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NATO Force Planning Without the Soviet Threat

TED GREENWOOD and STUART JOHNSON

In November 1990, the 22 member states of NATO and the Warsaw Pact signed a document that declared, among other things, that they were “no longer adversaries” and would “refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or the political independence of any State.”¹ The event was hardly noted in the press. Coming as it did on the heels of the collapse of communist governments in Eastern Europe and the decision to unite East with West Germany, and with an apparently benign government ruling in Moscow, the Declaration seemed to do no more than confirm the obvious.

At the same Paris meeting of heads of state and government of parties to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the alliance members also signed the treaty limiting their conventional forces in Europe (CFE),² and the full 34 participants in CSCE signed a new agreement on confidence- and security-building measures in Europe.³ These latter documents, years in the making, attracted the primary attention. Only later, as NATO set about the serious business of articulating the new strategic concept that the NATO countries had promised at their London summit meeting the previous July,⁴ was the problem that the Declaration posed for NATO force planning realized.

The problem can be simply stated: in the absence of its traditional adversaries, NATO can no longer do force planning in its accustomed manner. For over 40 years, NATO force planning began by identifying military threats posed by the Soviet Union and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. These threats were translated into particular scenarios, which included detailed estimates of the size and quality of the forces that NATO might find arrayed against it, the length of time that NATO might have to prepare its defense after detecting hostile activities, and the strategy and tactics that the adversary might use in its offensive operations. These scenarios, in turn, were employed as a basis

for sizing and structuring NATO's forces. For example, the primary scenario that NATO long used for force planning envisioned a Warsaw Pact attack against the Central Region employing some 90 to 100 divisions, preceded by an air attack against airfields, nuclear facilities, command and control installations, and other fixed targets, all with no more than 14 days' warning time.

NATO might well be in for a turbulent decade on its periphery, as many expect, but in the absence of identifiable adversaries, threat scenarios are no longer adequate as the basis for NATO force planning and certainly are not sufficient to win public support for national defense budgets. Yet no alternative basis for force planning has emerged. The abandonment of the term "threat" in the alliance's New Strategic Concept⁵ and its replacement by the term "risk" acknowledges the problem, but does not yet suggest a solution. Risks, by their nature, are highly uncertain and elusive; they do not suggest a methodology by which NATO and national military bureaucracies can do serious force planning. If the alliance's force planning process is to survive, a new conceptual basis will be required, one that does not rely on the outdated concept of threat scenarios but, at the same time, offers planners something more substantial than elusive risks.

In many ways, not only force planning but also the survival of NATO itself is at stake. The annual force planning exercise, in which almost all member nations participate, is the central business of the alliance and the glue that holds it together. Through the mechanism of combined force planning, NATO members share information about their military forces and coordinate their defense plans. What would otherwise be independent national planning is transformed into alliance planning, encouraging each member nation's security debate and national forces to reflect alliance-wide interests. Unilateral national defense policies and the attendant risk of misunderstanding—or even arms races among member states—are avoided. For all these reasons, NATO's force planning process is as important to preserve as NATO itself.

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Making NATO more political would not compensate for its loss. Without a meaningful force planning process, NATO, while not likely to disappear, would certainly risk drifting into irrelevance. Because NATO is the primary institution for guaranteeing European security and stability, preserving its vitality serves the interests not only of its own members but also of the rest of Europe and the world. Therefore, achieving a new conceptual basis for NATO force planning is indeed both an important and an urgent task.

The purpose of this article is to articulate such a new conceptual basis for NATO force planning and to illustrate in a general way its utility to force planners as a guide for sizing and structuring NATO's conventional forces. Detailed force sizing and structuring, which are properly done on a classified level through the NATO force planning process, will not be attempted here.

