Framework Nations Concept bears a strong European flavor.[13] By encouraging the formation of small groups of allies coordinated by a lead nation, the aim behind the Framework Nations Concept is to stimulate the joint development of forces and capabilities.[14] Of the various groupings developing in the framework of this initiative, two of them are particularly relevant to Europe's commitment to defense and deterrence in the eastern flank — the German-led and British-led initiatives.

A German-led, 10-nation strong grouping shall concentrate in logistics support; chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear protection; delivering fire-power from land, air, and sea; and deployable headquarters. Delivering fire-power from land, air, and sea is surely critical in an eastern flank context, as is the emphasis on logistical support and deployable headquarters, which dovetails with the Readiness Action Plan. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind Germany has doubled its presence in NATO's Multinational Corps Northeast headquarters in Szczecin (Poland) from 60 to 120 staff officers.[15] This should help NATO's plans to move that HQ – predominantly dedicated to territorial defense – from low to high readiness.

Additionally, a British-led, 7-nation Joint Expeditionary Force will be able to deploy rapidly into theatre and conduct full spectrum of operations, including high intensity.[16] Although the Joint Expeditionary Force is not assigned to any particular geographical theatre, its composition hints at a strong Baltic flavor. Indeed, by fostering interoperability between the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Norway, Denmark and the three Baltic States, the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force will help improve the Alliance's readiness and ability to project maritime and amphibious power through the North and Baltic Seas all the way to the Baltic States. This will represent an important contribution to the security of NATO's eastern flank.

Conceptualizing the "Eastern Flank"

As mentioned, the different initiatives adopted by NATO should be considered in terms of three military-strategic sub-theaters: the Baltic Sea; the Black Sea; and the continental flank. The Arctic area could be regarded as a fourth sub-theater of the eastern flank, as it will

---

12   "Wales Summit Declaration" (note 2).
13   Author's interview with NATO official in Brussels, June 12, 2014.
14   "Wales Summit Declaration" (note 2).
15   Jan Techau, "Germany's Budding Defense Debate," *Carnegie Europe*, June 17, 2014.
16   "Wales Summit Declaration" (note 2).

likely become increasingly important geopolitically, and presents a great degree of interconnectivity with the Baltic Sea.[17]

Currently, the continental flank is primarily confined to northeastern Europe, and NATO's efforts to strengthen defense and deterrence in Eastern Europe focus mainly on the Baltic States and Poland. This focus is because Ukraine constitutes a large continental buffer separating Russia from Central Europe (Slovakia, Hungary and southern Poland), and both Ukraine and Moldova "shield" the entire Balkan Peninsula from Russia. Should Kiev fall completely within Moscow's strategic orbit, the defense of Europe's eastern flank would become much more complicated, since the entire continental space running from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea – the so-called *intermarium* – would suddenly be in play. This possibility means avoiding a full military-strategic alignment between Russia and Ukraine, or Russia and Moldova (whatever the political modalities), should be a top priority for the West.

In some ways, Belarus' status as a geopolitical buffer between NATO and Russia resembles that of Ukraine. Although Minsk is politically close to Moscow, it still maintains an important degree of military autonomy in the sense Russian armed forces do not have a significant presence in Belarusian territory; nor are they in a position to transit Belarusian territory or airspace freely.[18] However, Russia has in recent months taken steps aimed at reinforcing defense cooperation with Belarus and expanding its military presence in that country.[19] As explained below, this trend is likely to aggravate Poland's geostrategic exposure to Russia and complicate the defense of NATO's eastern flank.

Admittedly, the Baltic Sea and the northeastern European flank are very much intertwined. However, its geostrategic supremacy in the Baltic Sea gives NATO two separate military supply lines to the "frontline" in the Baltic States: a maritime and "amphibious" communication line running through the North Atlantic and North Sea through the Baltic Sea; and a continental one running through Germany and Poland onto the Baltic States. In this regard, the British-led and German-led Framework Nations groupings shall help further substantiate the "maritime-amphibious" and "continental" foundations of Eastern European security.

