

## **Political and Strategic Framework of Future Operations of NATO**

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This chapter's focus is on political and strategic factors influencing the future operations of the Alliance. Its ambition is to set up a framework which will determine NATO's future operations, as well as consequences stemming from them. It is based on the precondition that military engagement and defense planning have to follow political and strategic developments and those two levels are inseparable. The main emphasis of the analysis will be on the following issues: the recent strategic-level developments in Eastern Europe and changes in domestic debates as well as security thinking influencing the foreign and security policies in key member states, especially the US as a leading power of the Alliance. The framework of the analysis is based on the thesis that the priority of member states in creation and shaping policies and actions of NATO take into consideration the mechanisms of the Alliance's decision-making. It means analyzing the drivers of changes based on the interests and visions of member states, which will be given priority consideration.



## **Changing strategic landscape in Europe – implications for NATO's operations in Europe**

The key determining factors of European security architecture have significantly changed during 2014. We witnessed a strategic shift in Eastern part of Europe with overwhelming impact on the security of the whole continent. One could classify the basic drivers of this change into several mutually interlinked factors.

First, a clearly demonstrated will of Russian leadership to launch open military operations in Europe to achieve strategic-political objectives. Russian operations in Crimea and South Eastern Ukraine are second only to the 2008 Georgian-Russian war, but from European perspective Moscow conducted military actions across the main vector of Europe's strategic axis.

Second, Russia broke the taboo of territorial integrity of European states. While we already had a precedent of creation of quasi-entities in post-Soviet space, in Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the annexation of Crimea was Moscow's first attempt to openly re-write internationally recognized borders in Europe. For Central European members it is especially harmful, as Ukrainian independence and territorial integrity was a key factor of Central European strategic independence within one security complex.

Third, Russia's actions changed the military balance in the Black Sea region, Eastern and Central Europe by deployments of significant naval and air forces to Crimea, as well as future modernization and build-up plans for Russian armed forces. Because of those changes Russia achieved military-strategic dominance in the Black Sea region, and will be able to



overwhelm all regional NATO members' combined capabilities.<sup>1</sup> It also creates excellent power-projection possibilities for Russia not only in the wider Black Sea but also towards Central European member states. So far, the Russian military in regard to Central Europe was dependent on Kaliningrad with strong but limited potential, whereas now the whole South Eastern flank of the Alliance is in reach of conventional segment of the Russian military.<sup>2</sup>

These three key and mutually interlinked developments have a significant impact on the internal discussion of the Alliance. We can partially witness the renaissance of emphasis on territorial defence, as Central Europeans, especially Poles and Baltics, always argued.<sup>3</sup> The Alliance's renewed attention to East and failure of the concept of "Russia as a strategic partner" will be one of the driving forces of NATO's future development, perhaps transformation and defense planning. As a consequence, we are witnessing a solid but not too heavy, and most importantly accented, yet not permanent, military build-up. It includes a more robust air force presence in the Baltics where the Alliance is operationally engaged in 24/7 air patrols from the very beginning of Baltics' membership in 2004, as Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia lack independent fighter jet capabilities. The recent increase includes a deployment of additional six US F-15C Eagle from the United Kingdom to Lithuania (Šiauliai) to the original four. Also the second Baltic air base of Ämari in Estonia was engaged in Baltic airspace patrolling by Danish Air Force, as well as Polish Malbork base has hosted

<sup>1</sup> And in addition to almost completely blocking or threatening the remaining capabilities of the Ukrainian navy, as well as multiplying the Russian potential to project power into Southern Ukraine, including the blockade of Odessa, Ukraine's most important connection to the outside world.

<sup>2</sup> An excellent brief summary of the military consequences of the annexation of Crimea by Russia was given by OSW's Andrzej Wilk. "The military consequences of the annexation of Crimea." *OSW Analyses*, March 19, 2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-03-19/military-consequences-annexation-crimea>.

<sup>3</sup> For detailed analysis see: Michta, Andrew A. "Polish hard power: Investing in the military as Europe cuts back." *American Enterprise Institute*, December 19, 2013, <http://www.aei.org/outlook/polish-hard-power-investing-in-the-military-as-europe-cuts-back>.



French Air Forces in May 2014. These developments could be perceived as significant for analyzing NATO's future operations. If the strategic situation will not change significantly, the Baltic air defense and patrols will be one of few permanent operations of the Alliance, maintained on permanent basis. In addition to Baltic build-up and assurance-driven trainings with the participation of Allied troops, NATO increased its presence also in the Southern flank through a temporary deployment of Canadian and US Air Force units to Romania.

