

Poland and NATO's next strategy: deterring Russia and making European Defence work

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Analysis

Poland is among the members of NATO whose fundamental security interests depend directly on the Alliance's ability to respond to the rapidly growing threat from Russia. Occupying a central position on the Alliance's Eastern Flank, Poland is now a natural focal point for almost every potential crisis involving Russia and NATO. While investing heavily in its national military capacity, Poland remains dependent for its defence on the readiness and capacity –understood both in political and military terms– of NATO to deter Russia and defend its easternmost Allies in a potential conflict with the country. Unprovoked Russian aggression against the Ukraine, regardless of how it unfolds, serves as a powerful call for continuing the adaptation of NATO to the Russian threat. It should be guided by the assumption that in coming years Putin's Russia, or any other Russian leadership that might follow, is likely to be prone to engage in brinkmanship and may be willing to test NATO. Hence, for Poland it is a top priority to have NATO's next strategy confirm the centrality of collective defence as the Alliance's principal task.

But new security challenges for the transatlantic area have not disappeared with Russian troops crossing Ukraine's borders. If consensus is to be reached on the next strategy, NATO will have to develop a unique, new approach to the rise of China, climate change and the rapid development of emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs). And the Alliance will have to deal with one more, special issue: the ambition to build up the European capacity for military crisis management outside the Alliance's framework. If implemented in a hapless way, this concept may weaken the message of transatlantic solidarity and political cohesion –something every Allied strategy is largely about– and pull the much needed resources of European allies away from NATO. For Poland it is also important to have European defence initiatives work for NATO and further strengthen the credibility of Allied defence and deterrence against Russia, rather than undermine it.

The adaptation success story

From the perspective of Poland, the post-2014 adaptation of NATO to the resurgent Russian threat has largely been a success story. Over a relatively short time the Alliance has overhauled its broadly understood force posture. Arguably, Poland has been among the Eastern Flank Allies that benefited perhaps the most visibly from these changes.

Since 2017 a multinational battle group with the US as a framework nation has been deployed to Poland to set up both a tripwire and a first line of Allied defence against Russia (three similar battlegroups have been established in Lithuania, Latvia and

Estonia). In the same year a US armoured brigade began rotations to Poland too, strengthening the Allies' defence and deterrence potential against Russia. In the event of a crisis or conflict these forward deployed forces are meant to be reinforced by the NATO Response Force (NRF), enhanced with the so-called VJTF 'spearhead', whose elements are ready for deployment in only a few days. A next tier of NATO reinforcements has been established within the NATO Readiness Initiative (NRI) and comprises 30 mechanised battalions, 30 squadrons and 30 warships, to be ready in 30 days. New commands and updated operational plans, together with the Alliance's first post-Cold War military strategy complement the picture of a broad effort to make NATO capable of addressing a Russian threat. For Poland this was equal to reaching its main, post-accession goal as regards the Alliance: to have art. 5's guarantees underwritten by a credible capacity to act in a crisis or a conflict with Russia.

In early 2022 the Allies stepped up their efforts to face the increasing threat from Russia, amassing troops at the Ukrainian border and reinforcing their position on the Eastern Flank with additional assets, including a new multinational battlegroup in the Black Sea (in Romania with France as the framework nation, within the concept of Enhanced Vigilance Activities). The actual Russian aggression against Ukraine was met with further decisions: a new multinational battlegroup in Slovakia and the deployment of the VJTF being perhaps the most prominent cases. From a Polish perspective all these decisions are living proof of the validity of NATO's security guarantees, underwritten by the US commitment to European security.

Keeping Russia in focus

Indeed, by means of adaptation NATO complicated Russian calculations as regards a potential quick-win over the Alliance in an isolated, time- and space-limited conflict, engaging mostly Eastern Flank Allies. The result is that as of 2022 Russia does not have a clear upper hand over NATO in a hypothetical scenario involving a quick land grab, leading immediately to a *fait accompli* due to NATO's inability to respond promptly to Russian aggression with military means. If its strategic goals vis-à-vis the Alliance and the broadly understood West (boiling down to pushing the US out of Europe, or at least its Eastern Flank, making NATO a void alliance and dealing a blow to US credibility worldwide) were to be effectively pursued, Russia would have to quickly and heavily escalate a conflict with NATO.

