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

BULLETIN

No. 16 (748), 9 February 2015 © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) ● Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz ● Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk ● Artur Gradziuk
Piotr Kościński ● Sebastian Płóciennik ● Patrycja Sasnal ● Marcin Terlikowski

NATO Spearhead Needs a Shield on the Eastern Flank

Wojciech Lorenz

NATO defence ministers have agreed to strengthen the Alliance's rapid-response capabilities. Immediate reaction forces supported by headquarters cells deployed in six bloc border states will strengthen the defences on its eastern flank. The so-called spearhead, however, should be complemented with a "shield" of credible deterrence and permanent training facilities.

NATO has enhanced its defences on its eastern flank mainly through additional rotations of troops. In the mid and long terms, the ability to defend border states will be assured by rapid-reaction forces, increased readiness of Multinational Corps Northeast with its headquarters in Szczecin, and updated contingency plans supported by exercises. NATO's adjustments to its territorial defence will last at least until 2018 but may be hampered by the reluctance of its members to increase their defence budgets. Even if NATO remains on track with its plan, the strategic change caused by Russia's annexation of Crimea and likely suspension of NATO enlargement to the east, may require the UK and the U.S.—countries that specifically guaranteed Ukrainian sovereignty—to make further strategic moves to strengthen defences in the region.

NATO and U.S. Responses to the Crisis. On 5 February, NATO defence ministers reviewed a plan to enhance the Alliance's rapid-response and collective-defence capabilities. According to the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) adopted during the 2014 NATO Wales summit, politicians approved the details of a Very High Readiness Task Force (VJTF) with units that would be deployable within 48 hours. The brigade size force (about 5,000 troops) is expected to be operational in 2016. Until than, rapid-deployment capability will be provided by an "interim spearhead" formed of German, Dutch and Norwegian units that are part of this year's rotation of the NATO Response Force (NRF). The Allies also agreed to set up small command cells in six border countries (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria) to ensure that the so-called spearhead can rapidly deploy and be ready for action. At the same time, the core NRF element that should be ready for deployment within 28 days will be strengthened from 13,000 to 25,000 troops. Additionally, Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin, which is directly responsible for defence of the eastern flank, will be upgraded from a low-readiness unit (deployable within 91–180 days) to a high-readiness force (30 days). The command will be tasked with joint operations among all the armed forces (army, navy, air force and special operations), but is likely to gain this capability only after 2018.

In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine, NATO took short-term measures to reassure the Allies and fill the gaps in its territorial defence capabilities. Member states reinforced the air defence mission over three Baltic States ("Baltic Air Policing"), increased the number of planes from four to 16, deployed early warning aircraft (AWACS) over Poland and Romania, activated NATO navy units and began a continuous rotational presence in the region through enhanced exercises. These actions will continue through 2015.

To date, the United States has also introduced temporary measures and made long-term decisions to enhance NATO's eastern flank. The U.S. reinforced its rotational land, naval and air units in the region. Congress also approved the president's European Reassurance Initiative with a budget of $985 million to finance the rotations, prepare infrastructure and pre-position equipment for an armoured brigade that will facilitate its deployment from the U.S. Heavy armour (some 200 Abrams tanks and Bradley infantry fighting vehicles) is planned to be permanently deployed in Europe, with some likely to be stationed in Poland and the Baltic States.

Repositioning U.S. Forces in Europe. During the last decade, NATO has mainly focused on crisis-management missions, while most of the European member states have cut their defence budgets, losing some capabilities crucial for territorial defence. At the same time, the U.S. significantly reduced its military presence in Europe to 67,000 troops, including 10,000 under the U.S. African Command (AFRICOM). The commander of NATO and U.S. troops in Europe (SACEUR) also has at his disposal a heavy brigade (4,000 troops), which is stationed in the United States but assigned to the NRF and rotates its units to train with the Allies. In addition and in order to develop the interoperability of larger units with European troops, an "Army Regionally Aligned Forces" concept is being implemented, which enables two U.S.-based divisions (about 15,000 troops each) to be deployed to Europe. This U.S. re-positioning includes military facility closures (European Infrastructure Consolidation). The Pentagon recently announced that 15 bases in six countries will be vacated. However, major capabilities (air tankers, reconnaissance, special operations aircraft) will be moved to the strategic U.S. air base in Ramstein, Germany, closer to potential threats in the south of Europe.