Even though, the most visible of NATO's increased Eastern engagement is the strengthened air force presence in the Baltic countries, Poland and Romania, perhaps the most important are the improvements and expansion of defense and military infrastructure and development of contingency plans for worst-case scenarios in Central Europe. Needless to say, this area was underestimated during the last decade and half, despite the membership of first Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary, and later from 2004 on, the other countries of the region. The plans and related infrastructure will be of crucial importance for any Article V related operation in the region, but it is also important politically for Central European allies as it increases the military credibility of political assurances. Operations of territorial defense according to Article V became yet again at the center of focus in NATO strategic thinking as well as that of its member states. Of course, this focus enjoys different intensity, with Central European and Baltic states giving it 100 percent priority, and the US with its global military engagement only part of its attention.

In addition, this refocusing is supplemented by a relative increases in the limited defense budgets of Central European countries. Baltic countries, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia made political commitments in recent months to increase their defense budgets. Latvia and Lithuania have committed themselves to reach 2 percent of GDP for defense by 2020,



while Central Europeans declared a willingness to stop the decrease in spending in the first step and then to increase it to approximately 1.6 percent of GDP from 2016 to 2010 (there is some variation country to country (Croft 2014). While the commitments to increase military spending in the region of Central Europe tend to be very fragile and unstable, such proclamations demonstrate a change in security perception. Poland, in a category of its own, in the region with military spending at 1.95 of GDP, enjoys military expenditures guaranteed by law, which gives it superior regional military capabilities. What's more it is to reach 2 percent of GDP in 2016. Warsaw also launched a very ambitious defense modernization plan from 2012 to 2022. During that period about 41 billion USD will be invested into modernization (Michta 2014). The military "medium-sized power" of the region will invest into capabilities related to territorial defense, including helicopters, main battle tanks, and most exclusively into air and missile defense to counter Russian conventional capabilities in Kaliningrad and Belarus. This Polish modernization program very clearly demonstrates the changed paradigm of defense thinking in Central Europe. Rather than focus on expeditionary capabilities – a sine qua non of any modernization program during the last two decades – Poland is strongly focusing on territorial defense, including air force and anti-missile capabilities in order to be able to counter Russian ability to establish a no-fly zone over vast Polish and Baltic territories from Kaliningrad. In general, Russian build-up and assertiveness will reduce Central Europeans' willingness to engage in out-of-area operations. Due to limited budget, Central Europeans will also reduce capabilities for expeditionary operations, as they will invest their available (and limited) resources to capabilities necessary for territorial defense (air force, helicopters, armored vehicles, as well as robust build-up of "host-nation-support" infrastructure). Of course, a key challenge again is to invest the available resources properly. If they will modernize their armed forces according to plans or visions from the past, it will be yet another in a long list of modernization failures in the region.



Even if the modernization plans are perceived as a technical rather than a strategic level issue, under the current changes of the security environment, they have a strong influence on future operations and demonstrate the way of thinking of the allies with regard to what kind of operations they are planning at the Alliance level.

Besides Central European and Baltic states, the most affected member state is Germany. When analyzing Central and Eastern European position in NATO and future operations of the Alliance we have to take into account Germany's central role in this regard. Criticized by the allies for its reluctance and engagement far below its potential, Berlin has recently started to emphasize its willingness to be more active in the Alliance's framework. At the Munich Security Conference, the German president, Joachim Gauck declared his country's willingness to move towards a more strategic engagement (Gauck 2014). However, the current development in Eastern Europe and the collapse of German concept of Russia as a cooperating power and part of "economic Europe" could potentially cause a review of German security policy. It will affect also its willingness to participate in operations abroad and place more focus on territorial defense. However Berlin's perspective is still different to Central European's as Germans still do not perceive Russia as a direct and imminent military threat.