Safeguarding NATO's Supremacy in the Baltic Sea

During the Cold War period, the Baltic Sea was a highly contested space, and constituted one of the main geostrategic "battlegrounds" between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. However, the integration of Poland and the Baltic States in NATO and the EU (and that of Sweden and Finland in the EU) has given the West a position of political-strategic supremacy in the Baltic to this day. In this regard, initiatives such as the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force, the reinforcement of NATO's Baltic Air Policing Mission and Standing Maritime Groups, and a more

---

17   On the geopolitical interconnectivity between the Baltic and Arctic spaces see James Rogers, "Geopolitics and the Wider North," *RUSI Journal* 157, No. 6 (December 2012): 42-53.

18   Jacek Bartosiak and Tomasz Szatkowski, "Geography of the Baltic Sea: a Military Perspective," *National Center for Strategic Studies* (December 2013, Warsaw).

19   Arkady Moshes, "Belarus' Renewed Subordination to Russia: Unconditional Surrender or Hard Bargain?," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 329 (August 2014).

ambitious program of exercises and training exercises in the area shall help cement the Alliance's position in the Baltic.

If NATO is to preserve its strategic supremacy in the Baltic Sea it must continue to strengthen military-to-military relations with Sweden and Finland, and seek to integrate those two countries further into its exercises and defense plans for the Baltic theater of operations. Sweden would add much value to the Alliance in the Baltic. Its territory envelops large swathes of the Baltic Sea, and the central location of Gotland makes that island of great geostrategic importance for the defense of the Baltic States.[20] Additionally, greater interoperability with Finland in the maritime and air domains and a strengthening of the naval, air and missile defense presence in Estonia would help the Alliance strengthen its ability to contain the Russian Navy in the Gulf of Finland in the event of hostilities, and thus complicate Moscow's access and freedom of movement in the broader Baltic.

The role of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in underpinning NATO's geostrategic supremacy in the Baltic Sea can not be overstated. If the security of the Baltic States were undermined, Russia's standing in the Arctic would be significantly enhanced. In turn, the Alliance's, own geostrategic position in the Baltic Sea could rapidly crumble, like a house of cards, and the Baltic would become again a contested geopolitical space. Against such a backdrop, Finland and Sweden (who have been getting closer to NATO recently) might be compelled to "swing back" into a quasi-neutral status. Hardening the defenses of the Baltic States and firming up NATO's presence there is, therefore, a geostrategic imperative for the Alliance. If the Baltics remain secure and firmly integrated within the West, then Sweden, Finland, and NATO's position in the Baltic Sea will also remain secure. Not least, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania straddle the Baltic Sea and the continental, northeastern European flank, and highlight the high-degree of interdependence between those two sub-theaters.

The Baltic States and Poland: NATO's Bulwark in Northeastern Europe

Europe's northeastern continental flank presents important geostrategic vulnerabilities. Chiefly, the Baltic States are highly exposed to conventional Russian land and air power. Russia could theoretically move easily into Estonia by land, air or sea, and into Latvia by land and air. In turn, the Russian enclave in Kaliningrad borders Lithuania and could serve to encircle the Baltic States geostrategically. The increasing military-strategic alignment between Moscow and Minsk should lead Polish and Baltic military planners to assume a high degree of Belarusian compliance with Russian demands for operational access in the event of a military conflict in northeastern Europe. This process threatens to leave Poland directly exposed to Russian military power and the Baltic States almost completely encircled by Russia and Russian proxies. Accordingly, the geopolitical evolution of Belarus has a great incidence upon the security of the Baltic States and Poland – an indeed upon that of Europe's northeastern flank.

---

20   Robert Nurick and Magnus Nordenman (eds.), "Nordic-Baltic Security in the 21st Century: The Regional Agenda and the Global Role," *Atlantic Council* (September 2011).

The defenses of Europe's northeastern continental flank will surely benefit from initiatives such as NATO's new Readiness Action Plan/Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, the US decision to rotate small contingents of land forces into Poland and the Baltics, the German-led Framework Nation grouping, the strengthening of the Alliance's command and control presence in Poland or that country's commitment to increase defense spending. These are steps in the right direction. The effective implementation of the Readiness Action Plan and the role of the German-led Framework Nation grouping will be of paramount importance, particularly when it comes to testing and improving the connectivity between Germany, Poland, and the Baltic States in an "Air-Land" context. This is, after all, the military-strategic heart of NATO's eastern flank.