Yet Russia is increasingly capable of doing so, even if it suffers horrendous losses in Ukraine. In the first place, it can easily build up a regional advantage over the Alliance in conventional forces (the ratio is thought to be around 3:1) as it has shown a great capacity to reinforce the potential Central and Eastern European theatre with additional forces from deep inside the country (as illustrated by the concentration of troops around Ukraine's borders prior to the invasion). Further, Russia is still able to saturate the battlefield with advanced missile systems (popularly referred to as anti-access/area-denial, or A2/AD weapons), which can impede the freedom of movement of NATO forces towards and inside the theatre. The relatively low level of such strikes in the Ukraine campaign suggests that many missile capabilities might be being kept in reserve. Last but not least, Russia has transformed Belarus, with which it forms a union state, into its outpost, multiplying options for effective manoeuvre warfare against the NATO Allies, as

is now the case with the threat of the Belarus regime committing troops to Russia's Ukrainian campaign.

It is therefore fair to say that what NATO is now facing on its Eastern Flank is a far more complicated picture than at the time when the main elements of today's Allied force posture were designed. That is why Poland argues that the adaptation of NATO to the Russian threat should be again be considered an open issue. The Alliance should keep all the options of reinforcing its force on the table and make them contingent on the evolution of the threat from Russia.

Towards an enhanced EU crisis management capacity

There is no doubt, however, that the question on how to continue strengthening the Allies' defence and deterrence potential will be balanced with the need to address new security challenges. But NATO's response in this regard is unlikely to require changes in its force posture. In fact, it was in the context of the rise of China, the effects of climate change and the rapid development of EDTs that the need to improve the political –rather than military– dimension of NATO was raised. The main outlier here is the issue of an autonomous European crisis management capacity.

The proposal set forth in the *Strategic Compass* involves the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (EU RDC) together with adequate command and control capabilities, a defence planning mechanism and a cycle of live exercises. The EU RDC concept assumes that the EU will be able to deploy a multinational brigade-size joint force, supported by European strategic and tactical enablers. Command and control over this force would be provided by an operational headquarters of the EU –the MPCC cell developed into a proper OHQ–. To allow a swift deployment of this force in scenarios of various crisis management operations in the neighbourhood of the EU, the latter must establish a cycle of first-ever live exercises.

This is a clear step-up from the EU battle groups, which have constituted the only exclusive EU military capability for the past 15 years. Typically built by clusters of EU member states and offered for a six-month-long standby, they comprised around 1,000 troops from only land forces and in practice relied on national C2 capabilities (though the MPCC can also play the role of EU OHQ). What is, however, revolutionary in the EU RDC proposal is that the conceptual 'Euro-brigade' is intended to be a joint and enabled force. 'Jointness' means that land units would have to be enhanced with extra naval and air assets. Proper enablement, in turn, would require a pool of systems like strategic airlift and mid-air refuelling, ISR at the tactical and operational levels (provided by drones of different sizes), secure strategic communications (requiring space-based assets), medical support (deployable field hospitals, etc) and perhaps also offensive weapons, such as precision-guided munitions, which may be needed in some particularly heavy combat scenarios, to name only a few. This has to be seen as a far-reaching proposal, which may harm NATO through a combination of political and technical effects.

The potential costs of European ambitions for NATO

On a political level the EU RDC has already highlighted divisions between the Allies. States with a strong transatlantic policy orientation, like Poland, seem to be concerned that any decision on going forward with this concept may be detrimental to the political cohesion of the Alliance, so necessary for having the next strategy adopted swiftly and presented as a sign of unity. So far, every proposal on endowing Europe with an autonomous, EU-independent military capacity has led to both transatlantic and intra-European tensions over notorious issues: the potential duplication of NATO by the EU (a single set of forces), a US decoupling from Europe and the discrimination of non-EU NATO members.

What exacerbates such concerns today is the fact that the Strategic Compass will be adopted later this month, prior to NATO's next strategy, scheduled for roll-out at the Madrid summit in late June. Consequently, it will –in one way or another– set the groundwork for the Allies' work on finalising the strategy. Messaging matters: if the EU agrees on its highest-ever level of ambition in the military dimension only weeks before NATO presents its new strategy, a perception may arise that the primacy of the Alliance in safeguarding peace in Europe is now effectively challenged.

This may occur regardless of reassuring language about the complementarity of European defence efforts with NATO as indicated –not exclusively but perhaps most importantly– in the joint Franco-US statement endorsed by Presidents Emmanuel Macron and Joe Biden on 29 October 2021. What may not help is the fact that NATO's non-EU members –the US, Canada and Norway– were invited last year to an EU military mobility project run within the mechanism of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO); and the expected third EU-NATO joint declaration, tightening the framework for practical cooperation of both organisations, may not prevent such a perception from gaining ground either. Simply, a more US-independent Europe –particularly in military terms– will be always seen as a trigger of a process that might lead to a deep reappraisal of the transatlantic bond.

