





NATO's LAND FORCES

By Gen. John W. Nicholson, U.S. Army

Strength and speed matter

the most — successful military alliances in history, having helped ensure nearly 70 years of peace in Europe. It was central to ending the Cold War, an event that brought freedom to tens of millions of people in Eastern Europe. The Alliance contributed to preventing further conflict in the Balkans and led a 50-nation coalition in Afghanistan that helped stabilize the country for over a decade. NATO accomplished this by adapting its enormous strengths to the circumstances of each crisis.

As NATO's campaign in Afghanistan came to an end and its heads of state discussed the future security environment at their summit meetings in 2010

Dutch and British platoon commanders coordinate as part of the exercise Silver Arrow in October 2016 in Adazi, Latvia. The annual exercise is designed to expedite NATO's response time to conflicts and increase defense capabilities.

SGT. ERIK ESTRADA/U.S. MARINE CORPS

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is one of the most — if not

and 2012, they envisaged a strategic partnership with Russia. However, in early 2014, after the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia's aggressive actions in Crimea and

Ukraine revealed a disturbing new evolution in its behavior and narrative.

As a result of Russia's actions, NATO heads of state at the Wales Summit established the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), including the enhanced NATO Response Force (NRF), to adapt NATO forces to deal with the threat posed by Russian aggression.

This action included the creation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force.

The RAP is composed of two main elements: assurance measures and adaptation measures. The assurance measures include, on a rotational basis, "continuous air, land, and maritime presence and meaningful military activity in the eastern part of the Alliance," while adaptation measures are designed to increase the capability and capacity of the Alliance to meet security challenges. Since adopting the RAP, NATO has maintained a continuous presence in eastern member states by conducting exercises and training among allied forces. Adaptation measures include increasing the size and capability of the NRF and the establishment of NATO Force Integration Units. Six are now in eastern NATO states and are designed to facilitate the planning and deployment of the NRF and additional NATO forces. NATO has increased the size and readiness of Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin, Poland, to maintain constant oversight of the northeastern border.

It has also established the Multinational Division Southeast, which is tasked with maintaining constant oversight of the southeastern region of NATO's border nations. In addition, NATO is prepositioning military equipment for training in the territory of eastern Alliance members; improving its ability to reinforce eastern allies through the improvement of infrastructure throughout the Alliance; and improving its defense plans through the introduction of the Graduated Response Plans. Each of these adaptation measures was designed to ensure that, as the RAP states, NATO has the right forces in the right

place and with the right equipment, and that members are ready to move at very short notice to defend any ally against any threat.

The resulting adaptation of NATO's land forces over the last year has resulted in strong, fast land forces that can generate options short of war. Should deterrence fail, these same measures will enable NATO to prevail decisively. Military planners analyze the correlation of

forces (COF) at the strategic and tactical levels to determine relative strengths between potential adversaries. At the strategic level, this calculation evaluates factors such as the size of a country's armed forces and its composition, military budgets, population, gross domestic product (GDP), and political legitimacy. A comparison of these strategic factors illustrates NATO's strategic strength.

The strategic advantages of the Alliance vis-à-vis Russia are telling: armed forces that are more than four times larger, a combined population more than six times greater, defense budgets that are 18 times larger, and a combined GDP that is 20 times greater. Furthermore, Russia's downward demographic and economic trends suggest that these ratios will remain for the foreseeable future, irrespective of the current planned modernization of Russia's Armed Forces, which does not appear sustainable.

The one area of strategic parity is in nuclear weapons, which poses an existential threat to Alliance members.

The mere possession of these weapons, however, does not translate into strategic leverage unless one believes they might be used.