However, the rotational, non-permanent nature of the Readiness Action Plan/Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and similar US initiatives could be insufficient to guarantee the defense of the Baltic States, which is complicated by the geography of northeastern Europe and the lack of a conventional military balance against Russian power. Unless these rotational forward deployments are reinforced by a credible Alliance strategy to deploy overwhelming air power quickly and follow-on land forces in the area, they will fail to constitute a reliable conventional deterrent against Russia in northeastern Europe in the short and medium term. NATO defense planners are already aware of this shortcoming, and are trying to identify ways of complementing and reinforcing the measures adopted in Wales.[21] However, a credible conventional follow-up would require a more radical transformation of allied strategy.

After decades of defense budgetary reductions and an emphasis on expeditionary warfare, the forces of most European countries have been hollowed out to such an extent they are unable to field corps or even divisions in some cases. This leads to the core of the problem: the existence of a dangerous gap in the Alliance's strategy for the defense of the eastern flank, between (part-time?) tripwires of sorts (i.e. the Readiness Action Plan/Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and US rotational deployments in the Baltics and Poland) and the promise of nuclear deterrence. To fill that critical gap, NATO and its Member States will need to think beyond readiness and devote considerable time and resources to rebuilding corps and division capabilities.

If NATO is to strengthen the conventional defenses and deterrence of the eastern flank the allies will need to boost their air and land presence in the Baltic States and Poland, and give such presence a more permanent form. An Alliance-wide effort to strengthen the theater missile defenses and air-defenses of the Baltic States and Poland would also be beneficial. However, any credible defense and deterrence strategy in the eastern flank would require a greater conventional effort and commitment on the part of the Western European allies. Greater military-strategic synergies between Germany and Poland would prove particularly valuable.

Given the ongoing presence of US and UK military forces in Germany and the position of Poland and Germany in Central Europe,

---

21   Author's interview with NATO defense official in Brussels, September 22, 2014.

these two countries constitute the geopolitical anchor between Western and Eastern Europe. In this regard, Germany's decisions to augment its command presence in Poland and lead a Framework Nation grouping are steps in the right direction, and should be complemented with greater efforts to improve the interoperability between the German and Polish armies and air forces. These measures would ensure that, in the case of a crisis, NATO would be able to draw on Western reinforcements rapidly to boost its position in Poland and the Baltic States.

The point is often made that conventional military power will not be of much help for NATO in the eastern flank, because Russia is using unconventional warfare techniques, such as cyber-attacks, under-cover assets ("little green men"), energy blackmail, financial penetration, agitation of ethnic Russian minorities, information warfare and so on.[22] This is an important point. In fact, the Alliance has already recognized it must strengthen the cyber-defenses, information warfare, counter-propaganda and intelligence capabilities of the Baltic States.[23] These are areas that transcend the military proper, and where greater cooperation between NATO and the EU would bring added value. An effort is also needed to help the Baltic States monitor foreign direct investment inflows from Russia, as well as to craft strategies to mitigate their energy dependence.

However, if there is a common thread to Russia's different unconventional warfare techniques it is its attempt to undermine the self-confidence and political morale of target countries. This possibility is precisely why a conventional military component in the Baltic States (and Poland) is important: it helps reassure those countries both militarily and, most importantly, politically. By conveying a strong message of strategic and political support from the West, a permanent conventional NATO footprint in the Baltics (and Poland) would complement existing rotational deployments and exercises and help further underpin the confidence of Baltic politicians, businessmen, and opinion formers, and empower them to turn away from (subtle) Russian means of penetration when targeted.

The Black Sea Balance after Russia's Annexation of Crimea

While Russia's annexation of Crimea and meddling in Eastern Ukraine may not have directly altered the military-strategic balance in northeastern Europe or the Baltic Sea, it could constitute a true game changer in the Black Sea.[24] Admittedly, Moscow's attempts to shore up its geopolitical standing in the Black Sea area pre-date the annexation of Crimea. Its 2008 invasion of Georgia and subsequent support to the breakaway regions of Abkhazia (situated on the Black Sea Basin) and South Ossetia are most illustrative in this regard. Insofar as Crimea is concerned, back in 2010 Russia had already secured the Ukrainian government's consent to maintain the lease of its Sevastopol naval base at least until 2042. However, the lease agreement signed by Kiev and Moscow imposed important restrictions on the Russian Black Sea Fleet,

22   For a good analysis of how to counter Russia's assymetrical threat to the Baltics see Jakub Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, "Limited War is Back," *The National Interest*, August 28, 2014.