Underlying Principles

The proposed conceptual basis for NATO force planning is based on three principles. The first and most important is that NATO should no longer seek to define detailed threat scenarios but rather seek to prevent excessive imbalances between NATO military capabilities and those of nations on its periphery, including both the confederation of former Soviet republics⁶ and others. The balance of forces in Europe is important for two reasons. The presence of an excessive force imbalance would harbor the seed of instability and provide the temptation, if not the motivation, for stronger states to employ their forces to coerce or intimidate others or even to initiate hostilities. Over the long term, this is an unstable basis for a lasting peace. Even a state with a benign intent one day could have hostile intent another, and the ability to act out that hostility might well increase the likelihood of such a transformation.⁷ In addition, the balance of forces between states has always been an important determinant of the psychological context for interstate relations in peacetime, influencing not only perceptions of security but also the conduct of day-to-day diplomacy over issues to which military forces are not immediately central. This will remain true in Europe for the foreseeable future.

The second principle is that the military capabilities of those countries on NATO's periphery, other than the confederation, that could pose a threat to NATO members must be taken into account more explicitly in NATO force planning than they have been in the past.⁸ The third principle is that NATO's force posture must continue to be supportive of the alliance's military strategy and political objectives, and must continue to accommodate national requirements, including the continued viability of their military organizations and, in some cases, non-NATO requirements.

Because of the number of largely separate military capabilities that must now be taken into account, NATO's overall conventional force posture must in the future be cobbled together from a series of separate requirements,

each one tied to a particular military capability of a potential enemy that must be counterbalanced. The table below lists these various capabilities. Each will be discussed in order to demonstrate how the proposed conceptual basis for NATO force planning could be employed.⁹

Conventional Military Capabilities NATO Must Counterbalance

Confederation:

- Peacetime Force Deployments
- Medium-Range Bomber Force
- Forces Potentially Oriented Toward NATO's Central Region
- Forces Potentially Oriented Toward North Norway
- Forces Potentially Oriented Toward NATO's Southern Region

Other:

- Conventional Capabilities of Turkey's Southeastern Neighbors
 - Mass-Casualty Weapons Within Reach of Southern Europe
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It is worth noting initially that several of the military capabilities that NATO must counterbalance are tied to the Southern Region: confederation or other successor state forces in the Caucasus and the Ukraine; forces of Turkey's southeastern neighbors; and mass-casualty weapons within range of Southern Region countries. In addition, NATO countries are concerned about instability in southeastern Europe and out-of-area contingencies in Southwest Asia and North Africa. NATO's Southern Region clearly will play a growing role in NATO force planning in the future.

Counterbalancing Confederation Military Capabilities

Despite the changes in Moscow's foreign and defense policy of the last five years, the recent turmoil within the former Soviet Union, and the possibility of more fragmentation than now seems likely, the confederation will probably possess the largest military forces in Europe. Five different conventional military capabilities can be identified, each of which must be counterbalanced by NATO forces.

- *Peacetime Force Deployments*

Unless interstate relations in Europe are transformed and a security arrangement is established that does not rely on military forces, the peacetime force balance in Europe, as indicated by quantitative measures, will remain an important component of security for NATO countries. With the demise of the Warsaw Pact, the most relevant balance will be between NATO forces and those of the confederation.

The CFE treaty provides equal aggregate entitlements to NATO and former Warsaw Pact states in five categories of treaty-limited equipment: battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, artillery, attack helicopters, and combat aircraft. Moreover, as a result of the CFE sufficiency rules, NATO's entitlement to this equipment exceeds the Soviet Union's entitlement.¹⁰ Despite these provisions of CFE, however, the confederation's conventional force inventories in the Atlantic-to-the-Urals region could remain larger than relevant NATO forces. NATO's current inventories of artillery, attack helicopters, and combat aircraft are below its CFE entitlement, and NATO inventories are programmed to decrease over the next several years in all of the treaty-limited equipment categories.

Not all numerical disparities are cause for concern, however. There will be no more reason in the future for NATO to field conventional forces in peacetime that numerically match the confederation's than there has been in the past. NATO's technological advantages, superior training, and the advantages of being a defender can compensate to some extent for numerical inferiority. Nonetheless, because of the political saliency of the peacetime Europe-wide quantitative force balance, NATO should continue to pay attention to it and avoid conventional force reductions, either on land in Europe or at sea around it, that will result in an excessive force imbalance favoring the confederation.