While a detailed discussion of nuclear policy is beyond the scope of this article, a willingness to leverage these capabilities as a form of escalation dominance is relevant to the discussion of how best to prevent conflict. Regardless of whether Russian leaders are bluffing, as some may believe, Alliance military leaders must assess their capabilities and stated intent at face value when planning how to deter and prevent conflict. Based on these statements and more, the risk of the Russians escalating a land war to the use of nuclear weapons is not zero. And if the risk is not zero, it becomes even more

critical that we deter conventional conflict to prevent escalation to nuclear conflict. While hybrid operations with ambiguous aggression and plausible deniability are the most likely forms of conflict, it is also important for us to deter or deal with the threat or actuality of a conventional attack. To determine how to deter conventional conflict, we must examine the tactical correlation of forces, which is limited in time, scale and scope. While an adversary may be inferior at the strategic level, as Russia is, it may still be able to generate a positive tactical correlation of forces at a specific place and time for a limited duration.

If contemplating an attack with less than a 3-to-1 ratio, a prudent military planner cannot guarantee success. Hence the desirability of NATO's capability to deliver to any eastern ally a robust defensive force that achieves a 1-to-3 ratio against potential Russian aggression.

Along NATO's northeastern border with Russia, under the existing set of conditions, the Russians enjoy certain advantages that enable them to generate a favorable force ratio for offensive action. If they were to successfully exploit a temporary tactical advantage to secure a gain and then threaten nuclear escalation to check an Alliance response, they could parlay an area of strategic parity — nuclear weapons — and a limited tactical advantage into an enduring strategic outcome: the fracturing of Alliance cohesion.

RUSSIAN TACTICAL ADVANTAGES

- **Interior Lines:** In the analysis of tactical correlation of forces, we first look at the interior lines that enhance Russia's ability to mass troops faster than the Alliance at certain points on its borders with NATO countries, i.e., the Baltics and Poland. The Russians have three armies positioned in the Western Military District that can deploy 13-16 battle groups, totaling approximately 35,000 troops, within 48 hours to the border of the Alliance, and another 90,000 troops within 30 days.
- **Speed of Decision-making:** Russia's unitary chain of command enables expeditious action across the whole of government. Conversely, while NATO's decisions possess the legitimacy of 28 nations acting in unison, they require consensus among all 28, which inevitably takes time.
- **Tanks in Europe:** Russia's Armed Forces, although four times smaller than the combined Armed Forces of NATO, contain sufficient quantities of armor, air defense, long-range fires and conscript soldiers to generate numerical advantage at certain points along our common borders before a large-scale NATO response could be launched.

A comparison of Russian and Alliance armor forces is instructive. While the Alliance has reduced its tank forces since the end of the Cold War, Russia has kept much of its force in storage and modernized

While an adversary may be inferior at the strategic level, as Russia is, it may still be able to generate a positive tactical correlation of forces at a specific place and time for a limited duration.



Norwegian Air Force F-16 fighters patrol over the Baltics during a NATO air policing mission from Zokniai Air Base near Siauliai, Lithuania. REUTERS

parts of its active force. Because of improved relations with Russia, the U.S. removed its armored forces from

Europe by 2013. Therefore, even though the Alliance possesses more active armor forces than the Russians, these tanks are dispersed among the Alliance member states, meaning the Russians can generate a local advantage in armor, in certain areas, for a finite period. If they chose (and could afford) to do so, the Russians could restore significant quantities of older model tanks, which could approach parity or even a numerical advantage against allied forces.

- **Snap Exercises:** Through the use of ambiguity and “snap exercises” (large drills without advance notice), Russia repeatedly desensitizes and tests for weaknesses along NATO’s boundaries. These exercises enable the Russians to learn and improve their ability to conduct large-scale mobilizations and operational maneuvers to generate a tactical correlation of force advantage at key points.
- **Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD):** This military doctrinal term describes how Russian forces seek to deny allied access and freedom of action in key areas bordering the NATO-Russian interface, such as the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, the Far North, and now the eastern Mediterranean, through the establishment of integrated air defense and missile zones. Russia is attempting to recreate the defensive depth it lost with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

NATO MILITARY FOCUS AND CAPABILITIES

Despite an overall strategic inferiority to NATO, Russia has the capability to generate local advantage in terms of the tactical correlation of forces and to leverage its nuclear capabilities in a form of escalation dominance. Given that, how should Alliance military forces contribute to deterrence?

