

NATO's REBIRTH

NATO's New Trajectories after the Wales Summit

John R. Deni

ABSTRACT: NATO is seeing something of a rebirth manifested by the Wales summit in September 2014. The summit did not fix all NATO's woes, but it did address a number of them, especially the reconfigured security situation in Europe. However, it remains unclear how NATO can add to its already full plate, especially during a time of personnel cuts and zero-growth budgets.

When the North Atlantic Alliance first announced in November 2013 that it would hold its next summit September 2014 in Wales, NATO watchers anticipated the meeting would be a rather ordinary affair. The summit was expected to focus largely on the concluding chapter of the Alliance's extensive involvement in Afghanistan – a kind of self-congratulatory denouement to a decade of war. Of course, all that changed in early and mid-2014, as Russia first invaded and then annexed Crimea, and later invaded the Donbas in the apparent hope of adding yet more Ukrainian territory.

In so doing, Russia fundamentally altered the security situation in Europe, and during the Alliance's gathering in Wales its leaders wasted no time in noting that fact in their summit declaration – indeed, it was the second sentence: “Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace.”¹

For several allies in Eastern Europe, this statement amounted to a regrettable “I told you so,” and they have since clamored for a robust, allied response. Yet to other allies in Southern Europe, the threat of Russia remains less compelling given illegal migration, smuggling, and other illicit activities across the Mediterranean Sea. Meanwhile, some in Western Europe – especially those struggling with anemic economic growth or those interested in protecting lucrative business dealings with Russia – were hoping Moscow's actions represented a passing storm rather than full-blown climate change. For the United States, navigating these various interests has required walking the line between doing too much on the one hand – thereby negating the incentive for allies to pull their fair share – and not doing enough on the other – thereby weakening the Alliance and encouraging Moscow's adventurism.

Despite these challenges, the Alliance has seen something of a rebirth due to the Wales summit. Certainly the Alliance's approach toward some of the subjects addressed in Wales – such as defense spending, or energy security – reflected tired methods or ongoing, unresolved

¹ “Wales Summit Declaration,” issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, Press Release (2014) 120, September 5, 2014, paragraph 1. The author would like to thank Ms. Valerie Andreyko for her research assistance.

Dr. John R. Deni is a Research Professor of Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational (JIIM) Security Studies at the US Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute. He previously worked for eight years as a political advisor for senior US military commanders in Europe.

debates among the allies. However, there were several issues – such as a renewed focus on maneuver warfare readiness, the rotational stationing of allied troops east of Germany, reversing the downsizing of NATO’s command structure, and tightening the linkage between cyber-attacks and Article 5 – where the Alliance appears indeed to have been rejuvenated with a sense of purpose and intent.

Alliance Purpose and Missions

In terms of its broad approach toward national security, NATO officials reiterated the three-fold purpose of the Alliance at Wales – collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security.² This announcement was particularly important in the face of collective exhaustion following major combat operations in Afghanistan and the return of an aggressive dynamic Russian threat in the East. It would be easy to argue the Alliance, now returning home from Afghanistan, should refocus on strengthening itself for upholding Article 5, territorial defense.³ However, it is clear several NATO members – especially the United States – still want an Alliance capable of contributing to collective defense and security, not only in Europe, but beyond it as well.⁴

Whether to focus on one of NATO’s three overarching objectives or to maintain equal emphasis on all of them is not merely a theoretical or diplomatic question. Such discussions have concrete implications for defense planners and military leaders. Capabilities most necessary for territorial defense – such as heavy armor or artillery – differ from those necessary for expeditionary crisis management operations – such as strategic air- and sealift, mobile medical support, overseas intelligence networks and capabilities, and deployable logistics capabilities.⁵ Certainly, one must be careful not to overemphasize the distinction between forces necessary for territorial defense versus those necessary for expeditionary operations – for instance, tanks and self-propelled artillery could be useful in an expeditionary crisis-response operation, depending on circumstances.⁶ However, without specialized expe-

2 NATO, “Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” November 2010, www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf.