23   Author's interview with NATO defense official in Brussels, September 22, 2014.

24   Igor Delanoe, "After the Crimean crisis: towards a greater Russian maritime power in the Black Sea," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 14, no. 3 (2014): 367-382.

particularly when it came to deploying additional warships to Sevastopol and replacing ageing platforms.[25]

Following the annexation of Crimea, Russia is now in a position to earmark any additional warships and resources to Sevastopol, as illustrated by the recent announcement by Admiral Viktor Chirkov (commander-in-chief of the Russian navy) that Russia's Black Sea Fleet will be bolstered by the arrival of 30 new warships over the next six years. In addition, the annexation of Crimea resulted in Russia's acquisition of the majority of the platforms and assets of the Ukrainian navy. More broadly, direct rule over Crimea represents a strengthening of Russia's geopolitical position in the northern rim of the Black Sea. A consolidation of *de facto* Russian control over Eastern Ukraine (whatever the political modalities) would only serve to further compound this fact. What does this mean for the Alliance?

Any NATO/Western strategy aimed at balancing Russian naval power in the Black Sea is complicated significantly by the legal regime regulating the transit of warships through the Turkish straits. According to the 1936 Montreux Convention, non-Black Sea nations must give Turkey a 15-day notice before sending any warships through the straits onto the Black Sea. Moreover, the access of non-Black Sea nations into the Black Sea must be limited to 21 straight days per warship, and a maximum aggregate tonnage of 45,000, with no vessel heavier than 15,000 tons.[26]

Admittedly, Turkey's control of the Dardanelles Strait, the Sea of Marmara and the Bosporus, and the fact NATO enjoys a position of naval and strategic advantage in the Eastern Mediterranean mean Russia is "bottled up" in the Black Sea anyway. However, if Russian power in the Black Sea is left unchecked and that sea becomes a "Russian lake," small and medium Black Sea countries might begin "bandwagoning" on Russia. Against such a backdrop, it would be far easier for Moscow to use its proxies in Transinistria as a way of destabilizing Moldova, weaken the Western link with Georgia and the Caucasus, as well as further strengthen its position in Bulgaria – where it already enjoys considerable economic and political influence. In other words, while Turkey might continue to thwart Russia from breaking into the Eastern Mediterranean and challenging the Alliance, Moscow could exploit its reinforced position in the Black Sea to consolidate and expand its influence over a number of (weaker) NATO allies and partners in southeastern Europe. How can the Alliance prevent such a scenario?

Turkey is certainly a key factor when it comes to the Black Sea – and its NATO membership is of enormous geostrategic value to the West. In this regard, the close political and military ties between Turkey and Romania represent an important check to the prospect of Russian hegemony in the area.[27] Greater Turkish-Romanian cooperation on naval and missile defense matters would be particularly important in this regard. Still, Ankara is wary of confronting Russia – a country on which it is heavily dependent in terms of energy. Moreover, Turkey sees the recent

---

25   John C.K. Daly, "After Crimea: The Future of the Black Sea Fleet," *The Jamestown Foundation*, May 22, 2014.

26   Stephen Starr, "How The 1936 Montreux Convention Would Help Russia In A Ukraine War," *International Business Times*, May 12, 2014.

27   Author's interview at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, May 30, 2014.

wave of hostility between the West and Russia as an opportunity to increase its own political leverage vis-à-vis both parties.[28]

The importance of the Turkish factor notwithstanding, NATO should take additional measures to reinforce its position in and around the Black Sea Basin. In late April 2014, the Alliance announced the deployment of six combat aircraft to Romania, along with 200 troops, pilots, mechanics and maintenance staff.[29] Barely four months later, Romania was designated "lead-nation" in an Alliance project to develop Ukraine's cyber defenses.[30] These are steps in the right direction. However, they should be further complemented with similar measures aimed at streamlining the Alliance's air and land posture in Bulgaria (arguably the Alliance's weakest link in southeastern Europe) and bolstering Sofia's cyber-security capabilities.[31] In addition to this, the Alliance should make it a top priority to enhance the theater missile defenses of Romania and Bulgaria and strengthen its military-to-military ties with Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

Insofar as the maritime domain is concerned, NATO should consider earmarking one of its Standing Maritime Groups to the Black Sea to facilitate its engagement in permanent naval exercises and training initiatives with the navies of Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and Ukraine. To mitigate the restrictions imposed by the legal regime of the Turkish Straits prohibiting non-Black Sea warships to stay on that sea for longer than 21 days, the Alliance might consider enhancing its presence at US Naval Support Facility in Souda Bay (Crete). This move would help reinforce the Alliance's presence in the Aegean Sea and make it easier to maintain a high tempo of naval rotations through the Turkish straits, as well as react quickly to Black Sea-related contingencies.

