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NATO SUMMIT 2016: From reassurance to deterrence. What's really at stake?

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The forthcoming NATO Summit in Warsaw is intended to boost NATO's presence in the east and south of Europe in order to tackle the instability caused by Russia in Ukraine and the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Many of the issues that will be decided by the NATO leaders on July 8th and 9th – such as a military reinforcement of the alliance's eastern flank and a strengthening of EU-NATO cooperation on cyber and hybrid warfare, the refugee crisis and stabilisation missions – have already been broadly discussed and agreed upon. A majority of this year's commitments undertaken at the NATO Summit will therefore be of tactical rather than strategic nature.

However, many security experts doubt whether the new military boost is sufficient to deter Russia from its military adventurism. While the level of US engagement in Europe and the commitment of the European partners to enhance their own defence spending will be under scrutiny, it is unlikely that the current (im)balance in engagement will see any drastic changes in the near future. First of all, it is rather unlikely that any long-

term defence commitments on either side of the Atlantic will be decided during a year in which the US holds a presidential election and the UK decides on its future outside the EU. Secondly, the discussions over some issues of real importance

for long-term stability in the Euro-Atlantic space have been suspended due to tense relations between NATO and Russia. A process of reflection over the ways of engaging Russia, debates concerning the state of the arms control agreements and the fate of the anti-missile defence system in Europe are unfortunately not on the summit's agenda. Just weeks ahead of the summit, there is little hope for a de-escalation of tensions with Russia and uncertainty about Europe's future stability and security is growing.

NATO-Russia relations – defence, deterrence and open dialogue

A significant upgrade of NATO military presence in the Baltic states and Poland is a key issue that will be discussed in detail at the Warsaw Summit. A deployment of four multinational battalions – three in the Baltic states and

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The main question that will inevitably arise at the Summit is whether the proposed deterrence posture in the eastern flank is a credible one and will provide a sufficient force to counter Russian conventional forces in the event of a surprise attack.

As discussions continue about EU-NATO cooperation in the Mediterranean Sea and potentially Libya, it looks like NATO's strategy is going to be driven not only by what is happening in the east, with Russia, but also in the Mediterranean region.

NATO is currently discussing how to step up its response to the European migrant crisis by expanding its presence in the Mediterranean region.

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one in Poland – was agreed at the last meeting of NATO defence ministers held on June 13th and 14th. These battalions (each of 800-1,000 troops) are part of a much bigger shift in NATO's defence and deterrence posture, including a larger NATO Response Force (40,000 troops), a new rapid reaction Spearhead Force (5,000 troops ready for deployment within days) as well as eight new headquarters in the eastern part of the alliance.

In addition to that, starting in 2017, Washington plans to begin continuous rotations of an armoured brigade (of approximately 4,200 US troops) in eastern and central Europe. The White House approved the broad contours of the plan, designed to start in February 2017, when it signed off on the \$3.4 billion European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) budget in February, leaving the specifics to the Pentagon. However, the US Congress still has to sign off on the request. While boosting military spending to counter Russia has bipartisan support, the overall budget might be contentious in an election year. For this reason, the US initiative might not be discussed officially at the NATO Summit.

Another reason for keeping the US plans unofficial is related to the Russian reaction to the proposed build-up of NATO forces on the eastern flank. Russian officials argue that the US decision violates the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, a

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document that says the alliance will not position substantial, permanent combat forces on Russia's borders. While "substantial" has not been defined, alliance officials say the size of the forces being considered is in keeping with the agreement. The current Pentagon plans include 4,200 troops rotated in and out of six countries in eastern and central Europe and new military equipment permanently based in eastern Europe (250 tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles and Paladin self-propelled howitzers as well as more than 1,700 additional wheeled vehicles and trucks).

In some respects, the proposed rotational deployments represent a considerable improvement upon the assurance and deterrence steps undertaken by the US and several NATO allies since the last summit in Wales. However, even before the official announcement was made, military experts pointed to multiple shortcomings regarding both the size and suitability of the suggested US armoured brigade.

In comparison to the initial plans for reassurance, the boost of NATO forces might sound encouraging to eastern NATO allies but security analysts question whether the currently proposed deployments are sufficient as an insurance policy against Russian belligerence. In June 2014, President Barack Obama announced the **European Reassurance Initiative**, a key element of his administration's strategy to counter Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which was launched just three months earlier. The initiative included a call to Congress for nearly a billion dollars in funding, which Congress authorised for 2015 and repeated in 2016. After the pivot of the US military engagement towards

Southeast Asia and the Middle East, the ERI was intended to demonstrate the commitment of Washington to the security of NATO allies and partners in Europe. Yet the initiative's execution put in question the seriousness of that commitment.