3 Bernd Riegert, “NATO Needs to Rethink its Strategy,” *Deutsche Welle*, May 6, 2014.

4 See the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report on the US desire to partner with European allies in the protection and promotion of common interests and security; Derek Chollet, “Transatlantic Security Challenges: Central and Eastern Europe,” Senate Foreign Relations European Affairs Subcommittee Testimony, April 10, 2014; www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Chollet_Testimony.pdf. According to Chollet, the Alliance will certainly need to “place more emphasis on high-end deterrence and defense,” but it must also make its forces “more deployable and sustainable.” For an outside perspective, see Erik Brattberg, “Should NATO Go Global or Back to Basics?” *The Hill*, May 7, 2014, thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/204737-should-nato-go-global-or-back-to-basics.

5 Richard Weitz, “Transatlantic Defense Troubles,” *Strategic Insights* 10, no. 3 (Winter 2011): 53, 59. Elsewhere, then-US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Alexander Vershbow argued the Alliance needs to emphasize expeditionary capabilities that could also fulfill a territorial defense mission, essentially trying to overcome the distinction in capabilities between forces focused on territorial defense versus those focused on expeditionary operations. Alexander Vershbow, “Crafting the new Strategic Concept: Ambitions, Resources, and Partnerships for a 21st Century Alliance,” keynote speech delivered at the “New Challenges, Better Capabilities” conference, Bratislava, Slovakia, October 22, 2009, slovakia.usembassy.gov/speech2.html.

6 David Yost argues the distinction between territorial defense capabilities and expeditionary crisis response capabilities has been overstated. Further, expeditionary capabilities may be necessary for territorial defense, given the expansion of the Alliance from 16 to 28 member states – the allies need to be able to project force to every part of the enlarged treaty area. David Yost, “NATO’s evolving purposes and the next Strategic Concept,” *International Affairs*, 86, 2 (2010): 495-7.

ditionary capabilities such as those noted above, Alliance forces are limited to territorial defense and unable to project enough force to make a difference.

In the debate over whether NATO will prioritize expeditionary or territorial-defense capabilities, the Alliance declared it would establish an enhanced program with “an increased focus on exercising collective defence including practising comprehensive responses to complex civil-military scenarios.”⁷ Clearly here the Alliance is looking to stress not simply territorial defense conceived of as conventional maneuver warfare but also the so-called hybrid or new generation warfare some argue Russia has implemented nearly perfectly in Crimea and attempted in eastern Ukraine.⁸ More broadly, it is possible to read the statement by the Alliance as a decision to favor collective defense capabilities and readiness at the expense of NATO's other two broad strategic purposes.

However, a more accurate read is the Alliance is righting a ship far out of balance. For the last decade, Alliance capabilities and readiness efforts have strongly favored counterinsurgency, foreign internal defense, and reconciliation and reconstruction – precisely what allied troops needed for their mission in Afghanistan. With that mission ending, more attention can be paid to collective defense capabilities and readiness. Nonetheless, the Alliance will need to spend considerable time, money, and effort in rebuilding corps- and division-level capability and readiness for territorial defense.

Meanwhile, NATO continues to devote attention and effort toward so-called emerging security challenges. On energy security, the Alliance's pronouncements at Wales reflected NATO's split personality on this issue. On one side, the allies declared energy supply, diversification of routes, suppliers and energy resources, and the interconnectivity of energy networks are “primarily the responsibility of national governments and other international organisations.”⁹

On the other hand, the allies declared the Alliance would:

...further develop our capacity to contribute to energy security, concentrating on ... enhanc[ing] our awareness of energy developments with security implications for Allies and the Alliance; further develop[ing] NATO's competence in supporting the protection of critical energy infrastructure; and continu[ing] to work towards significantly improving the energy efficiency of our military forces.¹⁰

This seemingly contradictory approach – leaving energy security to member states and/or the European Union, while simultaneously continuing efforts to play a greater role in energy security – reflects the debate within the Alliance. Some members – especially those in the east – want the Alliance more involved on this issue, helping to protect critical energy infrastructure. Others – especially Germany and Italy – are equally adamant that NATO not step beyond very limited bounds. The Wales summit declaration reflected this divide, but one can expect

7 “Wales Summit Declaration,” paragraph 10. Emphasis added.

