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2016 NATO Summit on Strategic Adaptation

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The upcoming NATO Summit in Warsaw will conclude the first phase of the Alliance's adaptation to new security challenges posed by Russia and threats emanating from the Middle East and North Africa. However, rapid response units that can be deployed within days do not offer credible deterrence against a conventional, surprise attack on the eastern flank aimed at undermining NATO's credibility. Hence, during the summit Poland would like to convince the Allies to agree the "Warsaw Initiative on Strategic Adaptation," which would enable the adjustment of NATO's force structure to the tasks of territorial defence and conventional deterrence.

Poland will use its opportunity as the host of next year's NATO summit to try to convince the Allies to go along with "strategic adaptation," that is, a set of comprehensive reforms that seeks to enhance the credibility of the Alliance's conventional deterrence and will go further than the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) adopted after Russia's annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine. Such adaptation may require a change in NATO's force structure and investments in the heavy armour necessary in conventional territorial defence scenarios. Even though changes are necessary to make collective defence guarantees credible, they will be restrained by a lack of defence spending and concerns about Russia's potential responses.

Why RAP Is Not Enough. The 2016 Warsaw summit will conclude the first and crucial phase of RAP, which was agreed during the 2014 Newport summit. NATO leaders are likely to announce the operational capability of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF)—a fast response element of the bigger multinational NATO Response Force (NRF). Headquarters elements called NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU) will be ready to facilitate VJTF deployment in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania. NATO will also raise the readiness of the Headquarters Multinational Corps North East in Szczecin—the main NATO unit responsible for collective defence of Central and Eastern Europe.

Through these changes, NATO will be able to support Allies threatened by such tactics as hybrid warfare with a 5,000-strong VJTF deployment within days. If there is a threat of further escalation, the Allies could agree to send the 30,000-strong NATO Response Force (NRF) within a month and further mobilise an approximately 45,000-strong defensive corps within three months. However, the practical usability of VJTF in the eastern flank can be limited by numerous political and technical factors. First, the 28 member states would have to agree to use the VJTF, which is formally also responsible for crisis management in out of area missions. Since the deployment of the unit on the eastern flank will limit NATO's ability to respond to other threats, the political decision process, which is difficult in itself, could become even more complicated. This may lead to a situation in which the rapid response units will be deprived of their major tactical advantage, which is a short response time. The designation of the unit to perform both collective defence and crisis-management operations will also limit the prepositioning of equipment in areas of likely deployment, which could shorten the reaction time and limit the escalatory potential of the deployment. It is impractical to store armour in one place in part because the units could not be easily used for other missions elsewhere. Even if surplus equipment was used, and most countries do not have it, it would be necessary to exchange the equipment every year in parallel with the rotations of national units assigned to the rapid response force.

Strategic Threat for NATO. From the Polish perspective, RAP should conclude only the first phase of NATO's adjustment to the permanent change in the security environment after the annexation of Crimea, which undermined the post-Cold War European order. Poland would like to include in the next summit agenda what it calls the

"Warsaw Initiative on Strategic Adaptation," which should enhance NATO's ability to deter conventional threats. To this end, the development of rapid response capabilities would have to be followed by an adjustment of the overall force structure to territorial defence tasks.

NATO is not prepared to deter a determined state adversary because after the collapse of the Soviet Union and dismantling of the Warsaw Pact it perceived the threat of a conventional attack against its territory as highly unlikely. Most of the European members of the Alliance have significantly decreased defence spending below the 2% GDP level advocated by NATO, cut the number of troops and replaced heavy armour with lighter expeditionary capabilities. Additionally, the U.S. has reduced its military presence in Europe. Since NATO perceived Russia as a partner, not a threat, it did not develop a force structure adjusted to defence of its eastern flank. This was reflected in the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security, in which the Alliance made a political commitment that "in the current and foreseeable security situation" it will carry out its collective defence tasks by maintaining adequate infrastructure, rather than permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.

