

# NATO:

## The Shifting Sands of an Alliance

**Alasdair Bowie**  
*alasdair.bowie@cesran.org*

As a military alliance the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has been the cornerstone of European defence since its formation in 1949.<sup>i</sup> NATO has stood the test of time, acting as a deterrent to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, subsequently, deploying troops and leading operations from Bosnia, Kosovo and the Former Yugoslavia Republic of Macedonia (FYR Macedonia) to Libya and Afghanistan. These operations have ranged from peace-keeping and enforcement, conducting airstrikes, training and capability building to counter-insurgency operations. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has faced continuous challenges as it seeks to maintain its relevance in a world without its intended adversary, the Soviet Union. NATO was created to face a conventional or nuclear threat. New threats have developed ranging from domestic and external terrorism, to piracy and cyberwarfare.

With the end of the Cold War the Soviet Union collapsed and was replaced by the Russian Federation, while the Warsaw Pact alliance simultaneously disintegrated. Subsequently in 1999 and 2004 NATO expanded, to take in all of the former Warsaw Pact nations; along with many nations of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Slovenia 2004, Albania, Croatia 2009 and Montenegro 2017).<sup>ii</sup> Other Eastern European nations such as FYR Macedonia aspire to NATO membership.<sup>iii</sup> The eastward expansion of both the alliance as well as the European Union (EU) has worked in concert, as membership of one organisation has largely been predicated on membership of the other.

This has seen many of the former Warsaw Pact nations turning towards the western sphere of influence. A clear example of this is the 2014 Euromaiden Revolution in Ukraine, which saw the removal of the pro-Russian Ukrainian Government led by President Viktor Yanukovich with a pro-EU government. Russia's actions in both the Crimea as well as in the Donbass shows Russia's resentment to its former satellite state, leaving what it sees as its sphere of influence. This has also been the case outside of Europe, particularly in the case of the Syrian Civil War where Russia has aggressively backed the Syrian Government supporting its armed forces.

Throughout the Cold War, NATO and the Soviet Unions' conventional and nuclear capabilities acted as mutual deterrents against military conflict. NATO's strategy relied on its collective security mechanism. This is set out

in Article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty, in which any attack on one member of the alliance is considered an attack on the whole alliance.<sup>iv</sup> This acts as a deterrent to potential aggressors as the combined forces of NATO would be a formidable adversary. Collective security makes every member's security a critical imperative to the other members. NATO is best described as a sum of its parts; not all NATO members possess the same military capabilities. Many have generic capabilities, but maintain a unique or specialist capability such as anti-submarine warfare, amphibious landing capability alongside marines or paratroopers that are held at a high level of readiness.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO began to move away from permanently forward deployment of large conventional forces in Western Europe. Instead NATO looked to build up its capability to respond to any crisis. This move showed NATO's willingness to move away from its heavy armoured approach that had characterised the Cold War to a more rapidly deployable, tactically flexible expeditionary capability. The purpose of NATO's Response Force (NRF) is to provide the alliance with the ability to respond rapidly, with Land, Sea and Air components, these may be enforcing collective security or responding to crises outside the alliance's borders.<sup>v</sup> The combined nature of the NRF allows it to operate in a wide

***With the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO began to move away from permanently forward deployment of large conventional forces in Western Europe.***

range of situations from high intensity state on state conventional warfare through to low intensity counter-insurgency/anti-piracy operations or peacekeeping/enforcement mandates, as well as providing specialist skills in the wake of natural disasters.

During the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, the alliance agreed to enhance the NRF to double its size; simultaneously it agreed to establish a new spearhead quick reaction

force, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) comprising an additional 5,000 troops, held at very high readiness, capable of being deployed within 48 hours.<sup>vi</sup> The VJTF provides a compact brigade formation that could act independent from the rest of the NRF. However, if required it could form the vanguard of a more substantial NRF deployment. The VJTF's ability to rapidly deploy to any incident or flashpoint area provides a deterrent that could have a decisive effect preventing or resolving a crisis.