Deterrence is ultimately a political outcome achieved in the mind of a potential adversary by convincing it that the costs of an action outweigh the benefits. The assurance measures in place contribute to deterrence through the presence of small Alliance forces conducting training and exercises with our eastern allies. The downside of this “tripwire” approach is that these forces are not of sufficient strength to defend against a short-notice Russian offensive, therefore necessitating a campaign to retake Alliance territory if it were to be seized.

An alternative to tripwire deterrence is deterrence through a forward defense. Positioning strong forces to achieve a favorable tactical correlation of forces for defense (1-to-3 ratio) would raise serious doubts in the minds of Russian leadership that they could achieve their objectives.

This leads us to a hybrid option in which we sustain tripwire deterrence while simultaneously improving our ability to rapidly reinforce and establish an effective defensive posture as conditions warrant. Deterrence can be achieved in this option by demonstrating the Alliance’s ability to quickly move strong forces to defend any threatened state within the Alliance. In short, we deter through a combination of strength and speed.



Russia is attempting to recreate the defensive depth it lost with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The Alliance possesses the forces and capabilities to deter in a hybrid manner, but they must be used in different ways than they have been since the end of the Cold War. NATO must start with an understanding of collective defense within the Alliance.

- **Indicators and Warnings (I&W):**

First and foremost, the Alliance's intelligence enterprise must provide adequate indicators and warnings of possible aggression that would result in the potential for an "armed attack" as per Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. I&W are not solely a covert intelligence function. They also involve the use of open source and diplomatic assessments.

- **High Readiness Forces (HRF):** Next, gaps in the current NATO rapid response timetables must be addressed. The NRF can respond to a unanimous resolution of the North Atlantic Council, the Alliance's principal political decision-making body, by commencing the deployment of the Spearhead Force, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force of 8,000 troops, within five to seven days. The remainder of the NRF would begin to move in 30-45 days. The main bodies of NATO militaries would follow afterward.

In addition to the NRF, most nations of the Alliance maintain national high readiness forces. These forces are retained as national reserves and are not offered to NATO on a standing basis, but could be offered in the case of a potential Article 5 scenario. Additionally, they could deploy based on determination by a member nation that an Article 5 obligation has occurred. In either case, these HRF can deploy in a matter of days or weeks. The rapid deployment of these forces to threatened areas would achieve the correlation of forces required to defend (1-to-3 ratio) within days or weeks and thus counter any Russian tactical advantage. The speed with which these forces can deploy enables the Alliance to counter, in part, Russian interior lines and its streamlined political decision-making system.

These are also "forcible entry capable" units in the event certain airports or seaports are unavailable. This forcible entry capability enables the Alliance to respond to multiple threats simultaneously, such as Russia attempting horizontal escalation across multiple areas.

- **Prepositioned Forces and Equipment:** Heavier forces have a greater defensive capability against heavy Russian forces. Their longer deployment times (30-90 days), lessens their deterrent effect early in a crisis. However, by prepositioning tanks and other armored forces, the Alliance can counter Russian interior lines, more rapidly deploy heavy deterrent forces to threatened allies in Europe, and buy time for diplomatic resolution of a crisis. The decision to preposition a U.S. set of heavy equipment in Europe significantly enhances the deterrent capability of Alliance land forces by enabling a more rapid reinforcement of early-arriving light forces with heavy combat capability.
- **Neutralizing Anti Access/Area Denial:** To retain freedom of action within Alliance territory and the surrounding air and sea space, the Alliance must develop effective counters to evolving Russian A2/AD capabilities. These allied capabilities exist

United States and Ukrainian Marines fire an M-40 A-6 sniper rifle during the exercise Platinum Lynx 16.5 in Babadag Training Area, Romania, in September 2016. The exercise allows allied militaries to train alongside partner nations.