On the other hand, while accepting the depth of strategic changes in Eastern Europe, as well as Central European concerns, there is no room to overestimate the long-term impact on United States' global strategy. While for NATO it meant the renaissance of discussion on territorial defense, as well as particular changes in military planning, for the USA it is true only in part, taking into consideration America's privileged position within NATO and American ability to shape the overall paradigm of the Alliance. Washington, while accepting the strategic threat caused by the Russian



operation, still does not perceive it as crucial for its defense posture. It will not lead to any reversal in historic trends or shift of US strategic attention and military redeployment towards Asia-Pacific. It would be a mistake to overestimate the hierarchy of Russian assertiveness in the eyes of American political elites. The American military downsizing in Europe is still a reality and could be reversed only in case of large-scale Russian invasion towards the West, which is still low in probability. The appearance of American forces in the Baltics, Poland and Romania and deployment of some naval forces to the Black Sea does not mean that the USA will strengthen its overall European military presence. The USA will redeploy some forces within Europe but will not increase the overall presence. The American reactions will be more political in nature, by ensuring Baltic and Central European allies of American commitments to their defense and demonstrating that the USA is still “a European power.” In the words of Ivo Daadler, former US Ambassador to NATO, president Obama “wants to send the signal that these three Baltic states are as central and important to the way we look at European security and defense as any other NATO member, that there’s no difference between Estonia or Great Britain when it comes to the security of Estonia or Great Britain” (Hirschfeld Davis 2014).

### **Shift in American domestic and strategic debate – implications for NATO’s operations in the Middle East**

In the United States there are two crucial political developments influencing the Alliance, a domestic one and a strategic-global one.

The domestic one is associated with the significantly decreased will of the American society as well as political elite to engage in operations abroad, more broadly to be engaged in world politics. The approval rate of the most recent large-scale operations in Afghanistan in 2001 was about 90



percent, while in Iraq in March of 2003 it was 76 percent, while the current military engagement against ISIS in the Middle East is lower, around 60 percent, despite the fact that it is much limited in scale, ambitions as well as deployed forces. According to Gallup Institute “Americans’ 60% approval for U.S. military action against Islamic militants in Iraq and Syria, . . . , is slightly below their average 68% approval for 10 other U.S. military operations Gallup has asked about. . . . Americans have been a bit less supportive of recent military actions after prolonged engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq” (Jones 2014). According to the same source, the support for direct engagement of land forces, “boots on the ground” is much lower. It shows the declining general trend of public support for military engagement abroad, while limited air strikes are partially acceptable in contrary of long-term military operations. According to survey of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs the number of Americans supportive towards active role in world affairs is declining as well, being at the level of 61 percent, the lowest point in post-Cold-War period, 38 percent say that the US has to stay out of world affairs, which is the lowest support since 1947 (Smeltz 2014). It has several roots, from the economic crisis which traditionally turns attention towards domestic affairs, to “fatigue” of American society from long-term military engagements abroad (Iraq, Afghanistan) during the last decade and half. Moreover, the current US president has constructed his “foreign policy image” on refusing the first Iraq war, then on the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan, which also influenced the public opinion against long-term military operations abroad (Ondrejcsák 2009).

As a result, if the current trends will not be changed by “strategic black swan” it is difficult to imagine the US engaged in another large-scale long-term operation<sup>4</sup> abroad with significant participation of land forces. The political elite in Washington is reluctant even to engage limited “boots on

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<sup>4</sup> Operation which engages several large army formations with ten-thousand troops, deployed and sustained for several years in the theatre of operation.



the ground” in the Middle East or elsewhere and prefers air campaigns – see planned but at the last minute cancelled operation against Syria in 2013 or Libyan air campaign in 2011 – not to mention more substantial engagement.

This shift is declared also in crucial American strategic document of the current leadership, the Defense Strategic Guidelines from 2012, which defines the current American “strategic ars poetica.” “U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations” (US Department of Defense 2012). By declining US ambition “to shape the World” NATO also becomes less “interventionist.” Together with events in Eastern Europe all these factors create a synergy effect of more defensive Alliance oriented to its own defense rather than long-term engagement in distant regions.

Of course this changes the nature of the whole Alliance significantly. One could predict that even in case of the current collapse of Iraqi and Syrian statehood and ISIS/ISIL gaining ground in the Middle East the US and NATO will stay away from massive land force deployment. Even though it is described as the “greatest national security threat” since the terrorist attacks in September 11, 2001 to the security of the United States and Allies, the current American leadership will not find the necessary political will to address it by land forces operation and will limit the engagement only to air campaign (Vanden Brook 2014). Perhaps the American approach will slightly change after the presidential elections in 2016 but one cannot expect earthquake-like changes, simply because of the domestic atmosphere.

The current developments and approach in the Middle East will define the basic framework of NATO’s operations and engagement in the region for years to come. As a most important future consequence, NATO will limit its operational engagement in the Middle East to defensive measures.