Deciding what constitutes an acceptable peacetime conventional force posture in Europe and even how to measure it will continue to be problematic. The attention given in the CFE negotiations to the Atlantic-to-the-Urals geographic region, various subregions, and particular categories of equipment suggests that these will remain salient factors. There is, however, no logical or empirical way to decide what degree of imbalance would be excessive. This is necessarily a policy judgment, subject to debate in Brussels and all NATO capitals.

- *Medium-Range Bomber Force*

The confederation's Fencer and Backfire medium-range bombers need not be reduced under CFE. Although uncertainties abound, there is every reason to expect that it will eliminate primarily older and short-range ground-attack aircraft. As a result, the number of Fencers and Backfires within range of Europe is unlikely to decline and could even continue to grow as Badgers and Blinders are retired. Flying from airfields in Belarus, Ukraine, or Russia, they can reach and therefore hold at risk almost all of Europe. After CFE reductions are complete, these aircraft will be the only forces capable of a short-warning attack against the Central Region of NATO. They also contribute significantly to the confederation's military capability relative to North Norway and southern Europe.

Although an air attack in isolation is unlikely, if this residual capability is not countered, the prospect could foster feelings of insecurity in Western

Europe. As NATO's peacetime deployments are reduced, therefore, adequate air defense capability, including surface-to-air missiles and interceptor aircraft, should be maintained at high readiness in Europe to provide a counterpoise to confederation Fencers and Backfires.

- *Forces Potentially Oriented Toward NATO's Central Region*

Even after withdrawals from Eastern Europe and CFE-mandated force reductions, the confederation could still retain a military force capable of posing a threat to NATO's Central Region. However, depending on how its ground and air forces are ultimately configured, a good six months and possibly more of highly visible mobilization would be needed before an attack could be launched against the Central Region.

The size and configuration of ground and air forces needed to counterbalance this Soviet capability could be derived only from detailed analysis by NATO force planners. However, assuming that NATO would react in a timely fashion to a threatening mobilization and would possess adequate strategic mobility assets, some of the general features of such a force structure can be discerned:

- Fewer ground and air units will be needed than in the past.
- Only minimal forces need be forward-deployed because time will be available to move ground units from western Germany and elsewhere to establish positions well east of the traditional NATO defense line.
- Much of NATO's main defense forces needed to counterbalance this capability could be held as reserve in peacetime.
- Fewer US augmentation divisions and tactical fighter squadrons would be needed and fewer of the former would need to have equipment prepositioned in Europe.

All of the above features are consistent with the outlines of a future force structure for the Central Region now agreed to by the NATO Defense Ministers.¹¹

Of particular note in the changed strategic geography of Europe is the fact that the southern approaches to Denmark are now well buffered by eastern Germany and Poland. In consequence, the allied ground and air augmentation forces programmed for Denmark have diminished military significance and thus from a purely military perspective are candidates for elimination. However, political imperatives might argue for retaining a small commitment.

Mobility assets will remain crucial to ensure that adequate US ground and air forces could be moved to Europe during mobilization. However, because of the increase in expected warning time, heavy reliance can be placed on sealift to move unit equipment, and only modest reliance need be placed on prepositioning and airlift, the latter primarily to move tactical fighter squadrons. Time will be available for multiple trips of sealift assets

and for numerous trips for airlift assets. Therefore, current and programmed government-owned and government-controlled assets, including the C-17 and the Ready Reserve Fleet, would be adequate to the task when augmented by privately held equipment that would be requisitioned for the purpose. Little to no additional sealift assets would be necessary to meet NATO needs.

The ability to defend sea lanes of communication will also remain an essential part of NATO's hedge. In the unlikely event of mobilization, the sea lanes across the Atlantic must be secure for the initial surge of unit equipment moving to Europe and later for sustainment shipping. Adequate naval forces must be retained to accomplish that task. However, more anti-submarine warfare assets than at present could be kept in the reserves.

