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NATO in the Post-Crimea Era²

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The European security environment is in flux. The Russian invasion and occupation of Crimea in February 2014 shattered the core premises on which NATO had built its strategy since the end of the Cold War: that the Euro-Atlantic area is stable, and that NATO members do not face any real threat to their territorial security.⁴ In eastern Europe, there is now a clearly perceived Russian threat to the Balkans, while in northern and northwestern Europe, Russia is significantly increasing its air and maritime activity. In the south, Europe contends with a threat of an entirely different nature: massive inflows of refugees from a region racked by civil war.

NATO's response can be understood through the prism of its strategic approach. During the post-Cold War era, defined as the quarter century between 1989 and early 2014, the alliance engaged in a three-track strategy for alliance security. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, referred to hereafter as the post-Crimea era, NATO has returned to the Cold War's two-track approach—yet in revitalized form.

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⁴ Matthew Kroenig, "Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War," *Survival* 57, no. 1 (February-March 2015), 49.

NATO Strategy during the Cold War

In the early years of the Cold War, NATO's strategic approach was collective defence, meaning both the deterrence of military activity and actual defensive action should war break out. In 1967, NATO added a second, concurrent approach of détente or political dialogue with the Soviet Union. This was the well-known formulation of the 1967 Harmel Report, which called for a two-track strategy for alliance security: maintaining a robust military capability while reaching out to the Soviet Union politically. Also expressed as détente and dialogue, the second track was the precursor to today's cooperative security.

NATO Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era

After the Berlin Wall came down, NATO adopted a three-track strategic approach. In addition to collective defence and dialogue, a third task of "crisis management" appeared. The approach is evident in each of the three strategic concepts released in the post-Cold War era (1991, 1999, and 2010). The wording varied from document to document,⁵ but in essence, all three listed NATO's fundamental tasks as:

- Collective defence (deterring and defending against aggression);
- Crisis management (intervening with political and/or military tools to stop crises' before they develop, mitigating them if they are already underway, and consolidating peace afterward); and,
- Cooperative security (addressing security issues beyond NATO borders by working with relevant countries and international organizations).

Examining NATO activity in the post-Cold War era through this three-part lens reveals the degree of emphasis placed on each mission. There were no collective defence operations—that is, no 'cold' deterrence missions and certainly no 'hot' defence operations. NATO invoked article V after 9/11, but its intervention as an alliance into Afghanistan came later, in the form of an operation to consolidate stability in a post-conflict situation. Other theatres of NATO crisis management in this period were Bosnia, Kosovo, and Libya. As for cooperative security, NATO launched numerous outreach initiatives to the east and south, with activities ranging from dialogue to concrete cooperation such as training.⁶

⁵ The 1991 concept said NATO would pursue its security through military defence, managing crises, and the pursuit of dialogue and cooperation. The 1999 concept spoke of security, consultation, and deterrence and defence as NATO's key tasks, along with crisis management.

⁶ Examples of cooperative security outreach initiatives include the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, Partnership for Peace Program, Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, Membership Action Plan, NATO-Russia Founding Act, NATO-Russia Council, NATO-Ukraine Commission, NATO-Georgia Commission, Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

NATO Strategy in the Post-Crimea Era

Collective Defence

In the aftermath of Russian aggression in Ukraine, the balance in NATO's three-pronged approach has changed. Sparked by the Crimea intervention, NATO is once again concretely (not just rhetorically) pursuing collective defence. For deterrence, in 2015 it created a very high readiness force designed to respond quickly to threats on NATO's periphery and billed as a "spearhead" force to the pre-existing NATO Response Force (NRF). The NRF itself is also expanding in size. Beyond this, the alliance established command, control, and force enabler sites in eastern Europe, deployed ground forces on a rotational basis, launched an air-policing mission over the Baltics, and sent maritime forces to the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas.

