

‘Hybrid’ threats and NATO’s Forward Presence

The Alliance’s Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltics and Poland could face serious challenges in ‘sub-conventional’ scenarios.

by Martin Zapfe

At its summit in Warsaw in July 2016, NATO opted to augment the ‘deterrence from afar’ agreed upon at its Wales Summit in 2014 with the presence of multinational ground forces in theatre. The so-called ‘Enhanced Forward Presence’ (EFP) is the right decision and will be a critical element of NATO’s conventional deterrence of Russia for years ahead.

However, this paper will focus on the narrow challenge of specific sub-conventional (‘hybrid’ or ‘non-linear’) challenges. Here, having standing forces in theatre might not necessarily be an asset; simply speaking, this presence could potentially even increase NATO’s *political* vulnerability in the east by exposing fault lines for determined adversaries to exploit. Those units deployed in the Baltics will not only be present on the ground, like figures in a game of chess. They will have to live, move, and train in their host nations, and all that in an environment that the Alliance deems vulnerable to possible Russian subversion and agitation. Without addressing potential challenges, NATO’s forward presence in the Baltics could well be used to undermine, and not strengthen, Allied cohesion and deterrence.

As current Russian thinking transcends a clear distinction between peacetime and wartime while giving primacy to non-military means,¹ NATO may not have the luxury to prepare for war in a time of peace. Facing a structurally revanchist Moscow that seems to consider the weakening of Western cohesion as both means and end of

KEY POINTS

- NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) is a critical step to enhance Allied conventional deterrence in the east
- In ‘hybrid’ scenarios, however, the presence of multinational forces could increase NATO’s vulnerability to Russian subversion
- National caveats and different strategic cultures could create possible fault lines within the Alliance
- Planning for contingencies with the host nation and harmonizing Rules of Engagement within the contingents is critical and achievable
- NATO member states should already consider the EFP a ‘peacetime operational deployment’ and plan accordingly

its foreign policy, NATO has to treat its EFP as a full-fledged operation – with appropriate planning, clear command and control responsibilities, minimal or at least transparent national caveats, and agreed-upon contingency plans for Russian peacetime subversion.

Enhancing the Forward Presence

The most important decision taken in Poland was to move from the rotational deployment of units for exercises and signaling, sometimes on the level of mere companies or less, to the ‘Enhanced Forward Presence’ of nominal combat units. NATO agreed to deploy four battalion-sized battlegroups that will be built around a single lead nation for each of the three Baltic states plus Poland: The UK will cover Estonia, Canada will send troops to Latvia, and Germany will be responsible for Lithuania. The US will base its battalion in Poland. These four nations will provide the core of the battalions; the exact multinational composition, and the mechanism of force generation (that will likely differ between the framework nations) has yet to be agreed upon. Germany, for example, appears set to build on the cooperation with the Netherlands and Norway that is also supposed to field a combined combat brigade designated as ‘Very High Readiness Joint Task Force’ (VJTF) for 2019.

This step derives its importance from the shortcomings of the adaptation measures agreed upon at the Wales Summit, and extensively analyzed:² Until Warsaw, NATO conventional planning focused on the VJTF, the Allied ‘Spearhead Force’. Doubts concerning its efficacy were mostly grounded on the simple fact that it might not be when and where it would be needed most: As a non-resident force with serious concerns regarding its rapid deployability, this ‘mobile tripwire’ was liable to be unsuited to its main task – namely to symbolize Allied solidarity at points of conflict.³

With the establishment of the four multinational battalions in the East, these logistical shortcomings will be partially remedied – the tripwire will be where it would be needed. The decisions of Warsaw thus represent a critical step in enhancing the conventional defence posture of NATO. They do not necessarily, however, sufficiently improve the Alliance’s operational and tactical posture with regard to sub-conventional threats.