- *Forces Potentially Oriented Toward North Norway*

In some respects, the potential for North Norway to be threatened has declined. An attack against Norway in isolation is improbable, and its likelihood has diminished along with that of aggression against the rest of Europe. Similarly, warning time available to Norway prior to a ground offensive has lengthened, as it has for all of NATO.

However, the actual military capability facing North Norway has declined less than for the Central Region. Under the CFE Treaty, force reductions in the Leningrad Military District can be minimal. Moreover, there is ample modern equipment to upgrade ground forces in the region, and combat aircraft, most notably Fencers, have been relocated to the Kola Peninsula.¹² The Northern Fleet is being modernized with new and improved combatant vessels, even as the numbers decline modestly. Norway remains concerned about the "predominant Soviet military power" in the north and the potential threat it poses.¹³

Because of its small size and exposed geographic position, Norway is incapable on its own of maintaining forces adequate to counterbalance forces across its border in peacetime or to defend successfully in the unlikely event of conflict. Therefore, in order to ensure an adequate balance of forces in the north, Norway should avoid excessive reductions in its own forces, and other NATO countries should maintain most forces now committed to the defense of North Norway. NATO reaction forces and their transportation are especially important to demonstrate NATO solidarity and resolve in support of Norway. Naval forces must be adequate to defend sea lanes across the Atlantic and through the Norwegian Sea.

- *Forces Potentially Oriented Toward NATO's Southern Region*

In some respects the potential threat to NATO's Southern Region has also declined. As in the case of North Norway, a confederation attack against the Southern Region in isolation is most improbable. It is unlikely that the confederation would be supported by Bulgaria or Romania, either through use

of airfields or for troop transit. This makes a ground attack against Greece and European Turkey much more difficult than in the past. Longer warning time also applies in the Southern Region. In particular, the ground threat to Italy has all but vanished, especially as a result of the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Hungary. As in the case of Denmark, from a purely military perspective, the allied ground and air augmentation forces programmed for northern Italy are candidates for elimination. Again, however, political imperatives might argue for retaining a small commitment.

However, the confederation's military capabilities facing Greece and especially Turkey have declined less. Under the CFE Treaty, ground forces in the Kiev, Odessa, Transcaucasus, and North Caucasus Military Districts of the Soviet Union can be reduced disproportionately less than in the Western Military Districts. Units in the old Southwestern and Southern Theaters of Operation can be upgraded with equipment being withdrawn elsewhere.

Greece and Turkey, like Norway, are incapable on their own of maintaining forces adequate to counterbalance confederation forces in peacetime or to defend successfully in the unlikely event of conflict. Therefore, in order to prevent an excessive imbalance of forces facing the Southern Region, Greece and especially Turkey should avoid excessive reductions of their own forces. The US Sixth Fleet should be maintained in the Southern Region in peacetime. NATO countries should maintain most forces committed to the defense of Greece and Turkey. NATO Reaction Forces and assets to transport them are especially important to demonstrate NATO solidarity and resolve in support of Greece and Turkey. Maritime forces must be adequate to defend sea lanes across the Atlantic and through the Mediterranean. The plan to base US tactical fighter squadrons at Crotona, Italy, now killed by congressional action, would also have been very useful.

Counterbalancing Military Capabilities of Others

The military capabilities of countries that have traditionally not been primary concerns of NATO must now also be taken into account in the alliance's force planning to ensure that excessive imbalances do not occur.

• *Conventional Capabilities of Turkey's Southeastern Neighbors*

Turkey continues to face instability and uncertainty across its southeastern borders. NATO must therefore provide an adequate balance to the military power of Turkey's neighbors—Iran, Syria, and Iraq—to deter intimidation or military adventurism and to hedge against the possibility that deterrence might fail. Turkey plans to maintain a large military force and would be able to deter or deal with small contingencies on its own. However, planning for military assistance from allies at an early stage would enhance deterrence by demonstrating alliance solidarity and resolve. To meet larger

contingencies and to defend successfully should deterrence fail, Turkey would need to count on military assistance from its allies.

