

# Can NATO's new Very High Readiness Joint Task force deter?

Jens Ringsmose & Sten Rynning<sup>1</sup>

When NATO-allies met at their Wales summit in September 2014, the D-word was back in vogue. Not in a muttering, shy or implicit way, but unambiguously and straightforward. For the first time in more than two decades NATO's heads of states and governments openly discussed how best to "deter" a distinct strategic rival – Russia.

Chief among the Welsh summit initiatives was the decision to set up a new multinational spearhead force – the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) – as part of an enhanced NATO Response Force (NRF) and within the framework of a so-called Readiness Action Plan (RAP). The VJTF will likely be announced an "operational capacity" at NATO's coming summit in Warsaw, in July 2016, as an indicator of a serious approach to deterrence.

Concomitantly, the United States has greatly expanded and extended its so-called European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) that was launched in 2014 as a response to Russia's annexation of Crimea. From early 2017, an armored American army brigade will be present in Eastern Europe on a "persistent rotational" basis with its heavy gear pre-positioned in Europe. This will bring the US land force presence in Europe up to two permanently stationed brigades and one that rotates in nine out of twelve months. The US air force and navy will maintain their enhanced presence (in effect, defer planned withdrawals for as long as it takes) and be particularly visible in the Baltic and Black Sea areas.

The Alliance has taken important first steps toward establishing credible deterrence, but it needs to do more. Credible deterrence requires not only adequate military *capacities*,

such as the VJTF; it equally requires a proper *doctrine* that pulls the capacities credible together and then a culture of decision-making and communication that establishes NATO's reputation for resolve. Capacities, doctrine, and *culture* – these are key dimensions of NATO's deterrence posture. We shall examine them in turn and pinpoint where NATO has work to do.

## Capacity: The VJTF and the "Enhanced NRF"

Since Wales, NATO's leadership has repeatedly trumpeted the VJTF as a rapid response force that will substantially enhance the Alliance's ability to counter military aggression against its members. Unfortunately, this involves a stretch of imagination. The VJTF might be quicker and punch with greater weight than yesterday's force, but it is still far too small to prevent a determined Russia from moving into, say, Latvia. Despite the magnificent headlines – "adaptation", "the biggest reinforcement of our collective defense" and "force enhancement" – the VJTF does not represent a dramatic break with what NATO is already doing in military terms. The VJTF adds readiness but *not* much real muscle to NATO and is in this sense mostly old wine in new bottles.

True, when fully implemented the new Enhanced NRF (of which the VJTF will be the high-readiness element) will *appear* to be three times as strong as yesterday's quick reaction force, the old NRF. As announced by NATO's secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, the Enhanced NRF will consist of up to 40,000 personnel, while the rapidly deployable parts of the pre-Wales NRF (the so-called Immediate Response Force – IRF) consisted of about 13,000 personnel.

However, to get to the "up to 40,000 personnel", NATO has resorted to somewhat creative bookkeeping. When the Alliance counted its high-readiness forces before Wales, it focused solely on the 13,000 troops that were on "stand-by" as part of the IRF – not the 13,000 personnel that were pre-

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paring to be part of the IRF the next year (standing up), nor the 13,000 personnel that had just been on stand-by as part of the NRF the year before (standing down).

The new Enhanced NRF really does two things. First, it speeds up the reaction time of the stand-by forces (the spearhead 13,000). Second, it puts the other two teams on call for deployment – the 13,000 personnel training for stand-by and the 13,000 personnel winding down after stand-by. Together these latter approximately 26,000 troops will be labeled the “Initial Follow On Forces Group” – or IFFG. The IFFG are meant to be “high-readiness forces that deploy quickly following the VJTF, in response to a crisis.” In reality, the IFFG will be able to deploy within 30-45 days, which hardly makes it a “high-readiness force”.

To be fair, the new NRF is a more agile military tool than its predecessor. While troop numbers have certainly been somewhat artificially inflated, the VJTF and the IFFG are on much higher alert than the old NRF. Parts of the VJTF will be ready for deployment within 48 hours; the old IRF needed a full month (30 days) to deploy. Moreover, both the VJTF and the IFFG will be subjected to a much more rigorous and demanding training program than the old NRF. Future NRF-rotations will see many more snap-exercises and short notice inspections. Being on higher alert will unquestionably make the new NRF a more relevant tool; it might be noted that it likewise will make it a lot more expensive.