Three Exemplary Scenarios

NATO’s EFP is supposed to be a symbol of Allied strength and cohesion. However, like all strengths, it can be turned into a weakness by an adversary willing to choose unconventional means. As Dima Adamsky points out, attacking an ene-

my’s weak points when and where he does not expect it, and in a way he does not foresee, is a theme regularly reiterated in the contemporary Russian debate.⁴ The potential challenges that could be subsumed under the headline of sub-conventional threats are countless. Three thinkable scenarios involving NATO troops in one of the Baltic states might be instructive, though the list is by no means exhaustive. While of course purely fictional, there is no lack of historical precedents in different circumstances. As of now, none of these scenarios is highly likely – but each is a possibility, and definitely more likely than a conventional attack on the Baltics, the deterrence of which is the EFP’s original *raison d’être*.

Crime and Accidents

First, NATO troops will have to interact with the civilian population of the host countries. At some point, this interaction will see the statistically normal occurrence of local ‘casualties’ – through accidents with civilian traffic, or through (real or alleged) crimes. Tragic events like these are always a possibility when thousands of young men and women are living in a foreign environment, and they can have a significant effect on the attitude of the host nation, even if not amplified by a hostile and concerted media campaign. The regular outbreak of massive anger within the population of Okinawa after crimes committed by members of the US garrison might be a good indicator of the potential political consequences. Any such event, even if only based on rumors, could very easily, and very effectively, be exploited by Russian propagandist efforts to influ-

FURTHER READING

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Mark Galeotti, Small Wars & Insurgencies, 2016, Vol. 27, No. 2, 282–301

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ence public opinion within the Russian-speaking minorities, Russia proper, and the troop-contributing nation.

Violent Demonstrations

Second, in the 'fog of hybrid war', NATO troops might face civilian unrest within the Russian-speaking minorities, supported and guided by Russia. It is reasonable to assume that any possible role of NATO forces in this context would only be that of only a third or fourth responder – after the respective police forces and national militaries would have been deployed. Nevertheless, demonstrations could be staged close to the barracks of NATO troops, or could block their movements out of and into these barracks, as happened regularly in front of US barracks in Germany after NATO's Double-Track-Decision in the 1980s.

The picture of NATO tanks facing civilian protesters is not far-fetched – and neither is the assumption that this would be a potential nightmare for troop-contributing nations.

Multinational deployments are the realm of caveats. Few spheres are as culturally and politically sensitive as the interaction of civilians and the military; and while some NATO members routinely deploy soldiers to patrol their streets in times of emergencies, major allies such as Germany do still have very strict cultural and legal reservations regarding the use of the military in domestic emergencies. Plus, due to the integration at very low level – down to the level of battalions – any major demonstration or civil unrest would very quickly affect numerous Allies.

Recent experience in multinational operations suggests that national capitals might not resist the temptation of micromanaging their national contingents, thereby possibly bypassing NATO's chain of command. It is unreasonable to assume that this would be decisively different in NATO's EFP. That again increases the number of potential fault lines – and of political friction. It is not completely implausible that the Canadian commander of a battalion in Latvia, ordered by the respective headquarters to support local authorities in confronting 'domestic', Russian-sponsored unrest, would be unable to guarantee that all his multinational subordinates could obey the operational orders in the face of political concerns in their own capitals. Neither can it be ruled out a priori that, vice versa, a company from the Netherlands could react to armed provocations in a way that would put the government of the German battalion commander in an uncomfortable spot.