Implications for European and Transatlantic Capabilities

Admittedly, defense and deterrence are not the main concern of all European countries, many of whom continue to attach more importance to expeditionary operations and non-eastern flank contingencies. Indeed, geopolitical volatility in the broader Middle East and the shift of the world's geostrategic center of gravity towards the Indo-Pacific maritime axis underscore the ongoing importance of out-of-area concepts. However, the renewed focus on the eastern flank is likely to result in a reinvigoration of NATO and lead many European allies to give greater consideration to defense and deterrence in the context of their own national force planning processes. It is only logical these changes feed into European capability discussions within the Alliance, the EU, as well as in a national context.[32] This leads to a broader point: the crisis of the crisis management paradigm.

28   Author's interview at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, May 30, 2014.

29   "Allies Enhance NATO Air-policing Duties in Baltic States, Poland, Romania": http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_109354.htm

30   Author's interview with NATO official in Brussels, September 22, 2014.

31   On the risks of Russian penetration in Bulgaria see Rachel A. Dicke, Ryan C. Hendrickson and Steven Kut, "NATO's Mafia Ally: The Strategic Consequences of Bulgarian Corruption," *Comparative Strategy* 33, No. 3 (2014): 287-298.

32   On the need to link NATO and EU force and capability generation processes see Alexander Mattelaer, "Preparing NATO for the Next Defense-Planning Cycle," *RUSI Journal* 159, No. 3 (June-July 2014): 30-35.

The crisis management paradigm has thrived on the assumotion that Western military power can make free use of the "global commons" (sea, air, space and cyber-space) to transit into out-of-area operational theaters, thus allowing the West to engage in external crisis management and follow-up state-building initiatives. A related assumption was the main challenges to the global commons would come in the form of low-level transnational threats, such as terrorism, piracy, organized crime (including cyber-crime) and so on. Similarly, obstacles to crisis management and state-building endeavors would come not so much in the form of traditional enemies, but through irregular and asymmetric insurgencies.[33]

The crisis management paradigm has come to define the last two decades, which have seen the Alliance engage in military conflicts with relatively low-level adversaries and engage in follow-up state-building enterprises through a combination of military, civilian, security sector reform, political and economic initiatives. The emphasis on crisis management and state-building has led Western countries to emphasize expeditionary military concepts and capabilities, but also to look at ways to achieve greater coordination between military and civilian operational tools. These parameters applied to the interventions in the Western Balkans and Afghanistan, the main operational theaters for post-Cold War NATO.

The crisis management paradigm was underpinned by Western global strategic and political supremacy, and it has organized the way in which Americans and Europeans have thought about military power over the past twenty-five years. Crisis management has had a pervasive influence upon Alliance doctrine and capability debates since the end of the Cold War. It has also been central to European military transformation, having come to organize the strategic culture, operational doctrine and approach to capability development for most European countries over the past two decades.[34]

Today, the crisis management paradigm itself is in crisis – and NATO's increasing focus on defense and deterrence in Eastern Europe is just one manifestation of a deeper strategic trend. Reasons behind the "crisis of crisis management" are manifold, and include the return of great power competition (both in Europe and globally), intervention fatigue in the West, as well as declining defense budgets in the United States and Europe. Another key factor in this regard is the development and proliferation of so-called "anti-access area denial" capabilities, aimed at denying Western military forces access and freedom of movement in a given theater of operations. Such capabilities are being developed primarily by China and Russia, but are also being exported to countries like Iran and Syria.[35] The anti-access area denial challenge includes kinetic (i.e. ballistic and cruise missiles) as well as non-kinetic capabilities (i.e. cyber and anti-space weapons).