2 What is really new about NATO’s spearhead force is not the projected (modest) military improvements, however, but the fact that the NRF is for the first time being linked explicitly to collective defense and thus Article 5. Since its creation in 2002, the NRF was always perceived as a vehicle for transformation and – if need be – an operational capacity for out-of-area operations. The latter contingency never materialized, though NRF units on a couple of occasions were deployed—to offer emergency relief in Pakistan or protect Olympic sites in Greece. The NRF, though modeled on a US Marine Expeditionary Brigade, lacked operational purpose, not least as it unfolded in the shadow of the war in Afghanistan that sucked up the allies’ defense energy.

Russia’s actions in Ukraine have convinced policymakers that the eastern-most allies need assurances (and Russia deterrence), and the political reframing of the NRF became the obvious answer. As the alliance’s geostrategic pendulum swung back towards “regional NATO”, so did the NRF, which thus gained a real operational purpose for the first time. The next question is whether the Alliance can shape the right doctrine for the new force.

### **Doctrine: Back to deterrence**

Deterrence is a question of sending a strong signal to would-be aggressors – such as Russia – that the NATO realm is off limits. Deterrence can take distinctively different forms, though.

The politically convenient option for NATO is “deterrence by denial” – by which NATO would deny Russia access to its territory and riches. The political appeal lies in the promise of upholding the inviolability – the sanctuary – of all NATO territory. It is the equivalent of building a wall so high that Russia would be discouraged from climbing it. It involves three things. First a potent NATO force on the eastern border, deployed, ready and strong enough to respond to Russian aggression and dig in and fight. Second a prepared insurgency for the eventuality that Russian forces penetrate part of the border in order to deny them the ability to settle in. Finally a capacity to move people and capital out of the contested area so that Russia would not be able to count on capturing riches.

There are at least two problems with this option of denial. One concerns the intensity of Russian interests. If Russia were really set on capturing one or several of the Baltic states, it probably would not be dissuaded by the prospect of an insurgency and the loss of some riches. These two dimensions thus fall out of the equation.

That means that “denial” depends almost uniquely on NATO’s forward deployed forces, and the fact of the matter is that they simply will not attain the strength to provide for in-place deterrence. NATO is unwilling to forward deploy anything as large as or larger than a brigade (around 5,000 troops) – which would not only violate the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 (which NATO prefers to keep intact to occupy the moral high ground) and be expensive for western taxpayers, it would risk pulling Western troops into a static forward-posture inappropriate for the dynamic threats and risks emanating not only from Russia but also other parts of the world.

NATO must therefore fall back on the other option of “deterrence by punishment.” In this scenario NATO accepts that part of its domain – say, the Baltic states – are vulnerable to Russian aggression, but it promises to meet such aggression with a response in some other place – Kaliningrad, Murmansk, or event Vladivostok out east – so fierce that Russia will desist. It should be noted that the new NRF is a tripwire—as is the American forces deployed as part of the European Reassurance Initiative, and as are the European forces that soon will be deployed on permanent rotation to the frontline allies as part of NATO’s new Enhanced Forward Presence initiative—that can bring the hammer to blow: it will move quickly to border areas of concern and confront Russia, which would have the muscle to defeat the force—kill it, to put it bluntly—but knowing that such aggression would cause NATO to bring its hammer to bear.

The tricky part for NATO is to define its hammer. This hammer must consist of follow-on forces – not the IFFG, which is part of the tripwire, but the whole package of NATO forces, both conventional and nuclear. A hammer is big and therefore both expensive and politically controversial, though in

different measures. NATO could organize a mass of conventional forces and tie them into the overall doctrine of deterrence. This conventional option would be expensive at a scale that dwarfs the VJTF expenditure, which is already impressive. Inversely, NATO could fall back on nuclear deterrence, which is much more affordable but frankly beyond the pale of some allies.

NATO is ultimately likely to opt for a mix of forces— it’s “defense and deterrence posture review” of 2012 talks of an “appropriate mix of conventional and nuclear capabilities,” and this ambiguous wording is likely to endure. Ambiguity can help NATO foster an internal compromise, and it can keep Russia guessing, which can be good for deterrence. But there should be no mistaking: as NATO cannot do “deterrence by denial,” it must confront the fact that “deterrence by punishment” defines the inescapable element in its deterrence posture. Creative ambiguity might in this regard suffice for its public diplomacy, but because Russia will know how to distinguish between public diplomacy and capacity, NATO must develop a real punishment option.

#### **Culture: Establishing NATO’s Reputation for Resolve**

Soft power is really the backbone of the construct of deterrence, if by soft power we understand the capacity to convey resolve. We shall briefly discuss two facets of this soft deterrent power – decision-making and strategic communication. They tie in with a third facet, namely public opinion. Worryingly for NATO governments, public opinion in some key allied countries are turning against the idea that their country should come to the defense of other allies. Policy-makers should take this erosion of public support very seriously, and clear policy in regards to decision-making and strategic communication can help them do so.