An 'Indigenous' Insurgency

Third, NATO troops might actually become the targets of organized violence way below the conventional threshold. It is not far-fetched to imagine a terror campaign by sup-



Locals look at armored fighting vehicles of US Army 2nd Cavalry Regiment in Parnu, Estonia, March 21, 2015. Soldiers of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence will have to live, move, and train in their host nations. REUTERS / Ints Kalnins.

posedly indigenous movement against 'occupying forces', their barracks, vehicles, and personnel. The terror campaign by Irish nationalists against British soldiers in Northern Ireland (and, indeed, in their NATO host nations Germany and the Netherlands) shows how such a campaign could unfold. Potential casualties on the side of the troop-contributing nations would be difficult to explain to domestic audiences already less than enthusiastic about the deployments. Plus, while the prevention of such attacks would again most likely be the primary responsibility of the host nation, it seems unlikely that any troop-contributing nation could indefinitely refrain from taking more proactive steps in first preventing attacks – opening the door to potentially disruptive entanglements in the 'grey zone'²⁵ of sub-conventional warfare.

Erasing the Fault Lines

What could be done to reduce the risk of strategic fallout from tactical developments on the ground? As political differences between NATO members with regard to the Alliance's stance towards Russia might crystallize around 'operationalizing' the EFP in peacetime, the steps proposed below might well overburden the shaky consensus of Warsaw and be unrealistic in the short term. Yet, every move made in the right direction matters; and notwithstanding a substantial détente with Russia, NATO states may not be able to dodge the question indefinitely.

First, and most basically, NATO member states have to agree that the Alliance's EFP in Poland and the Baltics should be treated as an operation in all but title – and tackle the thorny legal problems that open up immediately. NATO's Baltic battalions may be denied the luxury of a clear and unambiguous transition between peacetime and wartime; yet planning for eventualities in a time of peace, and on Allied soil, opens the box for numerous legal

problems, both on the level of international humanitarian law and the respective state-level laws of troop-contributing nations. This legal groundwork would have to be codified, inter alia, in the respective 'Status of Forces Agreements' – in quotation marks, as it concerns Allied territory – between NATO and the host nations as the basis for all further planning. Without finding common ground regarding the legal framework of NATO's EFP as *an operation*, and below the threshold of open warfare, NATO would risk being essentially blockaded when the time comes.

Second, building on those debates, NATO members contributing to the four battalions will have to harmonize their Rules of Engagements (RoE) and minimize national caveats. In sub-conventional scenarios, caveats become fault lines to exploit. While they can be worked around in most missions, this may not hold in the face of 'sub-conventional' challenges. A German battalion commander leading, say, a company each from Norway, Germany and the Netherlands, has to know that all three tactical units would operate according to the same ground rules when being confronted by violent demonstrations or other possible scenarios – and would, ideally, be all adequately equipped to rely on non-lethal means should the situation require the use of force.

The harmonization of RoE would be conducted at the Alliance level and in discussions between the national capitals, with the Military Committee and SHAPE being the main coordinating institutions. Much work has already been put into preparing the ground for quicker and sustained NATO deployments, and future harmonization could build on that. However, harmonization between the host nation and the respective framework nation, and within the multinational battalions, is even more important to prevent fault lines *within* contingents. Building on the same countries to provide the annual contingents would, of course, greatly facilitate such planning. Thus, while the operational planning and command will likely be a NATO task, national capitals will have to lay the groundwork – thereby hopefully diminishing the temptation for unilateral micromanagement should the situation on the ground escalate.

Third, on a firm legal basis and with harmonized rules of engagement, NATO will have to develop contingency plans for sub-conventional scenarios. These contingency plans, as routinely developed for conventional NATO operations, would have to be realistic, and they would have to be agreed upon at an Alliance level to minimize political friction should a scenario materialize. Only with a clear delineation of responsibilities between the troop-contributing states and NATO's Command Structure can the risk of operational and tactical frictions with potentially significant strategic fallout be reduced.

NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the east through multinational battalions will be a critical step in enhancing the Alliance's conventional deterrence posture. However, if not thought through, this presence might increase NATO's vulnerability to Russian subversion instead of reducing it. Erasing the fault lines within the forward deployed battalions, and between the capitals of troop-contributing nations, might appear to be an insignificant step, yet it could go a long way in complicating Russian 'divide and rule' policies in the years ahead.

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