In the meantime, Russia has embarked on an ambitious programme of military modernisation (with a goal of 70% of the armed forces' equipment considered modern by 2020), constantly increased defence spending (between 2004 and 2014 Russia doubled its military spending to approximately $70 billion, becoming the third-biggest defence spender), organized snap exercises that demonstrate its ability for the rapid mobilization of forces on NATO's border, regularly violates NATO airspace and tests its air defence systems, is modernizing its nuclear capabilities and has made verbal nuclear threats against the Alliance. Irrespective of its possible intentions, Russia, which perceives NATO as a major threat, has developed the military and political tools to conduct an effective operation aimed at undermining NATO's credibility. A NATO reaction time measured in days enhances the probability of a scenario in which Russia could use snap exercises as a cover for an offensive operation against one of the border states and, by taking part of its territory, confront NATO with the dilemma whether to accept *fait accompli* and lose credibility or mount a counteroffensive, such as destroying Russia's air defence systems in Kaliningrad Oblast and face the risk of escalation up to the nuclear threshold.

To limit the risk of such a dilemma, NATO should build conventional deterrence by denial, i.e., a combination of forces that will increase the upfront risks and costs of any offensive operation and discourage a potential aggressor. Credible deterrence requires the permanent presence of NATO combat units in the most vulnerable regions, ready to defend the territory without delay by the political decision-making process. The automatic contact of NATO troops with an aggressor would serve as a tripwire, increasing the likelihood for NATO to use Art. 5 collective defence guarantees and to send necessary reinforcements. NFR, which serves as a follow-on force, should be supported with large national combat units, which have shorter mobilizations than multinational forces and can be better prepared for collective defence scenarios. The credibility of their deployment will also depend on infrastructure and prepositioned equipment, which should include heavy armour.

Mission Difficult, but Possible. Strategic adaptation will be a long and politically challenging endeavour. It will require additional resources at a time when NATO, despite the renewed commitment during the Newport summit to enhance defence spending to 2% GDP, is unable to reverse the declining trend. Moreover, numerous NATO countries do not perceive Russia as a direct threat and are reluctant to agree to decisions that may be perceived as provocative and affect future cooperation with Russia. With such fiscal and political constraints, NATO will only be able to achieve credible deterrence if it agrees on a strategic vision based on common values and long-term security interests. The eastern flank members will have to accept the different threat perceptions among the Allies, among whom priority interests encompass the stability of the southern neighbourhood, combating terrorism and the development of NATO crisis-management capabilities. While southern flank members should accept that even though strengthening of defences may give Russia a pretext for further escalation of tensions, decisive and timely actions are necessary to avoid catastrophic consequences for the very idea of NATO as a political-military alliance. The lack of credible conventional deterrence will enhance the risk, which may have existential character for the Baltic States, and will make NATO vulnerable to the loss of credibility and significance as a collective defence alliance.

To change the structure and maintain the cohesion of the Alliance, it will be crucial to demonstrate at the Warsaw summit that NATO is an organisation that assumes its responsibility for global and regional security and, as such, is a strategic pillar of security for every member state. Hence, apart from RAP and the Warsaw Initiative the main points of the agenda should include enhanced support for the southern neighbourhood and especially Iraq and Libya through the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building initiative.

Successful implementation of this strategic adaptation will also require a dose of political pragmatism, which should leave NATO extended space for diplomatic manoeuvres in relations with Russia. An example of such pragmatism could be the flexibility of the new member states with regards to the scope of changes of the "Russia parts" of NATO strategic documents, which even in current form enable the creation of credible conventional deterrence.

The first test of NATO's willingness to support collective defence guarantees with capabilities and force structure will be the June 2015 meeting of NATO Defence Ministers. The Allies should demonstrate unanimity in the threat perception and adopt comprehensive political guidance that will serve as a reference point for the new NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) and supporting the development of capabilities required for both territorial defence and expeditionary missions.