Changes in the U.S. posture are supposedly balanced by the American contribution to NATO's defences against ballistic missile attack from the Middle East (European Phased Adaptive Approach), which includes radar in Turkey, a missile base in Romania (operational in 2015), another in Poland (operational in 2018), and four guided-missile destroyers equipped with the Aegis weapons systems and deployed in Rota, Spain (the last two ships are to be deployed in 2015). The U.S. also reinforces defence cooperation within the region through regular rotational training of fighter and transport aircraft in Poland (aviation detachment) and bases in Bulgaria and Romania (Joint Task Force East and Black Sea Rotational Force).

Ability to React on the Eastern Flank. The creation of the "spearhead" gives NATO the ability to react to a spectrum of potential threats (including hybrid warfare) at a low level of escalation. In case of further escalation, the plan can serve as a "trip wire" that would increase the probability of further NATO engagement with its larger NRF or Multinational Corps Northeast units. However, reaction time can be delayed by the necessity for consensus among the 28 NATO members on the use of common forces. In such a case, threatened countries can turn to U.S. reinforcements, including up to 12,000 combat infantry troops supported by the U.S. air forces permanently stationed in Western Europe, which do not require a political decision. Should a serious crisis erupt, the U.S. could also deploy 30,000 troops within a month, although such a decision would require a presidential decision, some political will and availability of the forces

In the longer term, the ability of NATO to deal with multiple levels of escalation from Russia can be limited by the lack of a sense of direct threat to the biggest members of the Alliance and their reluctance to invest in necessary capabilities. Despite the Wales summit pledge to increase defence budgets to 2% GDP within a decade, most of the major European Allies are not planning to meet that goal. Also, the U.S. will remain under significant fiscal pressure with the possibility of forced cuts (budget sequestration) in 2016. Nevertheless, the recent infrastructure consolidation in Europe was introduced without cuts in personnel or capabilities, which may indicate that the U.S. presence has reached the lowest level possible to ensure American strategic interests in Europe and Africa. Hence, it is likely that further cuts will be suspended for at least 3–5 years until NATO rebuilds its capabilities for full-spectrum missions and reverses the negative trend in defence expenditures.

A Spearhead Supported by a Shield. The potential threats emanating from Russia and the likely suspension of further NATO enlargement to the east will require NATO and the U.S. to take further steps to enhance their ability to deter threats and positively shape regional security. Since U.S. strategic guarantees depend on the ability of large units to be deployed from America it will be necessary for an exercise involving a full deployment. The exercise would form a shield (conventional deterrent) and signal the U.S.'s ability and will to support the Allies.

The United Kingdom and U.S, which guaranteed the territorial integrity of Ukraine in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum (in return for Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons), should also analyse the possibility of making bigger strategic commitments to the region. One possible step could be the redeployment of some elements of the U.S. Multinational Training Command Center in Germany (which includes 10,000 American troops and civilian personnel) to Poland and Romania to set up American–British training facilities. This would enable, in a cost effective manner, speeding up the process of capacity-building of regional allies and partners such as Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Finland.

Poland should prepare an economically attractive offer for hosting the American–British training facilities. At the same time, to ensure cohesion within NATO, it should review its modernisation programs, starting with naval forces and with the aim of enhancing crisis-management capabilities crucial to major allies U.S, UK, France and Italy. It should also be one of Poland's priorities for the 2016 NATO Warsaw summit to adopt a stronger resolution on increased defence spending.