8 For a description of this new generation of warfare, see Janis Berzins, “Russia's New Generation Warfare In Ukraine: Implications For Latvian Defense Policy,” National Defence Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research, Policy Paper No. 2, April 2014.

9 “Wales Summit Declaration,” paragraph 109. Emphasis added.

10 Ibid.

the Alliance's approach to energy security to evolve further as the debate unfolds.

The Alliance took a similar approach with regard to the growing threat to allied cyber security. NATO reinforced the notion that individual allies are responsible for developing the relevant capabilities for the protection of national networks, but concurrently agreed cyber defense falls within the realm of NATO's core collective defense tasks. Even though a member state may believe a cyber-attack crosses the collective defense threshold, the Alliance clearly noted "a decision as to when a cyber-attack would lead to the invocation of Article 5 would be taken by the North Atlantic Council on a case-by-case basis."¹¹ This statement represents a significant clarification of the Alliance's approach, at least in comparison to how NATO addressed cyber defense during the 2010 Lisbon summit and the 2012 Chicago summit.

NATO after Afghanistan

Clearly not content to rest on their laurels, NATO's Heads of State and Government announced or approved six new initiatives, plans, or efforts across a variety of issues.¹² While it appears NATO has been reinvigorated, the critical questions are whether and how the Alliance will manage to add to its already full plate, especially during a time of personnel cuts and zero-growth budgets in Brussels and Mons as well as mixed approaches to defense spending and investment among NATO allies.

The Readiness Action Plan is comprised of several elements designed not only to address issues in Eastern Europe, but beyond in areas "further afield that are of concern to allies."¹³ This was an important, rather explicit acknowledgement of the significantly diverging threat perceptions in the Alliance today, accounting for the Alliance's slow and limited action in the face of Russia's aggression earlier this year. Understandably, Poland, the Baltic states, and perhaps Romania are focused on what in some ways is an existential threat emanating from Russia. For these countries, NATO must refocus on territorial defense of its member states, as the combat mission in Afghanistan ends. Meanwhile, countries to the south, such as Spain and Italy, are far more concerned with illegal immigration and refugee flow from North Africa, the Levant, and Sub-Saharan Africa. They have less interest in preparing for warfare against a revanchist Russia, and remain more concerned with maritime security across the Mediterranean. Still other allies, such as the United States and United Kingdom, genuinely maintain a global outlook when it comes to conceptualizing their role in the world, and want to ensure NATO remains a vehicle for protecting and promoting their interests beyond Europe. Even at this early stage, the Readiness Action Plan seems aimed at satisfying all of NATO's various constituencies.

11 "Wales Summit Declaration," paragraph 72.

12 New initiatives endorsed by the Heads of State and Government include the Readiness Action Plan, the Very High Readiness Task Force, a Defense Planning Package, the Framework Nations Concept, the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative, and the Partnership Interoperability Initiative.

13 "Wales Summit Declaration," paragraph 5.

As part of the plan, the allies will “enhance” the NATO Response Force by developing force packages capable of moving rapidly and responding to potential threats. One enhancement will be the creation of not simply a high readiness force but rather a “Very High Readiness Joint Task Force” – so named perhaps to distinguish it from the NATO graduated readiness forces already extant around Europe which form the backbone of the NATO Response Force.¹⁴ Based in Eastern Europe, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force will consist of roughly 4,000 troops – the vast majority of which will be conventional land forces, with appropriate air, maritime, and special operations forces available to support.¹⁵ The forces will be rotational in nature – hence, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force is not a permanent basing of allied forces in the east.¹⁶ Even so, this represents a significant step toward meeting the long-standing, and largely unfilled, security needs of the Alliance’s eastern members.

