



## The Significance of High Readiness Forces for NATO Credibility

Wojciech Lorenz

*The outcome of the meeting of NATO leaders in Brussels should be to accelerate investment in high readiness forces needed for collective defence and expedition operations. Ensuring the Alliance's ability to conduct both types of missions at the same time is a prerequisite for maintaining its integrity and credibility, key to the sense of security of all its members. The development of these capacities by European countries is essential to strengthening the transatlantic link.*

One of the U.S. administration's stances ahead of a special NATO meeting in Brussels this week was that European Alliance members must increase defence spending to at least 2% of GDP. NATO already made the pledge in 2014 but has now decided to support it with national plans to increase the spending and will review them annually. The new funds should be used to build a bigger pool of forces capable of carrying out both collective defence missions and expeditionary activities. The need to be able to perform both tasks at the same time will require not only investment in armament but also an increase in the number of troops at high readiness.

**Limited Military Capabilities.** According to guidelines adopted in 2006, NATO should be capable of carrying out two major corps-size operations (about 50,000 soldiers each) and six smaller division-size (up to 15,000 troops) or brigade-size (3-5,000) missions. To this end, its members should have between 25 and 40 brigades (8 to 12 divisions) of ground troops at high readiness. Although the European Alliance states combined have 1.8 million active service troops, they can mobilise only about 20 brigades (up to 100,000 soldiers) for joint operations.

In the last decade, the pool of these troops has not increased. European NATO states also lost part of their potential for collective defence missions. As a result of the financial crisis and the adjustment of forces to expeditionary missions, they reduced, for example, the number of tanks from 14,000 to less than 7,000 and armoured personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles from 33,000 to 21,000.

**NATO Adaptation after the Annexation of Crimea.** Russia's takeover of Crimea forced NATO to change its force posture. The Alliance, which after the Cold War altered its wide defence strategy into the ability to deploy troops to a threatened region, now has decided to deploy multinational groupings of troops to Poland and the Baltic States. The 1,000-strong battle groups are expected to strengthen the Alliance's ability to deter Russia by signalling that NATO is ready to swiftly respond to any aggression towards its members.

The Allies also strengthened the NATO Response Force (NRF), a rapid-reaction force that in a crisis can be deployed to a threatened region. These multinational troop units consist of three land brigades with the necessary elements of other types of forces. The first unit is equipped with the highest readiness troops (VJTF) and is able to deploy to a crisis area within a few days. Two others should be ready to operate within 30 and 45 days, respectively. If NATO needs to mobilise troops faster or in greater numbers, it would have

to ask for additional support from its member states. In practice, only the UK, France, and Germany have the potential to mobilise and deploy forces of division size but it could take up to six months.

To fill in the gaps in its capabilities, the Alliance announced at the Warsaw Summit in July 2016 an increase in the number of high readiness troops and investment in heavier equipment and capabilities to engage in high-intensity warfare. NATO must, among other things, invest in modern weapons, including ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance), air defence, and precision-strike munitions to be able to neutralise Russian systems (A2/AD) blocking Alliance forces' freedom of manoeuvre during collective defence missions, especially on the Eastern Flank. Even with the increase in defence spending, such plans will require at least a few years to bear fruit.

Faster changes can take place in the command structure, which has been adjusted since 2014 to collective defence missions. With support from NATO, a new division headquarters is being formed in Poland and Romania. The readiness of the Multinational Corps North East (MNC NE) in Szczecin was increased and the headquarters will reach full operational capability by mid-2017. NATO is also reviewing its command structure and analysing whether it is capable of ensuring operational control over the Atlantic.

**Crisis Response and Defence of Territory.** While trying to adjust its forces and command elements to the threat from Russia, NATO has also agreed investments in capabilities for expeditionary operations. In 2016, European NATO members had over 26,000 soldiers involved in various missions, including more than 5,000 engaged in fighting and non-combat missions against the Islamic State (ISIL/ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, nearly 5,000 in the *Resolute Support* mission in Afghanistan and around 3,000 in KFOR in Kosovo. Although 10,000 troops fewer than at the peak of the Afghanistan ISAF operation, European states seem to have reached their limits. Their limited high-readiness resources are shared between expeditionary missions, maintaining an enhanced presence on the Eastern Flank, maintaining a reinforced NRF, and, as in the case of France, counter-terrorism operations on their own territory. The lack of investment in expeditionary capabilities may lead to internal NATO competition for resources and the subsequent political tensions could undermine Alliance cohesion.

**U.S. High-Readiness Contribution.** Even though the U.S. has in the last decade reduced the number of its troops in Europe from 98,000 to about 70,000, NATO's ability to deter Russia and to perform expeditionary missions is largely based on American military resources. After the withdrawal of the last armoured brigade from Europe in 2013, just two U.S. Army brigades (airborne and motorized infantry) were permanently stationed in Alliance states. After Russia's annexation of Crimea, the U.S. deployed a new armoured brigade (ABCT) to Europe on a rotational basis and re-created some equipment and armament stocks that can facilitate the transfer of another brigade and necessary support units to form a full division. To enable it to operate on the Eastern Flank, the U.S. plans to place elements of the division headquarters in Poznan. The U.S. also has an airborne brigade ready to support Europe, as well as the capability to quickly deploy Marines to the Black Sea region and to Norway. The U.S. expects this support to be accompanied by more dynamic development of the potential of its European allies and their greater commitment to strengthening common security, including through out-of-area missions.

**Perspectives.** Increasing the number of soldiers at high readiness will be one of the Alliance's priorities in the years to come. The ability to support the NRF with additional troops would limit Russia's capacity to use regional military superiority for intimidation and coercion. In the event of a crisis on the Eastern Flank, NATO would also be able to quickly mobilise larger units, which should significantly strengthen the credibility of conventional deterrence. At the same time, NATO must increase its capacity for expeditionary missions, perceived by the U.S. and many European Alliance members as an important security instrument. The development of both capabilities to operate at the same time will be a prerequisite for strengthening the transatlantic links and maintaining NATO cohesion and credibility.

It is in Poland's interest to support these initiatives, both in NATO and the EU framework because they would increase the overall pool of troops at high readiness in Europe. Although in the EU format such forces are intended only for expeditionary missions, in case NATO Article 5 (collective defence) is invoked, NATO states could redirect their troops from EU groupings to carry out the Alliance mission. Poland, which contributes to rapid-reaction units such as the Visegrad Battle Group (on standby in 2019), should consider reactivating the Weimar Battle Group with France and Germany. Then, it could support both the development of expeditionary capabilities and a bigger pool of high-readiness troops with those allies, crucial to collective defence operations.