Offensive operations – in limited scale – will be conducted by the USA and potential “coalition of the willing,” also with participation of several European NATO allies, such as France and the United Kingdom, as well as regional partners like the United Arab Emirates (already with experience from the Libyan operation) or Jordan. Some other European allies will be more reluctant to act, as Germany is being bounded by economic issues in Europe and also by developments in Eastern Europe claiming primary focus of German security policy and political elites. Some other Allies, traditionally familiar with participation in US-led operations, especially Central Europeans, will also limit their participation to political support. First, they lack the necessary air force assets to participate, with the rare exemption of Poland; second, they will exclusively focus on countering Russian strategic advantages in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. It will consume their resources and “strategic attention.”

As a consequence, NATO in the Middle East will focus on more traditional territorial defense measures and political demonstration that it will back its members’ security, with special attention paid to Turkey. As a most prominent example how to predict Alliance’s engagement, one can analyze the NATO’s involvement in Turkey’s defense, during the peak of Syrian crisis in 2013 (NATO 2013). In late 2012 NATO members decided to launch an operation in order to strengthen Turkey’s defense as well as to demonstrate the organization’s will to protect its members. The decision was followed by deployment in early 2013 of anti-air missile capability of Patriot missiles. The deployment was realized by the Netherlands, Germany and the United States for defense and deterrence purposes. One could predict, as with continuing destabilization of the Middle East, the Alliance will be engaged in similar operations on request of the Turkish government. Defense of Turkey and deterrence of potential adversaries will be the key operational activity of NATO as a whole in the Middle East for the foreseeable future.



Other regions will be on the scope of NATO's agenda to a much lesser extent. As Sub-Saharan Africa is becoming an increasingly important region for European security it will affect the Alliance, as well, but only marginally, as Sub-Saharan Africa never played a central role in NATO's political or military considerations, and one could predict that it will be completely left to Europeans, especially under French leadership. As witnessed in the case of operation Serval in Mali, in 2013-2014, NATO-allies, operating not under NATO umbrella, but on bilateral basis, will provide full political and limited logistical support, transport capabilities, air-to-air-refueling, and in the case of the US and UK, also intelligence sharing.<sup>5</sup>

Besides analyzing political circumstances and geographical determinants of NATO's future operations, it is also important to underline that the above mentioned developments will reshape the nature of Alliance's operations. Besides military engagement, the operations will be broadened by non-military actions, such as assistance in reforms, transformation of armed forces, defense planning, education or security sector reform in general. It will be applied especially in cases when NATO's engagement is limited because of internal or external factors. Case of Libya is an example where NATO will not launch land force operations because of the domestic situation and unwillingness on the part of the American public to see "boots on the ground." Furthermore, Alliance's presence is focusing on several crucial areas, as border control, security sector reform, etc.

In case of Ukraine, the external factors prevail, especially the strong Russian factor which prevents key Allies reaching agreement on providing hardware-support. As a consequence, NATO will be engaged in activities like rehabilitation of injured troops, cyber defense, logistics, and command and control and communications (NATO 2014). Both cases underline the Alliance's widening scope of actions, as one could foresee for the future.

<sup>5</sup> For more detailed information see Carr, David. "Operation SERVAL: Operational Analysis of the 2013 French Intervention in Mali." Air Power Development Centre - Podcasts, June 26, 2013, <http://apdcpodcasts.blogspot.hu/>



## **Changes of the US Grand Strategy – general implications for NATO**

One of the crucial strategic developments which will have a decisive impact on NATO is the American reprioritization or rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific.<sup>6</sup> Any American “rebalance” towards that region will automatically reduce importance of Europe and NATO for the US, by its nature.

Alliance, “tailor-made” for actions in broader European and Trans-Atlantic theatre has limited possibilities to be engaged in the Asia-Pacific, including, the two militarily most capable, France and the United Kingdom.

Operation ISAF in Afghanistan was the very outer geographical and political limit which Europeans were able and willing to go in terms of political and military engagement outside of the continent. It means that the new strategic priority of the USA will not geographically and politically match the European possibilities. European states even don't have ambitions to be present strategically in Asia-Pacific. If there is any discussion about the Pacific in “political Europe” it is limited to economic ties with rapidly growing Asian economies. Asia-Pacific simply doesn't reach the threshold of strategic calculations, and the attention of Europeans.