Although, in theory, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force will be capable of deploying with just a few days’ notice, its operational activation will be subject to decision by the North Atlantic Council, the highest political decision-making body of the Alliance. In other words, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, currently US Air Force General Phil Breedlove, will not have operational control over this force in peacetime and, hence, he will not have the ability to deploy it at the moment a threat arises, thereby nullifying the modifier “very” in the task force’s name.

In addition to the Readiness Action Plan, the allies agreed on a Defense Planning Package featuring a number of priorities:

- enhanced training and exercises;
- command and control, especially for air operations;
- intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance;
- ballistic missile defence;
- cyber defence; and,
- land force readiness.

Improving allies’ capabilities across these areas is necessary.¹⁷ The Alliance clearly needs to augment its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, for instance, and to use enhanced exercises to build up skills in large-scale conventional maneuver warfare that have atrophied through a decade of countering the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, it is unclear how this effort to promote specific defense planning goals would differ from previous attempts to prioritize and spur defense investments among the allies, such as the Prague Capabilities Commitment, the Defence Capabilities Initiative, the Connected Forces Initiative, or Smart Defence.

14 Emphasis added.

15 John-Thor Dahlburg and Julie Pace, “NATO Approves New Force Aimed at Deterring Russia,” *Associated Press*, September 5, 2014.

16 Alexander Vershbow, remarks at Multinational Corps (North East) in Szczecin, Poland, September 18, 2014, poland.usembassy.gov/szczecin3.html.

17 “Wales Summit Declaration,” paragraph 64.

Reflecting a multifaceted approach to capabilities development, allies also embraced the Framework Nations Concept, an initiative in which groups of allies work together to develop capabilities and forces, particularly in Europe. For example, the United Kingdom will lead Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Norway in developing a “Joint Expeditionary Force,” a rapidly deployable force capable of conducting the full spectrum of operations, including high intensity operations.¹⁸ Also, Denmark will lead a project including the Czech Republic, Greece, Norway, Portugal, and Spain that focuses on multinational approaches toward using air-to-ground precision-guided munitions.¹⁹

The Framework Nations Concept, originally a German proposal endorsed by Alliance defense ministers in June 2014, embodies the Smart Defence initiative launched by the Alliance in 2011, which encourages groups of allies to work together to develop, acquire, operate, and maintain military capabilities.²⁰ In some respects, the Framework Nations Concept mirrors NATO operations in Afghanistan (and Kosovo), in which military forces from smaller allies plug into military formations of larger allies. The risk in this approach is critical countries may decide to sit out certain operations, reducing the overall effectiveness of NATO forces. Indeed, given the recent history of NATO operations, in which several allies exercised their right to withhold force contributions even after voting to support an Alliance operation, it would seem this risk is growing.

Separately, but along the same lines, “two allies” – presumably the United Kingdom and France, although the Alliance’s summit statement was oddly opaque on this point – have announced their intention to establish a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force by 2016, to be available for full-spectrum operations, including at high intensity. This agreement and the Framework Nations Concept are important efforts on the part of the Alliance, but they underscore the reality that the force structures of many larger and mid-size allies in Europe – such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands – have shrunk to the point they cannot independently field corps-size or even division-size formations as they did just a few years ago.²¹ Additionally, and with regard to the Joint Expeditionary Force in particular, although the end result may benefit the Alliance, this initiative appears likely to exacerbate the problem of equitable risk-sharing among the allies. Most countries that decided to join the United Kingdom in the Joint Expeditionary Force effort have arguably out-performed other European allies in taking on risk in Afghanistan.

The allies also agreed to launch a Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative.²² This would formalize the Alliance’s actions in training Iraqi and Afghan security forces, which NATO views

18 UK Ministry of Defence, “International Partners Sign Joint Expeditionary Force Agreement,” September 5, 2014, www.gov.uk/government/news/international-partners-sign-joint-expeditionary-force-agreement.

19 Richard Tomkins, “NATO Members Launch Air-to-Ground Precision-guided Weapons Initiative,” *United Press International*, September 5, 2014.