While countries like Poland, the Baltic states and Romania have appreciated the ERI, they are also aware that the quantity of US forces deployed so far, mostly through exercises and training activities, were just symbolic detachments. Limited US deployments (for the most part marine infantry units, a limited number of mechanised units, and handfuls of aircraft and ships) have been juxtaposed by Russian mobilisations for exercises and shows of force involving up to 30,000 troops in the regions that border Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states.

In addition, gaps between the US deployments and the inconsistent presence of armoured units potentially offer a window of opportunity to Russian adventurism in eastern Europe. Continuous provocative actions by Russia's military forces pushed the Obama administration to request a significant increase in funding for the ERI in its budget proposal for 2017. Under the 2017 proposal, the ERI would expand from roughly \$789 million in 2016 to just over \$3.4 billion in 2017. Much of this increase in funding would be used to pay for the rotational deployment of the armoured brigade.

Yet security experts point out multiple weaknesses not only in the current NATO posture but also in the planned increase in the rotational military presence of up to 4,200 troops. For instance, in a series of war games conducted between summer

2014 and spring 2015, the RAND Corporation examined the shape and probable outcome of a near-term Russian invasion of the Baltic states. The games' findings were unambiguous: *"As currently postured, NATO cannot successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members"...* *"Across multiple games using a wide range of expert participants in and out of uniform playing both sides, the longest it has taken Russian forces to reach the outskirts of the Estonian and/or Latvian capitals of Tallinn and Riga, respectively, is 60 hours."*¹

Fortunately, the study also found that avoiding such a swift catastrophic failure does not appear to require a Herculean effort. A force of about seven brigades, including three heavy armoured brigades – adequately supported by airpower, land-based fires, and other enablers on the ground ready to fight at the onset of hostilities – could suffice to prevent Russia from rapidly overrunning the Baltic states. While not sufficient to mount a sustained defence of the region or to achieve NATO's ultimate end state of restoring its members' territorial integrity, such a posture would fundamentally change the strategic picture as seen from Moscow. The authors of the study estimate that crafting this deterrent posture would cost \$2.7 billion per annum, which is cheap compared to the costs of failing to defend NATO's most exposed and vulnerable allies.

1. Shlapak, David A. and W. Johnson, Michael. *Reinforcing Deterrence of NATO's Eastern Flank*. Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics, RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf.

The currently proposed increase in ERI funding and US military presence in Europe signals a growing understanding in Washington that the alliance needs to move to a new normal in eastern Europe and that the US must lead the deterrence efforts there. But again, according to military analysts, the size of the commitment – deployment of only one armoured brigade – does little to provide a real deterrent.² Among various shortcomings mentioned, for instance, in the analysis by Carnegie Europe is the fact that the brigade will be split between six countries: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania. This dispersed deployment would likely prevent the brigade from easily and quickly achieving mass and hence its full potential during a crisis. Another worrying issue is that the US brigades in Europe lack a dedicated intermediate-level command-and-control element. There is currently no US divisional or corps-level command in Europe and a division headquarters sent from the US might not arrive in time in the case of an attack. Moreover, ERI funding has so far not been included in the base budget of the US Department of Defense; instead it is part of the overseas contingency operational budget. This inhibits the Department of Defense from planning efforts for future budgeting, not to mention the fact that the ERI might be reviewed altogether by the new US administration. As the Republican presumptive nominee, Donald Trump, has repeatedly stated, he will review US commitments to defending NATO allies and will request the Europeans pay the US adequately for ensuring their security.

Even if all these shortcomings were addressed, the military experts question whether a rotationally deployed armoured brigade is the right solution for the challenges facing the Baltic states and Poland. A US armoured brigade is best suited (but not sufficient) to counter the worst-case scenario of a Russian conventional attack against allied forces. However, this event is considered to be highly unlikely. What is more likely is a form of hybrid warfare, designated to help Vladimir Putin achieve his political objectives in Europe without crossing the threshold of Article 5, NATO's mutual defence clause. If that is the case, the analysts argue that the ERI needs an additional set of tools designed to build resilience in civil governance institutions, enhance military-civilian cooperation during a crisis, augment border observation and control, strengthen information operations and conduct offensive and defensive cyber operations.