LANCE CPL. TIMOTHY LUTZ/U.S. MARINE CORPS

but have not yet been arrayed against Russian A2/AD sites. Continued Russian expansion and the deepening of these systems require that the Alliance develop plans should it become necessary to defend ourselves.

For example, the recent establishment of SA21 radars and missile infrastructure in eastern Syria extends Russia's air defense coverage over sovereign Turkish (NATO) airspace, including Incirlik Air Base, from which U.S. aircraft operate against terrorists in Syria.

- **Filling Gaps and Equipment Shortfalls:** The end of the Cold War and the conduct of a 10-year campaign in Afghanistan understandably led to the optimization of Alliance armies for the prosecution of counterinsurgency operations, not for interstate, high-intensity conflict against a symmetrical opponent. As a result, despite NATO's overall strategic advantage in the size of armed forces and defense budgets, certain gaps and shortfalls exist in some Alliance conventional capabilities. These need to be considered in the context of the latest Alliance defensive planning, the Graduated Response Plans. To enable rapid reinforcement and deterrence, these capabilities include: strategic lift; anti-armor systems for light forces; armor; air defense; long-range artillery; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance; and electronic warfare, among others. The secretary-general's encouragement of the 2 percent spending goal, if met, would go a long way toward filling these gaps and shortfalls.
- **Training and Doctrine:** Readiness for a high-intensity collective defense against a symmetrical opponent necessitates an ongoing re-examination of existing doctrine and training. For example, hybrid warfare is the subject of intense study on how military forces best support the responses of Alliance governments to hybrid threats; it encompasses border control, law enforcement, intelligence and strategic communications challenges, to name a few. These considerations are being integrated into NATO exercises at all levels.

For the rapid deployment of light forces to successfully deter against hybrid threats, the creation of reconnaissance and security zones in support of national home defense forces is key. If those light forces must deter against an armored threat, they must transition to a light anti-armor defense with local air superiority, which necessitates neutralization of any A2/AD threat and sufficient fires and anti-armor capability within the light force. Additionally, to ensure they are able to integrate with heavy forces deployed to conduct a forward defense of Alliance territory, those forces must be trained in combined arms defensive operations.

THE BALTIC SCENARIO

One hypothetical scenario that combines Russian use of a tactical COF advantage with escalation dominance is the defense of the Baltic states. In this scenario, the speed of Alliance response in the first critical days and weeks would be vital to deterrence and conflict prevention. The introduction of high readiness forces early in a crisis enables the Alliance to achieve a 1-to-3 COF within two weeks and a 1-to-2.5 COF ratio soon thereafter. Russian forces would thus be incapable of achieving a *fait accompli*. This is critical to preserving the time and space needed to resolve any crisis through diplomatic means.

In addition to military speed, we must also consider the speed of political decision-making. Political speed is required to preserve options short of war. Expeditious political decisions therefore help preserve political options at a smaller military cost. Detailed planning informs the dialogue between military and civilian leadership regarding options, and enables interoperability between military forces, which likewise creates options for political leaders. Thus, NATO's strength and speed generate political options short of war. If deterrence fails, however, strength and speed enable us to prevail in conflict.

The cohesion and competence of NATO's land forces have never been higher. This high level of professionalism and combat experience is unprecedented and far exceeds that of any other alliance or individual army on the planet, including Russia's.

CONCLUSION

NATO's first goal is conflict prevention. Military forces contribute to this by deterring conventional conflict. Conflict prevention is ultimately a political or diplomatic endeavor that is supported by the military's readiness to defend our vital interests. We deter through our strength and our speed, which are delivered through readiness.

Ultimately, we hope for a time when we can work together with the Russians in our areas of common interest. If deterrence fails, the strategic advantages that NATO enjoys mean that we would prevail. □

NOTE: Gen. Nicholson published a longer version of this article in the spring of 2016 in the National Defense University's *PRISM*, Vol. 6, No. 2. <http://cco.ndu.edu/Publications/PRISM/PRISM-Volume-6-no-2/Article/835046/natos-land-forces-strength-and-speed-matter/>