20 “Wales Summit Declaration,” paragraph 67.

21 Interview with a civilian member of the NATO International Staff, July 16, 2014.

22 “Wales Summit Declaration,” paragraph 89.

as part of its Cooperative Security task. The Alliance has stated the program will focus initially on Georgia, Jordan, and Moldova, but this “demand-driven” initiative will remain open to any partner. As is the case with regard to US national security policy, these sorts of security cooperation – or military-to-military – activities are becoming increasingly important. The fact NATO is formalizing its approach to security cooperation is a positive development, but key to future success will be deconflicting the military-to-military activities of the Alliance and its member states, as well as the allocation of sufficient funding and appropriately trained manpower resources.

Quantity & Quality in Defense Spending

Aside from unveiling a host of new initiatives, allies also used the summit to address challenges in defense spending. The summit provided clear evidence the Alliance recognizes the importance of both quantity and quality of defense spending. In terms of quantity, the allies reiterated the political goal of having each spend the equivalent of 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense.²³ Military capability also depends on how scarce defense resources are used. To address this qualitative angle, the allies agreed to spend at least 20 percent of their defense budgets on procurement and research and development.

Obviously – judging from NATO’s own figures – not all allies are meeting these goals.²⁴ However, the allies agreed to redouble efforts to achieve both quantitative and qualitative targets, explicitly pledging that those allies not spending the equivalent of 2 percent of gross domestic product or devoting 20 percent of their defense budgets to procurement and research and development would indeed meet those objectives – over the next decade.

Giving themselves an entire decade to achieve objectives seems less than aggressive. However, the real issue is not time, but rather whether those targets are truly reflective of equitable burden sharing or will result in useful capabilities. The cases of Greece and Denmark are most illustrative. The Greek government routinely spends more than the equivalent of 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense – one of only four NATO allies in 2013 to do so. That same year, Greece spent nearly 18 percent of its defense budget on procurement and related research and development. As far as NATO’s targets are concerned, Greece appears as a model ally. However, Greece’s contributions to allied operations in Afghanistan, Libya, and Kosovo have been minimal, and the Greek military remains largely unable to project significant force for any length of time or distance.²⁵

Meanwhile, the Danes regularly spend less than the 2 percent goal – averaging 1.5 percent since 2000 – and in 2013 were projected to spend just 10 percent on procurement and related research and development.

23 “Wales Summit Declaration,” paragraph 14.

24 NATO Public Diplomacy Division, “Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence,” Communiqué PR/CP(2014)028, February 24, 2014.

25 In Kosovo, Greece contributes 119 troops, or roughly 2.4 percent of the troops there – more than Denmark currently contributes, but far less than the 314 troops from NATO ally Slovenia, for instance, which has less than one fifth Greece’s population. In Libya, Greece contributed one of the 18 ships and five of the 185 military aircraft involved in Operation Unified Protector. In Afghanistan today, Greece has roughly 9 troops, or roughly 0.02 percent of the 41,000 troops remaining.

As far as NATO's objectives are concerned, Denmark is clearly falling short. However, the Danes have a highly capable, deployable military, and have had a relatively high casualty rate in Afghanistan. Danish forces took on far more risky missions in the southern region of Afghanistan than many of the larger allies. At half the population of Greece, Denmark clearly punches above its weight class, making significant contributions to NATO's missions, and able to project force across time and distance.²⁶

A far more effective way to determine which countries need to devote more effort would be for the Alliance to develop a burden-sharing score. Such a score could be based on factors similar to the percentage of defense spending devoted to procurement and related research and development, but also could include contributions to recent and ongoing missions, as well as force usability levels. NATO defines this last concept – usability – in terms of deployability and sustainability, and a decade ago, the Alliance established a goal for member-state force usability. In their Wales summit declaration, the allies pledged to meet those usability goals – 50 percent of each member's overall land-force strength should be deployable, and 10 percent of each member's overall land-force strength should either be engaged in, or earmarked for, sustained operations – but they again failed to agree on making such usability data public.