The most recent large-scale NATO military training exercise (Anaconda-16), organised in Poland just weeks ahead of the summit, indicates that NATO is well aware that the currently planned posture of about 4,000 rotational troops is not sufficient in itself to effectively safeguard the eastern flank of the alliance. The exercise conducted over ten days in June involved the largest number of multinational troops since the end of the Cold War (about 30,000 troops from ten countries). While the Alliance has the new rapid reaction Spearhead Force and the

Response Force (45,000 additional troops in total) at its disposal, it is not clear whether their full deployment would be quick enough in the case of a surprise attack. Therefore, the main question that will inevitably arise at the forthcoming NATO Summit is whether the proposed deterrence posture is a credible one. If there is a serious doubt about the credibility of the proposed reinforcement and if NATO is simply in denial when it comes to its own limitations, the proposed posture might escalate the relations with Russia without providing a sufficient force to counter Russian conventional forces in the event of a surprise attack. It's definitely not a reassuring prognosis for NATO-Russia relations.

NATO, at the same time, claims to be keeping a window of political dialogue open with Russia; however, Putin's administration has so far responded mainly with threats of retaliation if NATO increases its military presence in Russia's neighbouring countries, or places anti-ballistic missiles in Poland and Romania. Although the current tensions are not conducive to discussions with Russia on issues such as arms control and other international affairs, what is expected from the NATO leaders is that they will initiate a serious process of reflection on the long-term possibilities of engaging Russia. Instead, NATO-Russia relations now appear to be moving in the opposite direction. In May, the US launched

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a new ground-based missile defence system in Romania, quickly sparking fresh tensions with Russia. An additional anti-missile platform is still planned in Poland. NATO has long insisted that the shield is directed against rogue states like Iran, but the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran undermines this argument. It is therefore high time to revisit the issue with greater scrutiny.

Some nuclear arms control specialists suggest that: *"Instead of continuing to insist on the Iranian threat it makes sense to re-evaluate the old proposal by George H.W. Bush to direct missile defence against a greater and truly universal threat of accidental or unauthorised launches."*³ The reframing of the missile defence dispute in such a way could possibly lead to the reshaping of the system and perhaps future cooperation with Russia. Not solving this matter could, on the other hand, be the main obstacle preventing any progress on arms control negotiations and the achievement of long-lasting solutions for stability in Europe.

A new report from a high-level group of international security experts from Russia, the US and Germany called the Deep Cuts Commission recommends that the West and Russia build on a number of existing arms control and confidence-

2. Deni, John. "The Flawed U.S. Approach to European Reassurance", Judy Dempsey's *Strategic Europe*, Carnegie Europe, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=63675>.

3. Erasto, Tytti. "Time to decouple European missile defence from Iran", The European Leadership network, <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/time-to-decouple-european-missile-defence-from-iran-3710.html>.

building measures in order to avoid further exacerbation of the increasingly tense and dangerous relationship between Russia and the West, particularly along the border between Russia and NATO member states. The report recommends how to address the most acute security concerns in Europe – particularly in the Baltic area – and increase US-Russia nuclear transparency and predictability: *“The prime objective for the next few years should be limiting the potential for dangerous military incidents that can escalate out of control,”* the authors argue. *“Russia and the West must come back from the brink. They need to better manage their conflictual relationship. Restraint and dialogue are now needed more than ever.”*⁴

NATO-EU cooperation and the challenges in the south

At the forthcoming Warsaw Summit, NATO will need to address not only the challenge of an increasingly assertive Russia in the east, but also the challenges arising from conflicts, instability and violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa. The consequences of instability could be manifold: an overwhelming refugee and migration crisis; the spread of violent extremism; terrorist attacks on EU and US soil; and increased human and arms trafficking.

It looks like the alliance for the moment remains without an agreed strategy for the south.

NATO is currently discussing how to step up its response to the European migrant crisis by expanding its presence in the Mediterranean region. However, the internal divisions are becoming emblematic of NATO’s inability to deal comprehensively with threats strongly affecting its southern shore. Recent debates on what to do in the south have exposed some of the old schisms about the extent to which a US-dominated alliance should openly engage in parts of the world that European nations have traditionally managed.⁵ The *New York Times* reports that France, Italy and Spain are reluctant to have NATO expand its influence in the south and believe that too much alliance involvement would be unpopular with Muslims and North Africans. France and Italy do not want an alliance operation in Libya, and Germany does not want an alliance operation against the Islamic State and other Islamist terrorist groups. Some Europeans believe that an expanded role of NATO in the south would make it harder to reach an agreement with Russia over Syria.

As a result, what has been observed over the last couple of months is an increase in cooperation initiatives between NATO and the EU. The new initiatives mean that NATO is expected to support EU efforts to re-establish stability in the south instead of expanding its own role. In fact, since the terrorist attacks in Paris last November, the EU and NATO have

visibly intensified discussions on how the two organisations could combine forces, especially in the areas where they work side by side but often do not cooperate closely enough. For instance, both NATO and the EU are seeking to prepare, deter and defend against hybrid warfare; both have civilian and military tools that complement each other, hence combining those tools could make a big difference. The areas in which closer cooperation is needed include, in particular: information sharing, situational awareness, cyber defence, strategic communication, civil preparedness and resilience, joint training and exercises.

