PISM | POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 108 (1048), 14 November 2017 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Bartosz Wiśniewski • Rafał Tarnogórski

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka • Anna Maria Dyner • Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk
Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Justyna Szczudlik • Marcin Terlikowski • Tomasz Żornaczuk

Changes to the NATO Command Structure

Wojciech Lorenz

NATO defence ministers approved changes to the Alliance's command structure to increase its ability to conduct collective-defence missions. However, the decision about the location of new commands is still pending. While working out a compromise, the Allies should not undermine the political coherence of NATO, the backbone of its credibility.

On 8 November, NATO defence ministers agreed to create a new Atlantic command, new logistic headquarters, and a cyberspace operations centre. The Alliance decided to review its command structure at the Warsaw summit in July 2016 in response to Russia's aggressive actions. Decisions on the location of the commands, their size and related costs are to be approved at the defence ministers meeting on 18 February 2018.

Evolution of the NATO Command Structure. After the end of the Cold War, the Alliance departed from a "forward defence" strategy based on maintaining considerable force at its then eastern border. Instead, it started to develop the ability to send troops to a threatened region. This required deep changes in the structure of the command and NATO forces. As a result of the series of reforms, the number of commands was reduced from more than 60 to seven. The Alliance moved from the concept of a headquarters focused on particular geographic regions towards commands that could conduct operations in any region within the transatlantic area. In 2003, Strategic Allied Command Atlantic (ACLANT) located in the U.S. was disbanded. Instead, an Allied Command Transformation (ACT) was formed to support the development of multinational rapid-reaction forces.

By recreating a command responsible for the Atlantic, NATO would increase its ability to control sea lanes, necessary for sending reinforcements from the U.S. to Europe. The growing activity of Russian submarines between Greenland, Iceland, and the UK, and the recent *Zapad 2017* exercises indicate that, as in the Cold War, Russia may be prepared to block access to the region during a crisis. The command could be hosted by France, Spain, Portugal, or the U.S.

The new logistics command will be responsible for ensuring NATO's ability to quickly deploy troops across Europe. The deployment of small units on its Eastern Flank to deter Russia has not changed the foundations of the strategy, which is based on the ability to send troops to a threatened region. As Russia has a regional advantage over NATO in the Baltic Sea region and is able to take swift action, for example under the guise of snap exercises, the Alliance must be able to rapidly deploy multinational rapid reaction forces (the NRF, including the so-called VJTF or "spearhead"), whose land component consists of about 15,000 soldiers. In November, for the first time in decades, the Alliance will also conduct command-post exercises (without troops on the ground), testing the ability to conduct an operation involving up to three corps (about 100,000 soldiers) and may have to support the development of appropriate logistical capabilities for such operations. The most likely locations for the headquarters is Germany or Poland.

With the establishment of the cyberspace operations centre, the Alliance tries to enhance its ability to protect deployed troops against cyberattack. At the summit in Warsaw, NATO recognised cyberspace as an area of operational activity (along with land, sea, and airspace) and has increased its responsibility for

defending command-and-control elements, crucial for the ability to conduct missions. The centre probably will be placed in the NATO's main headquarters in Mons (Belgium), where the Computer Incident Response Team (NCIRC) and other cyber capabilities are already located.

Challenges with Command Locations. The decisions on the location of the commands will be based on operational, as well as political factors. Newer NATO members have been advocating for years for a more balanced distribution of infrastructure across the Alliance. Since the first NATO enlargement in 1999, not a single command that is part of the command structure has been established on new member state territory. Placing the logistic headquarters in Poland would be a signal that the Alliance is augmenting its presence in the region in a sustainable way. It could also offer better expertise on logistics in a region of a potential collective-defence operation. Placing the command in Germany is, however, justified by the proximity of stored U.S. Army equipment and ports to which the U.S. would probably send reinforcements. Similar dilemmas will have to be resolved with the location of the Atlantic command. Placing it in the U.S., which seems likely, could increase American engagement in European security. Locating it in one of the European countries, mainly focused on the Southern Flank, could strengthen their sense of shared responsibility for the security of the continent in the face of Russia's aggressive policy. In the past, the issue of command locations led to disputes within the Alliance, so this may also be the case today. However, an unnecessary escalation of such tensions and demonstrating divisions may undermine NATO credibility.

Challenges with Manning the Commands. The creation of a new headquarters may require the involvement of several hundred experienced, English-speaking officers. Since the summit in Wales in 2014, NATO has already established small command cells (NATO Force Integration Units, NFIU) in the Baltic States, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Hungary (about 40 people each) to coordinate the deployment of the VJTF. The Alliance also has increased staffing (from 200 to 400 people) of the headquarters Multinational Corps North-East in Szczecin—the only such command in the new member states—as part of the Alliance's force structure. In addition, NATO accepted Polish and Romanian offers to use their national division-level commands in times of crisis. Both headquarters were partially filled with international personnel. The Alliance has also decided to increase its ability to respond to threats from the south by strengthening the command in Naples (about 100 people). In total, the Allies had to earmark 600 officers for the needs of the Alliance, which already proved challenging. The creation of new command structures may therefore require readjustments within existing structures. Regardless of the solutions adopted, the reform should be an opportunity to put additional pressure on the Allies to increase defence spending and invest resources in a more effective way.

The Risk of Regionalisation. While rebuilding its collective-defence capability, the Alliance should try to minimise the risk of so-called "regionalisation of security." At present, the command structure of NATO is based on operational headquarters in the Netherlands (Allied Joint Forces Command in Brunssum) and in Italy (Allied Joint Forces Command in Naples), which should be capable of conducting both collective-defence missions and crisis-response operations. Their ability to operate, however, has been mainly tested during exercises based on crisis-management scenarios and real out-of-area operations. The attempt to build into both commands the capacity for a large collective-defence operation can prove challenging and could enforce their specialisation. The headquarters in Brunssum could focus more on the defence of Alliance territory while the one in Naples could pay attention to crisis-management missions. States with different threat perceptions could support the development of one of the commands over the other. This could undermine the political cohesion of the Alliance, which is fundament of its ability to achieve consensus and react quickly during a crisis. To limit such a risk, it is necessary to maintain the ability of two major operational commands to conduct all types of missions. The Allies should also proportionally staff both commands with officers from all member states.

Conclusions. The decision to create new commands indicates that NATO is able to adapt to the changing security situation by strengthening its collective-defence capacity after years of concentrating on crisis-response missions. Maintaining the ability to conduct both types of missions will, however, be a prerequisite for maintaining the Alliance's political cohesion, which is crucial for the effective deterrence and security of the new members. Despite increasing defence budgets, it may be a challenge for the Allies to find enough experienced officers. This may already indicate the limitations of adaptation should further changes be needed. Therefore, it is quite likely that in addition to investing in new headquarters, NATO will have to increase the role of national commands, incorporating some of them into the Alliance's command structure.