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Defence Priorities for NATO's Northern Flank

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In response to the growing activity of the Russian Navy and Air Force in the North Atlantic, NATO is strengthening its ability to conduct a collective-defence mission in Northern Europe. The priority for the countries of the region is to augment the sea and air capabilities. Given differences in threat perception and limited funds, some investment in land forces has been postponed, which may hinder their use on the Eastern Flank of the Alliance if needed.

NATO's Northern Flank countries (Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Iceland, Norway, the United Kingdom) are signalling an increase in the activity of the Russian Navy and Air Force in the North Atlantic and Arctic. In February, Norwegian intelligence revealed that in 2018 Russia practised an attack on a radar installation on the island of Vardø, in the north of Norway. The authorities in Oslo also accused Russia of blocking the GPS signal in the north of the country during NATO's *Trident Juncture 2018* manoeuvres, endangering all maritime and air traffic. The UK revealed that in 2017, the Royal Navy had to respond 33 times to Russian ships approaching British territorial waters. In 2010, there was only one such incident.

The Nature of the Military Threats. Russia's doctrine, military exercise scenarios, as well as investment in armament and military infrastructure, indicate that in a conflict with NATO in any region (e.g., the Baltic or Black sea) Russia could pose a direct threat to Northern Flank countries. According to Norwegian analysts, Russia has reintroduced its "bastion" concept, which envisages a military buffer zone around strategic bases on the Kola Peninsula. The area includes the northern part of Norway and its territorial waters, which would be covered by Russian anti-access systems (A2/AD), hindering the defence of Norwegian territory. The dislocation of defensive systems and investment in military capabilities indicate that other NATO members in the region also feel threatened by Russia. Russian planes and ships equipped with cruise missiles could threaten bases where nuclear weapons are stored for NATO's nuclear deterrent mission (in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and the UK). The list of potential Russian targets includes ports, airports, and arms depots for U.S. armoured brigades (in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany) that can be deployed to Europe in a crisis. Russian submarines could seriously hinder the transport of reinforcements through the North Atlantic. They could also be used to interfere with or cut fibre-optic cables connecting Europe with North America, with potentially serious economic consequences.

NATO Adaptation to Threats in the North. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO's Northern Flank countries have supported the Alliance's adaptation to possible threats in the Baltic and the Black Sea region. They have contributed troops to reinforced rapid reaction forces (NRF), augmented air-policing missions, and deployed soldiers to Poland and the Baltic States as part of multinational battalion-size battle groups. NATO and the U.S. have also gradually increased their capability to detect threats and conduct a collective-defence mission on the Northern Flank. In 2018, the Allies decided to reinstate the command for the Atlantic (JFC Norfolk), which will oversee naval operations with a recreated U.S. 2nd Fleet. The Allies have also expanded infrastructure (bases in Iceland and Norway) to support air and naval operations in the region.

Planners rate a surprise Russian land forces attack on Norway as unlikely, so the Alliance has not deployed multinational troops there. However, to demonstrate the credibility of its defence doctrine, it tested the capability to deploy rapid-reaction forces to Norway during the *Trident Juncture 2018* manoeuvres. Additionally, the U.S. established a rotational presence of two companies of Marines in Norway (about 350 soldiers each), which would support the deployment of a larger Marines task force during a crisis. The U.S. has also replenished equipment stockpiles in Norway, which could sustain thousands of Marines conducting an operation for up to 30 days across Scandinavia.

To increase the capability to conduct a collective-defence mission both on the Northern and Eastern flanks the Allies agreed to contribute larger forces for common operations. In line with the Readiness Initiative (“4x30”), approved in 2018, the Allies have committed to have by 2020 30 medium and heavy manoeuvre battalions (10 brigades), 30 fighter aircraft squadrons (about 400 aircraft), and 30 naval combat vessels, all ready to use in less than 30 days.

However, inadequate defence spending by most of the Northern Flank countries will make it difficult for them to support this initiative, especially with land forces. The only country in the region that allocates at least 2% of GDP to defence is the UK. In 2018, the rest of the Allies were well below the 2% level agreed by the Alliance: Denmark was at 1.23%, the Netherlands at 1.35%, Belgium at 0.9%, and Norway at 1.62%. Although in absolute terms spending has been increasing, it seems unlikely that it will reach 2% of GDP by 2024, as pledged at 2014 summit.

Investment Priorities. The Northern Flank countries, except for Iceland, which does not have armed forces, give priority to the modernisation of their air forces. Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and the UK decided to invest in 5th-generation fighter planes (F-35). By 2024, the number of such aircraft in the region is expected to increase from 30 currently to around 200 (including about 50 U.S. F35s stationed in the UK). Thanks to its reduced radar signature, the F-35 will be able to operate more effectively within range of the Russian A2/AD systems. They will also provide additional capability to combat Russian cruise missiles. With the new aircraft, Belgium and the Netherlands will continue to participate in NATO’s nuclear-sharing programme, which is an important element of Allied nuclear deterrence. However, the investments will consume a significant portion of their budgets allocated for modernisation (35% in Norway and around 40% in Belgium). Due to the high cost of the weapons system, the Allies will procure fewer aircraft than expected by NATO military planners.

The Allies will try to improve their detection and combat capabilities through multinational cooperation and the use of modern technology. Norway and the UK have decided to acquire nine P-8 Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft (UK 5, Norway 4). Increasing the capability to detect and combat ships is part of an initiative by 13 NATO countries—Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Turkey, UK, U.S.—that in 2018 signed an agreement to develop maritime unmanned systems.

The modernisation plans of the Northern Flank countries also include the reinforcement of land forces. However, the Netherlands and Denmark—the only countries that disclose information about the requirements imposed on them by the Alliance as part of the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP)—admit that are unable to meet the expectations regarding the size, armament, and level of readiness of such troops. They have also delayed decisions about investments in some heavy land capabilities, crucial to any collective-defence operation on the Eastern Flank.

Conclusions for Poland. Given their geographical location, NATO’s Northern Flank states can receive U.S. reinforcements and deploy forces to Poland faster than many other Allies. Therefore, it is in Poland’s interest to develop a wider concept of regional cooperation that will stimulate sufficient investment in land forces and strengthen the political and military mechanisms facilitating their deployment to the Eastern Flank. The priority should be given to cooperation with the Netherlands, which has the second-largest military potential in the region after the UK. Since the Allies offer support to each other on the basis of common interests, as well as under the principle of reciprocity, Poland could analyse potential new forms of cooperation, such as those within the framework of rapid reaction forces (including amphibious forces), naval and air units, which are key to the security of the Northern Flank states. Poland could reconsider the abandoned idea of joining the Icelandic Air Policing mission. It may also be necessary to more effectively signal Poland’s contribution to NATO exercises on the Northern Flank, as its involvement in *Trident Juncture 2018* was not effectively promoted.