Even though NATO and the EU share 22 member states and have their headquarters in Brussels, when a crisis strikes people from one institution still do not know who to call on the other side of the town. For that reason, talks over closer cooperation started last November with a series of visits by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to the European institutions. Subsequently, NATO and the EU have reached two formal arrangements: one on cyber defence, and one on practical cooperation in the Aegean Sea.

The main idea behind the cyber defence agreement was a collaborative approach on better information sharing, resulting in a technical arrangement on cyber defence signed between the NATO Computer Incident Response Capability (NCIRC) and the EU’s equivalent, known as the Computer Emergency Response Team of the EU (CERT-EU). It is an open-ended arrangement that can be reviewed every few years, with a possibility for enhanced cooperation in various areas.

The second agreement, regarding NATO’s support for the EU in monitoring, surveillance and reconnaissance in the Aegean Sea, although symbolic in size, is indicative of NATO’s strategy in the years ahead. NATO cannot claim to be relevant without having a comprehensive strategy in response to evolving threats in the Middle East and North Africa. As further discussions continue about EU-NATO cooperation in the Mediterranean Sea and potentially Libya, it looks like NATO’s strategy is going to be driven not only by what is happening in the east, with Russia, but also in the Mediterranean region.

So far NATO’s mission in the Aegean Sea has been criticised for doing little to influence the dynamics of the migration crisis. Effective management of the problem relies mostly on Turkish cooperation and this depends on Turkey’s wider strategic considerations. Despite this criticism, the EU, which struggles to deal with the continuous influx of refugees on its own, would like to expand cooperation with NATO on maritime surveillance to the Mediterranean Sea. In June 2015, the EU launched its military operation EUNAVOR Med (Operation Sophia) oriented at breaking the business model of human traffickers in the Mediterranean. The mandate for this operation has been extended by a year and the tasks of the operations have been expanded. The EU is planning to help with the training of the Libyan coastguards and navy, as well as to contribute to the implementation of the UN arms embargo on the high seas off the coast of Libya.

4. *Back from the Brink: Towards Restraint and Dialogue between Russia and the West*, The Third Report of the Deep Cuts Commission, <http://deepcuts.org/publications/reports>.

5. Erlanger, Steven. “Shifting Attention to Mediterranean, NATO Fights Internal Dissent”, *New York Times*, June 16th, 2016.

The two organisations' aim at the Warsaw Summit is to adopt a joint statement on cooperation as well as to discuss new "playbooks" on fighting hybrid threats and a programme of NATO and EU exercises. Lately, in preparation of the joint statement on NATO-EU relations, the EU's High Representative, Federica Mogherini, attended the latest NATO Foreign Ministers meeting. The key areas identified at the meeting for expanding EU-NATO cooperation included fighting hybrid and cyber threats, supporting common partners in defence capacity building, and increasing maritime security. However, it remains to be seen what the final joint statement on cooperation will look like. Even though most of the issues have been discussed already, much will depend on the outcome of the British referendum and of the European Council meeting scheduled for June 28th and 29th. The European leaders are planning to discuss EU-NATO cooperation ahead of the NATO Summit and Federica Mogherini is expected to present a new EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy. Independently of these developments, it looks like the alliance for the moment remains without an agreed strategy for the south.

From the perspective of long-term stability projections in Europe and its neighbourhood, the discussions leading to the NATO Summit 2016 and the initiatives decided so far in the east and in the south do not produce a very optimistic picture. First, there is a feeling of policy fragmentation and lack of a clear medium and/or long-term strategy for achieving greater stability in Europe. Second, even the proposed short-term solutions seem to be insufficient and reactive. For instance, despite the fact that NATO is committed to considerably strengthening its military deployments in eastern and central Europe, the question of whether the proposed deterrence posture is credible and the means are appropriate to counter Russia's new hybrid type of warfare remain. At the same time in the south, while NATO's contribution to surveillance of the Mediterranean Sea might be necessary to implement the UN arms embargo and to stabilise Libya, the military surveillance solution to the refugee crisis has been criticised so far for not being able to influence the dynamics of the crisis. What seems to be missing at this point, though, is a broader vision of NATO's role beyond military defence and deterrence: reflection is required on NATO's strategy and the ways of tackling the continuously evolving threats and their consequences for the internal and external security of the allies. We can only hope that some of these discussions will be initiated this year in Warsaw.

What seems to be missing is a broader vision of NATO's role beyond military defence and deterrence.