Over the course of 2015 and 2016, a growing number of voices argued that a more permanent force presence in eastern Europe was necessary. As a result, NATO has deployed four mechanized battalions to the Baltics and Poland, including a multinational battalion led by Canada,⁷ to bolster the deterrence component of collective defence. While a small force cannot fight a Russian army, it can form a sort of "tripwire" against potential Russian aggression. Indeed, in light of Russian fears of NATO enlargement and encroachment, the alliance is purposely keeping force deployments small to take into account Russian perceptions and to convey the message that these are defensive, not offensive, forces.

NATO's land force deployment is the best-known aspect of its new, concrete emphasis on collective defence. However, because of growing Russian naval activity in the maritime regions surrounding Europe, NATO also is returning to its Cold War focus on anti-submarine warfare, especially in the so-called "GIUK" gap between Greenland, Iceland, and the UK. The alliance is concerned that Russia's increasingly robust maritime force based out of Kaliningrad and Murmansk could threaten NATO access to the Baltics in the event of a crisis. The Baltics are connected to "mainland NATO" through only a narrow land bridge. If Russian forces or missiles were to block that land bridge, access from the Baltic Sea would be critical.

Crisis Management

Whether humbled or exhausted, NATO in the new era has cut back the crisis management component of its strategy. NATO no longer runs a large stabilization operation in Bosnia, an air war over Kosovo or Libya, or a counterinsurgency mission in Afghanistan. Instead, NATO is engaging in much smaller crisis management efforts and in cooperation with the European Union. An important focus is on the refugee and migrant crisis in the Mediterranean region, where a NATO maritime force is supporting EU efforts to stem illegal trafficking and migration by providing the EU's Op Sophia with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance information.

⁷ The others are German, British and American battalions to Lithuania, Estonia and Poland respectively. The Canadian-led battalion is deploying to Latvia.

Cooperative Security

The emphasis on cooperative security has grown in the post-Crimea era. Much more than the dialogue of the Harmel Report, outreach now centers on “defence capacity building”—a term that can refer to anything from giving advice on security sector reform, to developing local armed forces (through training and education), to helping out on cyber defence and logistics. The idea is to “project stability” by enabling countries to address security concerns on their own.

Concrete cooperative security efforts are not new, and we have seen them before. The Partnership for Peace program (PfP), for example, involves practical bilateral cooperation between NATO and Euro-Atlantic countries. Yet the program has lost momentum since NATO launched it in 1994. Many of its original members are now alliance members. One scholar has described the PfP as essentially non-existent today because of conflict between two of its members (Ukraine and Russia), and the Mediterranean Dialogue—another cooperative effort—as being “in ruins” due to developments in the Islamic world.⁸

Cooperative security needed a “reboot” in the east and the south, and this reboot has come in the form of defence capacity building. NATO’s new initiative is both more specific in military and security terms than its predecessors were, and more geographically dispersed. The alliance has launched formal capacity building packages with Georgia, Iraq, Jordan, and Moldova. With its mission to train Afghan security forces, NATO’s operation Resolute Support in Afghanistan also can be considered capacity building.

Support for defence capacity building is a foreign and defence policy priority for Canada.⁹ Canadian special operations forces are training Iraqi security forces, and the Canadian military has sent training assistant teams to both Jordan and Lebanon to build capacity in the those militaries. Canada has extended its mission to train Ukrainian forces in western Ukraine, and has begun to focus on Romania. Notably, the defence capacity building component of NATO’s new strategic approach is an area where the alliance can establish direct links with the European Union.

In Sum

The Euro-Atlantic region has left the post-Cold War era and is now in a new, post-Crimea era. The post-Cold War era featured extensive crisis management and a flurry of cooperative security efforts even as collective defence remained in the rhetorical first position. The post-Crimea era is largely characterized by a return to the two-track Harmel formulation. For NATO, the best means to tackle contemporary threats is a combination of concrete collective defence measures and a revitalized approach to cooperation and dialogue. This latter component has direct implications for partnership between NATO and the European Union.

⁸ Karl-Heinz Kamp, “Why NATO Needs a New Strategic Concept,” *NATO Defense College Research Report 09/16* (November 2016), 10.

⁹ Author interview with an official from the Directorate of NATO Policy, National Defence Headquarters, 2 March 2017.