At the technical level European defence ambitions may generate even further friction with NATO. On paper the EU RDC could be seen as a pool of forces, as an amalgam of existing capabilities: EU battle groups, enhanced with extra assets, including strategic and tactical enablers. In practice, however, the European NATO Allies have a finite number of forces and capabilities fit for use in multinational settings. These units constitute only a fraction of their military strength: usually there are only certain units kept on a high enough level of readiness to be earmarked for initiatives like EU battle groups, the NATO Response Force, forward-deployed forces on the Eastern Flank, both EU and NATO missions and operations, and flagship Allied exercises.

Consequently, implementing the ambition of a joint and fully enabled 'Euro-brigade' would require most EU member states to make a significant effort to update existing plans. Military planners from capitals would have to either juggle already made commitments in an attempt to find some way of accommodating novel EU needs or generate new capabilities. Regarding the latter, it would be misleading to look at the EU RDC only through the perspective of numbers and consider it an easy task. It goes without saying that creating one more multinational brigade by a group of European Allies

should not be particularly detrimental to the pool of forces available for NATO (nevertheless, it might still have some effect). But to establish a system of rotating brigades, as in the case of the EU battlegroups, would be an entirely different matter. And this may be the next step, as all crisis management operations prove that effective engagement requires a pool of available forces on the horizon.

But it is the enablers issue that might have particular implications for NATO. Already scarce in Europe, enablers of European Allies may simply become unavailable for NATO if attached too firmly to the proposed EU RDC. Furthermore, the next generation of Europe's own enablers –and other weapon systems, which will matter on the future battlefield– will be developed almost exclusively under EU frameworks through PESCO projects and R&D programmes financed from the European Defence Fund. What might follow is the Europeanisation of their maintenance and also of their operational use. This means that NATO might gradually lose its primacy as the main driver of national capability planning processes and armaments programmes. This may have direct effects on the availability of forces for the Alliance, their interoperability and, as a result, also the credibility of NATO defence and deterrence.

Conclusion

Facing a sustained threat from Russia, Poland is unlikely to ever have any better security guarantees than those from art 5 of the Washington Treaty. But to be credible they require NATO to sustain political cohesion, keep the US fully engaged –politically and militarily– in upholding peace in Europe and continue to invest in its defence and deterrence potential. Hence, from a Polish perspective, new European defence initiatives should have one main purpose: to reinforce NATO by means of facilitating the development of the overall military capacity of the European Allies and by improving burden sharing.

What NATO is facing in terms of the evolving Russian threat is a twofold challenge: from the increasing Russian brinkmanship as regards potential and from its grey-zone/hybrid warfare methods. In both these areas progress in European defence may actually work for NATO. The frameworks of the PESCO and EDF could greatly facilitate the development of at least some capabilities that the European Allies lack. There is, however, only one crucial condition: that NATO and EU defence planning processes are aligned and conjoint (in the EU's case these processes are directly linked to the programming of work within both the PESCO and EDF and thereby even more important). All crucial capabilities developed by the EU should respond to NATO needs and not only be available for the Alliance but actively used in NATO initiatives and missions. Another condition is to drop the uncompromising approach to defence-industrial cooperation with the US, which assumes that EU member states should concentrate on European cooperation in this regard. Instead, nations should be free to choose if they want to pursue a European or a transatlantic course in acquiring the capabilities they need. The suggested new programme for rearming the Eastern Flank nations (Lend-Lease 2.0) should be welcomed by Europe, even if it jeopardises some of the goals of Europe's defence-industrial policy. Surely, within the renewed commitment to increase the military capability of the European NATO allies, there will be also room

for European armaments programmes and, perhaps in the first place, for transatlantic cooperation.

An avenue to foster EU-US cooperation on technologies can be provided by NATO's focus on EDTs, most notably by establishing the Innovation Fund and the Defence Innovation Accelerator –which can naturally be linked at various levels not only with the European Commission-run EDF but also with the European Defence Agency. Finally, the EU has a vast potential to improve the ability of member states to address the hybrid threats posed by Russia. The Strategic Compass proposes a step-up in this regard by establishing an EU Hybrid Toolbox along with new instruments in the area of – specifically– cybersecurity. It would thus be in Poland's interest –and all other Eastern Flank nations– if states focus on these issues, rich with potential topics for cooperation in which European defence can be effectively employed to strengthen the credibility of NATO's defence and deterrence, instead of focusing on building a pool of forces for the EU, which is a politically divisive exercise and a concept that is practically cumbersome to implement.

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