These are necessary, but insufficient, conditions for maintaining collective defense and security; disparate allied forces must also be able to operate together, often side by side in complex security environments. The allies clearly recognize this need, and pledged once again to ensure their armed forces will be able to operate together effectively, capitalizing on the immense interoperability gains of the last decade in Afghanistan. Specifically, the allies launched a Partnership Interoperability Initiative to “enhance our ability to tackle security challenges together with our partners.”²⁷ This initiative will consist of dialogue as well as practical cooperation aimed at building and maintaining interoperability. As with other initiatives outlined above, however, the proof will be in the budgeting – and unfortunately, most member states continue to favor investment in military platforms at the expense of readiness and the exercises and training necessary to underpin it.²⁸

Finally, while NATO clearly recognized its needs to expand, modernize, and invest in the security tools at its disposal, it also acknowledged the need to adjust the command structures directing those military assets. Although esoteric, the issue of Alliance command structure is vitally important for member states. Changes in allied command structures mean major, in behind-the-scenes, intra-Alliance battles over the placement of valuable NATO infrastructure and the distribution of prestigious and influential general and flag officer billets.

In what amounts to an implicit admission the Alliance cannot meet its own ambitions, the allies noted they will ensure its command

²⁶ At the height of the surge in Afghanistan, Denmark had roughly 750 troops there; today, that figure is down to 145 troops. In Libya, Denmark contributed 7 aircraft.

²⁷ “Wales Summit Declaration,” paragraph 88.

²⁸ Interview with a senior civilian member of the NATO International Staff, July 16, 2014.

structure has a “regional focus.”²⁹ Although vague, this is an indication the Alliance will revise its command structure.³⁰ Just a few years ago, NATO’s command structure had a regional focus; northern air, land, and maritime component commands reported to a northern joint forces command in Brunssum, and southern air, land, and maritime component commands reported to a southern joint forces command in Naples. In 2011, the Alliance began implementing a plan to do away with one air command, one land command, and one maritime command, cutting in half the number of component commands. When implementation was complete one year later, the changes were hailed as an example of necessary streamlining and more efficient use of resources. In retrospect, though, it has become clear – certainly to those within the Alliance organization and now evidently to Heads of State and Government – the Alliance lacks the command structure to do all that it says it must do, in peacetime and during crises.

Conclusion

The Wales summit did not fix all NATO’s woes, but it did address a number of its security, organizational, and functional challenges, especially the new security situation in Europe. In some ways, the Alliance has seen a rebirth as a result of Russia’s actions in Ukraine. However, in the absence of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the upending of the security environment in Europe, NATO certainly was not headed toward irrelevance. To the contrary, the Alliance had plenty on its plate before Moscow made its fateful decision to send Russian military forces throughout Crimea and into the Donbas.

The great irony of Russia’s actions is they have rejuvenated the Alliance in a way inimical to Moscow’s perceived interests, including the stationing of US and allied troops east of Germany and a new NATO emphasis on territorial defense. In sum, just as the Alliance ends its Afghanistan odyssey, the Wales summit indicates NATO has found a new footing and adjusted its trajectory in an effort to meet new, as well as old, challenges.

If the allies – especially those in Europe – can individually or collectively rise to meet those challenges, their efforts will doubtlessly be very welcome in the United States. While Washington professes a continuing desire to see US foreign and security policy rebalanced to the Asia-Pacific, events affecting vital and important American interests in the Middle East, West Africa, and Eastern Europe provide critical reminders that one cannot always choose the terrain upon which to counter threats. In this environment – and especially with further rounds of sequestration-induced defense budget cuts on the horizon, the United States needs partners more than ever. European allies together represent the best option – and with the possible exceptions of countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the *only* option. In order to match ability with will, all NATO allies must now work to fulfill the aspirations of the Wales summit.

29 “Wales Summit Declaration,” paragraph 9.

30 Interview with a civilian member of the NATO International Staff, July 16, 2014.