It will have serious consequences for the Alliance and its operations, even more serious than the domestic political considerations analyzed above. By redeploying American assets and political attention to the Pacific and East Asia the Europeans will find themselves in a situation when they have to count with both Eastern Europe and Mediterranean basin without having attracted American priority interests. In case of the Southern Flank it

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<sup>6</sup> For detailed analysis see: Ondrejcsák, Róbert. 2012. The United State's Strategic Shift Towards the Pacific – Continuity and Change, In: Majer, Marian – Ondrejcsák, Róbert – Tarasovič, Vladimír (eds.): Panorama of global security environment 2012. Bratislava: CENAA, pp. 25-41.



will cause that if NATO will launch any military operation there it will be more on the shoulders of its European allies, as we witnessed in the case of Libya. On the other hand the limited American engagement will automatically determine the level of military ambitions of NATO, simply because of limited European capabilities. NATO will be able to launch limited air campaign and Special Forces operations, but one could exclude even middle-scale land force operations. “Leading from behind” and providing “enablers” can secure limited success but cannot back strategic level ambitions, and operations, of course. In concrete terms it means that NATO will conduct Libya-like operations where there is no need to engage strategic level forces. Moreover, where military bases are available in relative geographical proximity and logistics is not very demanding for power-projection purposes. On the other hand, we cannot expect operations as “potential-Syria-like” (as it was planned in early 2013) against more advanced air-defense capabilities without stronger American engagement. The most exclusive demonstration of strategic reality was the “confusion” over air campaign against Syria in 2013. Until the USA was demonstrating its political will to act, France was ready to take action too. But when Washington withdrew its political will to launch the operation, Paris, even with the most capable European military (together with the UK) in terms of power projection, immediately found herself in strange position without real possibility to act alone or lead any coalition able to generate the necessary level of military capabilities (Gordon 2014).

Besides the consequences for leadership in the Mediterranean and limits for NATO’s operations size, the next crucial question is NATO’s engagement with Asian-Pacific allies. What will be the nature of collaboration with so-called “global partners” Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea, each of them provided significant support to NATO’s ISAF mission, especially Australia with large-scale military involvement (Australian Government 2014). By downsizing NATO’s presence in Afghanistan



and particularly by terminating ISAF mission by the end of 2014 there are numerous questions arising. What will be the contribution of Asian-Pacific partners to future NATO operations? There are two simultaneous potential developments. First, the level of partnership could decrease because of NATO's turning back towards territorial defense in Europe. Second, their importance could rise because of NATO's most important member's, the US, rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific. One of the potential developments could be a more robust partnership with the USA, and as a consequence, also with NATO, but because of the above mentioned factors it will be more formal or based more on bilateral cooperation with the United States.

## Conclusion

Key political and strategic trends determining the future of NATO are as follows: the changing strategic situation in Eastern Europe, which includes a dramatically modified nature of relationship to Russia; dynamics of domestic debate in the United States as well as other key member states and rising unwillingness to commit themselves to long-term large-scale operation; strategic shift of the United States towards Asia-Pacific. These trends will mark NATO's future, its mission, policies, as well as operations conducted by the Allies.

The most important consequences for future operations are the following: Territorial defense-driven operations will gain in importance, especially for Eastern members, but in general, too. The Alliance will develop its logistics and host nation support infrastructure in Central Europe and the Baltics to be able to counter increased Russian presence and potential actions. It will also maintain permanent operation of air defense of the Baltics, and in case of escalation of conflict in the Black Sea, also in Romania. On the other hand it is still very much dependent on the sensitivity of American strategists in terms of threat perception. It means that the US



will redeploy some forces within Europe towards the East, but will not increase its overall European military presence. In American strategic consideration, Europe is still a secondary theatre to Asia-Pacific and it will stay so unless “strategic black swan” will occur.

In the Middle East especially, the Alliance as an organization will limit its engagement to defense of Turkey and deterrence of potential adversaries, by case-by-case deployments of defensive capabilities (e.g. Patriot missiles). In regions and countries where there is lack of political will for engagement and local or regional strategic context is unfavorable to NATO’s military presence, the Alliance will deploy advisory or assistance missions, as we are seeing at the time being in Ukraine or Libya.

Under current circumstances it is illusory to expect any large-scale long-term non-Article V operations out-of-Europe which would last for years and see the deployment of several tens of thousands troops. Any new involvement of NATO outside of Europe will be more political and assistance-providing rather than military. Several European members will be engaged but on a bilateral basis – in the Middle East under American leadership or in sub-Saharan Africa under French or formally under the aegis of EU led by France. In the Mediterranean, NATO will conduct defensive maritime border control operations, or limited air campaigns under American leadership or by applying “leadership-from-behind” approach by providing key US “enablers” to European allies. Under current circumstances there is no chance for ISAF-like engagement, because of lack of political will and strategic framework. The Alliance is becoming more “introverted” rather than “transitional” in distant regions.



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