---

33 Antulio J Echevarria II, "After Afghanistan: Lessons for NATO's Future Wars," *RUSI Journal* 159, No. 3 (June-July 2014): 20-23.

34   Terry Terriff, Frans Osinga, and Theo Farrell (eds.), *A Transformation Gap? American Innovations and European Military Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

35   For a good overview of the A2/AD challenge see John Gordon IV and John Matsumura, "The Army's Role in Overcoming Anti-Access and Area-Denial Challenges," *RAND Corporation, Report for the US Army* (2013).

Mounting defense budgetary pressures and an increasingly contested global political and strategic environment are underpinning a rebalance within Western military strategy, from intervention towards defense, deterrence, intelligence, prevention and military diplomacy. Against such a backdrop, the West may need to move away from the assumption of unhindered global access and freedom of movement and think more about how to preserve Western supremacy in the commons (sea, air, space and cyber-space) and how to use the commons to project power in a contested environment. While this does not mean the era of Western expeditionary military interventions is over, long-lasting military engagements will tend to be avoided and "surgical" forms of intervention prioritized, i.e. precision strikes, special operation forces, cyber-attacks, etc.

The United States has already begun to grapple with the implications of the crisis of the crisis management paradigm. Indeed, the Pentagon's growing emphasis on building partnership capacity reflects a prioritization of defense diplomacy and prevention over intervention.[36] In turn, concepts like airsea battle, conventional prompt global strike, missile and space defense or directed-energy weapons can help overcome the anti-access area denial challenge as well as strengthen deterrence and defense.[37]

European debates on capability development must also transcend external crisis management and adopt a multi-task mindframe. To strengthen defense and deterrence in an eastern flank context, Europeans should pay greater attention to air-land capabilities (i.e. air combat, air defense, heavy armor and artillery, etc.), cyber-defense, strategic and theater missile defense or energy-based weaponry. Insofar as power projection is concerned, fewer resources should be devoted to strategic airlift and sealift, air-to-air refueling or tactical airlift. These capabilities are broadly aimed at enabling expeditionary operations in permissive strategic environments, and are likely to become less relevant as the external crisis management paradigm wears down. In this regard, greater emphasis should be placed on capabilities and concepts that can both contribute to assert (Western) strategic supremacy in the global commons and help project military power in more challenging operational environments, such as long-range strike, air and sea combat, undersea warfare, stealthy aerial combat systems, cyber warfare, space defense and anti-satellite weapons, etc.

Conclusions

Throughout 2014, NATO has adopted a number of measures aimed at consolidating its position in Europe's eastern flank in the context of an increasingly assertive Russia. Such measures have included the creation of a 4,000-6,000 strong Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, the streamlining of the Alliance's command, control and logistical

---

36   Deni (ed.), *op. cit.*, note 10.
37   Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010); Amy F. Woolf, "Conventional Prompt Global Strike and Long-Range Ballistic Missiles: Background and Issues,"*Congressional Research Service*, 26 August 2014; Mark Gunzinger and Christopher Dougherty, *Changing the Game: The Promise of Directed-Energy Weapons* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2012); Tod Harrison, *The Future of MilSatCom* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2013).

infrastructure, and a series of rotational force deployments into Central and Eastern Europe. These measures constitute important steps. However, if they are to create a lasting impact upon European security, they should be complemented by a more permanent and sizable allied military presence in Central and Eastern Europe and a broader effort to regenerate the conventional military power of the European allies. The former will require structural changes in both force planning and capability development.

Admittedly, a return of a Cold War-type confrontation with Russia over Eastern Europe could weaken the West's standing elsewhere especially at a time when the fulcrum of global geopolitics is rapidly shifting towards the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East is beset by mounting instability. Not least, an escalation of tensions between the West and Russia could push the latter towards China and seriously undermine the security of the Western-based global order. However, this is precisely why the transatlantic allies should focus on hardening defense and deterrence in Europe's eastern flank. For one thing, Russia might interpret any Western attempts to reach an accommodation as a sign of weakness, and an invitation to further expansion. This interpretation could eventually require a greater commitment of Western strategic and financial resources to Eastern European security in the medium and long term. Moreover, if the West is ever to establish any sort of meaningful dialogue with Russia on global security issues, it must do so from a position of strength. Thus, hardening the defenses of Eastern Europe must be a pre-condition to any such dialogue.