



NATO Regional Defence Plans Key to Credibility of Deterrence

Wojciech Lorenz

New defence plans and changes in NATO's force structure are intended to ensure the ability to deter Russia even if the U.S. is involved militarily in the Indo-Pacific. However, the credibility of deterrence will require strengthening the military potential of European allies and the development of the ability to fight a large-scale collective defence operation based on the multi-domain operations doctrine. Due to its potential, Poland has a chance to become one of the leaders in the implementation of this concept.

At their summit in Vilnius on 11-12 July, NATO leaders approved regional defence plans that are intended to ensure the ability to respond to the threat from Russia from multiple directions simultaneously. This year, the Alliance is also expected to implement a new force model (NFM) that will enable it to respond to threats in accordance with the approved plan. The decisions are the result of a change in NATO's military and political strategy and the recognition of Russia as the most serious threat to the security of the Alliance members, and terrorism as the main asymmetric threat.

Main Assumptions. The plans are secret, but the main assumptions of the deterrence concept that became the basis for their development are known. The concept takes into account both types of threats, but it will have the greatest impact on the ability to deter Russia. Although the Alliance has been strengthening deterrence and defence mechanisms since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the outdated 2010 strategy and plans that assumed the use of relatively small forces did not ensure the ability to deter Russia in several regions at the same time. In 2020, the Allies approved the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), which became part of the strategy adopted in Madrid in 2022. In line with NATO's new military strategy, which is dubbed forward defence, the Alliance is to prevent the enemy from gaining an advantage in any geographical region and operational domain (land, air, sea, space, cyberspace, and special forces operations) already in the initial phase of the

crisis. For this purpose, the allies have developed a strategic plan that assumes the need for coordinated defence of the entire territory of the Alliance and plans for individual operational domains. They are complemented by regional defence plans for three operational areas: the North (the European part of the Arctic and the Atlantic), the Centre (the region of Western Europe above the Alps and Central Europe), and the South (the Black and Mediterranean Sea regions). They allow the military response to be adjusted to various geographical conditions that may influence the nature of the threat (e.g., the countries of the Northern and Eastern Flanks are more exposed to an attack by land forces). The Alliance will implement the concept of multi-domain operations (coordinated action in all domains) to maintain the advantage over the adversary at every level of escalation. It will rely on the ability to quickly concentrate forces, but also on the long-range precision-strike capability that can be applied from various directions. This will make it easier to create a regional advantage in firepower without having to balance the enemy's quantitative potential. The ability to respond simultaneously to threats from all directions will facilitate strengthening the political cohesion of the Alliance, which determines the scale and speed of the response.

Changes in NATO's Military Potential. The ability to act according to the plans requires the allies to contribute significantly greater forces to NATO than before. Before, the plans assumed that for the deterrence the allies would rely

PISM BULLETIN

mainly on NATO's Response Force (NRF), multinational forces, which numbered about 40,000 troops (including three brigades of land forces). The NFM assumes that the allies will maintain at least 300,000 troops in a state of high readiness (able to act within 30 days). With regard to individual types of armed forces, NATO's goal is to have 100 land brigades, 1,400 combat aircraft, and 250 large surface ships and submarines maintained in high readiness. Some of the troops will become part of the Allied Reaction Force (ARF), which will probably operate on a similar basis to the NRF. The mission of this multinational force will be to provide rapid support in any region and demonstrate the determination of the entire Alliance to act. The remaining part of the forces will be the units of individual allies, which, according to the plans, have been assigned to operate in designated geographical regions and countries.

Even though European NATO countries declare that they have at least 100 mechanised and armoured brigades, about 1,500 combat aircraft, and more than 200 ships, this potential must be prepared to defend the allies from Russia. Decades of focusing on crisis-response missions, inadequate defence spending, and support for Ukraine have resulted in the allies lacking, among other things, ammunition, tanks, artillery, and infantry fighting vehicles. The ability to conduct a large collective defence operation also requires investments in, among others, communication, reconnaissance, air and missile defence systems, and long-range precision-strike capabilities. Because Russia's military potential has been weakened by the war in Ukraine, the Alliance countries have time to make the necessary investments.

The new plans will not change the deployment of Alliance troops, including increasing the permanent presence on the Eastern Flank. NATO, strengthening its deterrence, has already deployed multinational battle groups in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Hungary. Although the Alliance assumes the possibility of increasing them to the brigade level, only Germany, which commands the unit in Lithuania, and Canada, which commands the forces in Latvia, have decided to do so. The U.S. administration, however, considers American involvement in Europe to be sufficient and it can even be assumed that some of the troops deployed in 2022 will be withdrawn.

Impact on Intra-NATO Relations. Changes in NATO's force structure introduce a new division of responsibilities and costs between the U.S. and other allies. The ability to use forces within 30 days, which is crucial to deterring Russia, will be provided primarily by the troops present in Europe. The main responsibility for conventional deterrence will therefore rest with European countries. The guaranteed contribution of the United States will be based on forces stationed in Europe and army prepositioned stocks (APS), enabling the rapid transfer of additional troops. In the case of land forces, the U.S. will provide less than 10% (6-8 brigades) of NATO's total high readiness potential. Regardless of the possibility of the U.S. sending much more support, European countries will be able

to argue that they are taking greater responsibility for their own security. This will weaken the arguments of advocates of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Europe, who claim that the United States bears disproportionately high costs of defending NATO allies. The Alliance will also be better prepared for possible U.S. involvement in the Indo-Pacific, which may limit the American ability to provide support to Europe.

Regional plans will also stimulate the development of cooperation between European allies. There will be new justification for the joint development of capabilities that affect the security of entire regions. The Nordic countries have already announced the intention to integrate their air forces, and 19 allies have joined Sky Shield, an air and missile defence initiative promoted by Germany.

Conclusions and Prospects. Adopting new plans and supporting them with a new NATO force model may increase the political and practical importance of the European pillar of the Alliance. However, this requires European countries to strengthen their potential and develop the ability to conduct a large-scale collective defence mission based on the doctrine of multi-domain operations. For this purpose, it will be necessary to increase the scale and frequency of exercises organised by NATO, coordinated with national exercises with the participation of key allies, develop infrastructure facilitating the transfer and stationing of troops, and develop command structures, especially on the Northern and Eastern Flanks. The scope and pace of necessary actions may be influenced by continuing differences in the assessment of the threat from Russia and its ability to rebuild its potential. The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), which enables the Alliance to set the goals for the development of capabilities by the allies and assess their implementation, will remain a crucial instrument of stimulating investments. Additional pressure may be exerted by the new defence pledge adopted in Vilnius, which indicates that 2% of GDP on defence per year is the necessary minimum, and not a goal to be pursued. Problems with inadequate spending levels and slow investments in military potential by European allies may undermine the credibility of deterrence and lead to political tensions within the Alliance.

Although the commonality of interests between European countries will be strengthened, this will not significantly limit their cooperation with the U.S. The war in Ukraine demonstrated that the American military presence in Europe is necessary to strengthen the allies' sense of security, mobilise them to act, and deter Russia. U.S. leadership will be essential to implementing the concept of multi-domain operations. It will also ensure the ability to coordinate action across the entire NATO area and reduce the risk that regional cooperation will be pursued at the expense of the political cohesion of the entire NATO (so-called security regionalisation).

Due to its potential, Poland has a chance to become one of the leaders in implementing the concept of multi-domain operations. This will be the basis for long-term military cooperation with the U.S, but also with key European allies such as UK, France and Germany.