Decision-making at NATO level is basically about speed and credibility. Speedy decisions are of essence if the VJTF is to move into a danger zone within 48 hours (NATO military authorities can assemble the force but political approval is necessary for its deployment and engagement). NATO can prepare its decision-making by improving its “early warning indicators,” but ultimately it comes down to the ability of each ally to establish a fast-track procedure for approval in the national capital, especially if parliamentary approval is required. This ties into a wider question of defining the procedures for activating the VJTF: the Alliance is de facto beset by disagreement about *when* to activate the force. Unsurprisingly, eastern allies have argued in favor of early deployment when there is trouble on the distant horizon, while for mostly political and economic reasons some West European countries prefer “last minute” activation.

These issues of speedy decision-making involve another tricky matter, namely the transit of other NATO forces and especially their lethal equipment. Obviously, speedy decisions matter little if forces cannot move. In peacetime the

movement of forces and equipment across borders is near impossible on account of “dangerous goods” legislation. According to NATO officials, the Alliance is making headway in regard to national procedures allowing for force and military equipment transit. Still, there is some way to go to realize the type of “military Schengen zone” that the commander of US Army Europe, General Hodges, in late 2015 called for.

Next is the question of decision-making credibility. It begins with an identification of vital interests – or perhaps more commonly, red lines. These should be clearly identified (i.e., no violation of NATO borders) but painted in broad strokes to leave the adversary guessing (i.e., leave open the specific response to small incursions). The adversary should be of the impression that the hammer that could fall on him is exceptionally forceful (i.e., in the logic of deterrence by punishment), which is to say that all options must be kept on the table.

The worst-case scenario begins with NATO authorities taking some options off the table because they are uncomfortable with them – such as the nuclear option. It then continues with a very detailed red line that NATO authorities in fact are unwilling to defend and therefore willing to negotiate. And a cumbersome decision-making process tops it off. Russia would perceive these weaknesses and, assuredly, exploit them. All this is to say that NATO has to get its decision-making culture right if its investments in military hardware and doctrine are going to be worth their while.

Finally, culture in the broader sense of strategic communication is likewise of essence. Modern conflict takes place in a very fundamental way in the cognitive domain. We saw it earlier in regards to dwindling NATO public opinion polls. It goes also for the key publics of the conflicts in which NATO or NATO allies are involved – be it Ukrainians, Muslims drawn to Islamic State, or Pashtuns. They likely experience NATO as reactive and disconnected from their social and political reality. When NATO’s messaging gets online, it is far distanced by more agile adversaries’ command of media and narratives. NATO – as in all NATO governments in addition to NATO staff in Brussels – must become more apt at identifying and communicating to these key publics to explain why their grievances may be justified, what NATO can do to help, and why grievances are vulnerable to the manipulation sought by actors in confrontation with NATO.

#### **Conclusion: Anticipating the 2016 Warsaw Summit**

At their Warsaw Summit, NATO-allies will discuss whether the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) that was adopted in Wales suffices. The discussion will once again center around assurance and adaptation measures, and it will, at least implicitly, involve different positions on how to deter Russia.

The allies closest to Russia will argue in favor of a RAP II. These nations are not squeamish when it comes to violating

the NATO-Russian Founding Act of 1997, and they would prefer a move toward more “deterrence by denial” and the permanent deployment of substantial combat troops in Eastern Europe. According to officials in NATO Headquarters, this demand is to some extent backed by the United States as Washington is seeking to make NATO-Europe take greater responsibility for European security. A measure thus being considered is the aforementioned Enhanced Forward Presence, meaning concretely the deployment of four-to-six non-US NATO battalions to Eastern Europe. Other nations will maintain that the already existing RAP – or RAP I – is enough. As always with NATO, it will probably end with a compromise, but a compromise influenced mainly by the Alliance’s major powers. The likely outcome is a RAP 1.5 with a tilt toward trip-wire forces and “deterrence by punishment”.

We should also expect to see the allies commence a difficult discussion about NATO’s long-term relationship with Russia. Although NATO and Russia is again meeting within the framework of the NATO-Russia Council, it is highly unlikely that the Alliance and Russia can establish a new strategic partnership anytime soon. However, neither NATO nor Moscow has an interest in a tense military standoff imbued that threatens to spin out of control. So while deterrence is back in vogue, we will likely soon encounter a new round of diplomacy intended to revive Pierre Harmel’s old formula of deterrence *and* dialogue/détente.

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#### About the Authors

**Dr. Jens Ringmose** is an associate professor at the Center for War Studies, and the Head at the Department of Political Science and Public Management, University of Southern Denmark.

**Dr. Sten Rynning** is Head of Center for War Studies, University of Southern Denmark.