The military capacities of Turkey and other NATO countries needed to counterbalance confederation capabilities relevant to Turkey and Greece, including especially NATO Reaction Forces and the US Sixth Fleet, would be adequate to counterbalance other capabilities as well. Therefore, this case does not generate any new force structure requirements. Nonetheless, it does underline the importance of NATO's maintaining a robust capability to reinforce Turkey.

• *Mass-Casualty Weapons Within Reach of Southern Europe*

Several states on NATO's periphery now possess ballistic missiles capable of attacking NATO's southern states with conventional or chemical munitions.¹⁴ During the 1990s, the number, range, and sophistication of such missiles is likely to increase. Moreover, unless the effectiveness of the missile technology control and nuclear nonproliferation regimes improves markedly and unless an effective global ban of chemical weapons is achieved, which now seems improbable, missile, chemical, and perhaps nuclear capabilities are likely to spread to other Middle Eastern and North African states.

This ability to attack southern Europe with mass-casualty weapons can be countered in two ways. First, their use can be deterred by maintaining a credible retaliatory capability. In the absence of maintaining chemical weapons, which most NATO countries are reluctant to do, a credible retaliatory capability would require US and allied aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean capable of attacking hundreds of miles inland and land-based, ground-attack aircraft based in or programmed for reinforcement to southern Europe. Some of the latter should preferably be American to demonstrate US commitment and enable a rapid reaction. Some should also possess nuclear strike capability in order to deter nuclear attacks. Second, defensive capabilities can be deployed to reduce the effectiveness of mass-casualty weapons. NATO should deploy adequate chemical warfare defenses and develop an anti-tactical ballistic missile system deployable across southern Europe.

Forces Employable Out of Area

European members of NATO have been unwilling to give NATO out-of-area missions or even to discuss within NATO the coordination of national military operations for out-of-area contingencies. Some prefer coordination of operations by European forces through the West European Union. For the foreseeable future, therefore, NATO is unlikely to generate an alliance military capability with acknowledged out-of-area missions.

Nonetheless, NATO states have economic, security, and other reasons to be concerned about instability and conflict outside the NATO area,

especially in southeastern Europe, Southwest Asia, and the southern and eastern Mediterranean littorals. Only under the aegis of NATO can European and US forces train and prepare for combined out-of-area operations. Although unacknowledged, there is broad understanding of this critical role for NATO, and generic planning might be possible. The NATO Reaction Forces, intended for NATO missions; could be employed and would be adequate on their own for most out-of-area contingencies, either as coordinated national forces or as a NATO force, should member countries ever decide to do so. Their missions might include dispute mediation, crisis management, peacekeeping, conflict suppression, or conflict containment. Larger contingencies would require allocation of additional national forces, including US forces deployed from the continental United States.

Conclusions

In the future NATO's force planning can and should be based not on threat scenarios, but on the need to avoid excessive force imbalances between NATO forces and those of others, including especially the confederation and other countries with a capability to strike NATO members. In surveying the many conventional military capabilities that NATO forces must counterbalance, several general conclusions emerge about NATO's future force structure:

- Southern Europe will play a more central role in future NATO force planning than in the past.

- NATO must avoid excessive quantitative imbalances relative to the confederation in its peacetime force deployments in Europe.

- NATO must maintain adequate air defense capability, including surface-to-air missiles and interceptor aircraft, at high readiness in peacetime.

- Allied ground and air augmentation forces programmed for Denmark and northern Italy have diminished military importance.

- NATO forces needed to counterbalance confederation forces potentially oriented toward NATO's Central Region will require fewer active ground and air units than in the past, including the US augmentation which will itself require less equipment prepositioned in Europe.

- Norway, Greece, and Turkey should be encouraged to avoid excessive reductions in their own forces, and other NATO countries should be encouraged to maintain most forces committed to the defense of North Norway, Greece, and Turkey.