By increasing the size of NRF, its capability to undertake large contingency operations would be increased, therefore maximizing the forces available to a deter an aggressor. This expansion in resources allows the NRF to increase the number of specialist personnel on high readiness, as well as being able to conduct existing capabilities at a higher level and greater intensity. These continued changes to NRF mean that across the alliance there are more troops capable of being deployed rapidly. This once again

strengthens NATO's ability to act as deterrent, as well as giving the alliance the ability to intervene.

The 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw saw the unveiling and implementation of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States (Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania) and Poland.<sup>vii</sup> Four multinational battalions were deployed on a rotational basis with the United Kingdom, Canada, United States of America and Germany taking the lead as the framework nation in each country.<sup>viii</sup> With continuing allegations of Russian involvement in the Ukrainian civil war, the forward positioning of the Enhanced Forward Presence can be seen as a clear statement of the collective security ideal as well as providing an opportunity for NATO members to exercise more regularly together. Although in February 2018 the four Enhanced Forward Presence battalions totalled only 4,692 personnel,<sup>ix</sup> they act to reassure NATO eastern flank members, as well as statement to a potential aggressor that NATO members take seriously their commitment to collective security.

Enhanced Forward Presence is mutually beneficial as the host nations get the opportunity to train as well as developing new capabilities. These additional specific capabilities could be the regeneration of formerly existent skills or the development of new skills through partnering with other NATO allies. For other NATO members they are firstly showing their commitment to the ideal of collective security, and also gaining the opportunity to conduct training exercises in a different terrain and climate.

***Enhanced Forward Presence is mutually beneficial as the host nations get the opportunity to train as well as developing new capabilities.***

NATO faces an uncertain future. Its original geo-strategic adversary Russia is once again its most pressing concern. However, to face the future NATO must seek to be able to conduct any possible type of military operation that is conceivable while maintaining the capability of dealing with the Russian threat. The threat to NATO's Eastern flank has been recognised and with the addition of Enhanced Forward Presence has begun the process of reinforcing the alliance's eastern flank. Taken together with the VJTF and the expansion and enhancement of the NRF this provides NATO's leadership with an increased capability to respond to the wide range of potential threats facing the alliance.

This reinforcement shows that the ideal of collective security is still central to the alliance's future and that these formations work to build strong bonds between NATO member states as well as providing opportunities for further training, integration and capability-building. Altogether the training, integration and capability-building results in a more capable military force allowing NATO to fulfil its core commitments. These closer bonds endorse the ideal of collective security, facilitating NATO's ability to act as a deterrent against any aggressor.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> NATO, *Founding Treaty*. Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_67656.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67656.htm)? [Accessed 15 November 2018]
  - <sup>ii</sup> NATO, *What is NATO*. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/index.html> [Accessed 6 December 2018]
  - <sup>iii</sup> BBC, *New name, same country? A choice for Macedonians*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45665069> [Accessed 15 November 2018]
  - <sup>iv</sup> NATO, *The North Atlantic Treaty*. Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/ie/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ie/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm) [Accessed 8 November 2018]
  - <sup>v</sup> NATO, *NATO Response Force*. Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/ra/natohq/topics\\_49755.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ra/natohq/topics_49755.htm) [Accessed 15 November 2018]
  - <sup>vi</sup> NATO, *NATO Readiness Plan May 2015*. Available at: [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2015\\_05/20150508\\_1505-Factsheet-RAP-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_05/20150508_1505-Factsheet-RAP-en.pdf) [Accessed 15 November 2018]
  - <sup>vii</sup> NATO, *NATO Enhanced Forward Presence February 2018*. Available at: [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2018\\_02/20180213\\_1802-factsheet-efp.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_02/20180213_1802-factsheet-efp.pdf) [Accessed 19 November 18]
  - <sup>viii</sup> NATO, *Boosting NATO's presence in the East and Southeast*. Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_136388.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm) [Accessed 29 November 2018]
  - <sup>ix</sup> NATO, *NATO Enhanced Forward Presence February 2018*. Available at: [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2018\\_02/20180213\\_1802-factsheet-efp.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_02/20180213_1802-factsheet-efp.pdf) [Accessed 19 November 2018]