- NATO's Reaction Forces and transport are especially important to demonstrate NATO solidarity and resolve in support of Norway, Greece, and Turkey.

- NATO's Reaction Forces would have the capability to be employed out-of-area for dispute mediation, crisis management, peacekeeping,

conflict suppression, or conflict containment, either as coordinated national forces or as a NATO force, should member countries ever decide to do so.

- NATO should deter the use of mass-casualty weapons against southern Europe and take actions that would reduce their effectiveness if used.

- For augmentation forces, greater reliance can be placed on sealift and less on airlift and prepositioning. Current sealift assets and planned airlift assets, including the C-17, seem adequate to meet NATO mobility requirements.

- Maritime forces must be adequate to defend sea lanes across the Atlantic, through the Norwegian Sea, and through the Mediterranean.

Most important, we have sought to demonstrate that as a conceptual basis for NATO force planning, the concept of force balancing, unlike the concept of risk, can be a useful guide to NATO force planners as they continue day to day to carry out the alliance's most important function.

NOTES

1. Joint Declaration of Twenty-Two States, paragraph 2, 20 November 1990.

2. *Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe*, Paris, 19 November 1990.

3. Vienna Document, Negotiations on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures, November 1990.

4. "London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London on 5th-6th July 1990," NATO Press Communique S-1 (90) 36, 6 July 1990, paragraph 20.

5. *The Alliance's New Strategic Concept*, NATO Press Communique S-1 (91) 85, 7 November 1991.

6. At this writing, the former Soviet Union has given way to its republics and a newly proclaimed Commonwealth of Euro-Asian Independent States as its successor states. The latter seems likely to have control of most, although not all, military forces of the former Soviet Union. Because of the cumbersomeness of this name and the uncertainty about its longevity, we have chosen to use a more generic term, the confederation of former Soviet republics, or for short, the confederation, to mean whatever major state ultimately succeeds the Soviet Union.

7. The best recent example is probably Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Possessing superior forces relative to Kuwait and those that he expected might support Kuwait, Saddam used these forces first to try to coerce Kuwait and then to capture it.

8. This concept is analogous to the recent changes in US military strategy from containment of the Soviet Union to a broader set of requirements, not tightly tied to specific scenarios. See, for example, the testimony of Brigadier General William Fedorochko, Jr., Deputy Director of Force Structure and Resources, Joint Staff, before the Senate Armed Service Committee, Manpower and Personnel Subcommittee, 5 June 1991.

9. The same approach could be employed for NATO's nuclear force posture.

10. Although the former Soviet Republics have declared that they will be bound by arms control treaties entered into by the Soviet Union, whether this occurs in practice and, if so, exactly how the Soviet Union's CFE entitlement will be divided among its successor states remains to be seen.

11. Paul L. Montgomery, "NATO Agrees to Expand a Rapid-Reaction Force," *The New York Times*, 14 April 1991, sec. I, p. 4.

12. Robert Toth, "Cream of Soviet Military is Flowing North," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 May 1991, p. 3.

13. Johan Jørgen Holst, "Toward New Security Arrangements in Europe," speech to the 1991 NATO Symposium, Washington, D.C., 18 April 1991.

14. See Steve Fetter, "Ballistic Missiles and Weapons of Mass Destruction," *International Security*, 16 (Summer 1991), 5-42; Thomas L. McNaugher, "Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons: The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War," *International Security*, 15 (Fall 1990), 5-34; Janne E. Nolan and Albert D. Weelon, "Third World Ballistic Missiles," *Scientific American*, 263 (August 1990), 34-40; Martin S. Navias, "Ballistic missile proliferation in the Middle East," *Survival*, 31 (May/June 1989), 225-39; Aaron Karp, *The United States and the Soviet Union and the Control of Ballistic Missile Proliferation in the Middle East* (New York: Institute for East-West Security Studies, 1990); and Mark Heller, "Coping with Missile Proliferation in the Middle East," *Orbis*, 35 (Winter 1991), 15-28.