

Implementing the NATO Wales Summit: From Strategy to Action

30-31 October 2014

In late October 2014 Chatham House convened a group of international security experts and policy practitioners from a number of NATO member states to review the progress made on implementing the Wales Summit deliverables and to discuss next steps that allies should take to deal with, and prepare for, current and future threats. This report summarizes some of the key themes and takeaways from the discussions, and includes some initial recommendations about how to make progress on some of the emerging challenges.

The strategic context

- **As an alliance of 28 sovereign states, the actions that NATO takes are driven by the interests of its members.** These are largely a function of each member's own geopolitical realities and competing domestic priorities. For example, Mediterranean countries tend to be more concerned about instability in the Middle East and North Africa than in Central and Eastern European states. That said, recent Russian acts of aggression, including airspace violations as far south as Portugal, are underscoring that the threat from Moscow reaches right across the alliance.
- **While the situation in Ukraine remains worrying, most participants felt that events there are actually symptomatic of a wider challenge – a resurgent Russia.** The challenge that Moscow is presenting, both to the security of NATO allies, as well as to the norms underpinning the international legal order, will endure beyond the Ukraine conflict. While relations with Russia might be normalized once Putin leaves office, his successor could pursue an even more aggressive foreign and national security policy. NATO and its member states must therefore devise a more 'forward-leaning' strategy in order to deter Russian subversion and interference.
- **NATO states must also grapple with the ISIL threat in Syria and Iraq.** However, what specifically NATO ought to do in this context, if anything, remains unclear. And it is potentially complicated by Turkey's unique interests on the front lines. The Readiness Action Plan (RAP) is a tool that, at least theoretically, is supposed to allow the alliance to respond flexibly to a broad range of contingencies. Thus far, however, it has primarily been considered in the context of Central and Eastern European conflict scenarios. NATO needs to also consider planning for the RAP's possible use in Middle East/North Africa contingencies.

- **The Ebola crisis, currently ravaging Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, may have long-term effects on West Africa’s stability and security, and knock on effects on NATO members.** Both directly and indirectly, this pandemic may result in security challenges to allies – a possible outcome that is unsettling to a number of policy-makers across NATO capitals. At the same time, NATO member states have military resources, including logistical support, which could be enormously valuable in helping respond to the crisis and which might have the additional effect of improving public support for the organization, both domestically and within the region.¹ NATO therefore ought to consider whether it can and should play a role in helping to manage the Ebola crisis.
- **Some of the challenges faced by ‘front-line’ states along Europe’s periphery that make them vulnerable are domestic and social issues, such as unrest caused by inadequate safeguards on minority rights.** Undermining Moscow’s argument that it has a role in protecting ethnic minority Russians, for example, will require nations to address any existing tensions. NATO does not have a role in helping to resolve these, but without stronger and more coherent states that are perceived as legitimate by their publics, it is hard for NATO to fashion a credible defensive response. What can NATO, along with the EU and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), do to reduce state fragility? Is this a realistic objective?
- **Looking forward, NATO must be able to grapple with a number of significant challenges simultaneously.** The overall sense of the group was that while the strategy put forward in Wales is a step in the right direction, considerably more work must be done to effectively prepare the alliance for these challenges. Given that over the past decade NATO has actually been performing at close to its currently stated level of ambition (LoA), NATO needs to consider whether the LoA is actually sufficient to meet future challenges, which may be even more demanding than those it currently faces.

Emerging security needs

- **Moscow’s preferred method of coercion and subversion is hybrid warfare. NATO must therefore prepare itself to deter and defend against such attacks.** While hybrid warfare is not new, given the lack of consensus over what it actually constitutes, it seems clear that NATO has considerable work to do in this area. However, most agree there is a critical, yet limited, role for the military in its prosecution. NATO must understand its implications and applications, and learn how to work with other actors to develop comprehensive, civilian–military responses to hybrid attacks. It must also rethink Article V – and what constitutes an armed attack – in hybrid scenarios. Perhaps most important is to focus on early warning to prevent a hybrid attack from occurring in the first place.

¹ The US saw significant upswings in its popularity when it used its military resources for humanitarian and emergency response for example in Pakistan in response to earthquakes or floods, or in South East Asia following the 2004 tsunami.

- **In addition to hybrid warfare, NATO must also strengthen its capacities to conduct major, force-on-force operations.** Since the end of the Cold War, the alliance has focused primarily on crisis management. Yet Russia's willingness to use military instruments to pursue its objectives in Ukraine and Georgia suggests that the alliance must too be prepared to use force to repel Russian coercion. NATO must re-examine the full spectrum of its capabilities, both conventional and nuclear, to determine whether they are sufficiently robust to deter Moscow, reassure allies and contend with emerging threats.
- **Deterring Moscow requires that NATO demonstrate its capability and credibility.** While the RAP is a step in the right direction, it will need to be implemented aggressively if it is to have its intended effect. NATO must also consider what else must be done beyond the RAP, and whether there are capability gaps that exist (for example, anti-submarine warfare) in the plan's current configuration. Improving NATO's early warning and crisis management processes is therefore critical in order to enable NATO member states to generate – and disseminate – enough credible intelligence to act. NATO must further address how to implement the RAP, given that very few NATO members are currently capable of deploying forces within 48 hours.
- **Given that speed is of the essence, NATO must also consider whether additional authorities should be given to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) to act quickly and effectively in the event of a crisis.** While many NATO member states are presently reluctant to delegate more to SACEUR for fear of accidental crisis escalation, these are risks that can be managed through careful scoping of such authorities.

Burden-sharing

- **Many nations are increasingly dissatisfied with the 2% of GDP spending target, as it measures 'inputs' rather than capability outputs.** The Wales statement to halt defence cost-cutting, while helpful, is also treated by many with a fair degree of scepticism. This is because the 10-year time frame, and the reference to NATO's aim to move towards the 2% guideline, are enabling sitting governments to avoid commitments entirely or pass them on to their successors, many of whom may be even less inclined to reverse defence spending cuts.
- **While efficiencies in spending (not least through joint planning) can be found, NATO nations will likely still need to increase their investment in defence.** While efficiencies in defence spending can, and should, be sought, without additional defence resources, pledges and initiatives announced at Wales will be hollow. Multinational initiatives such as Smart Defence should be treated with some scepticism, as multinational acquisition can be even more expensive than national procurement.
- **'How' we spend is as important as 'how much'. With many nations increasingly prioritizing the acquisition of high-end platforms in small numbers, there are questions over whether NATO members are investing in the right kinds of capabilities.** As one participant remarked, 'quantity has its own quality', suggesting that these reduced numbers of more sophisticated platforms may ultimately prove insufficient. NATO nations might therefore consider whether they are

striking the right balance between high- and low-tech platforms. At the same time they must ensure that sufficient funding is dedicated to maintenance and upkeep of existing platforms.

- **The ‘costs lie where they fall’ system of burden-sharing and paying for NATO’s operations must be revisited.** Similar to the issues associated with deploying the NATO Response Force, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) is unlikely to be utilized if nations who are providing forces will be required to foot the bill for its deployment. Furthermore, nations must work to harmonize the rules of engagement with their NATO partners as well remove any caveats from their VJTF-earmarked forces if it is to be effective.
- **Front-line states in Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, cannot be complacent about their own defences.** NATO will, of course, assist in an Article V contingency, but front-line states are, and will be, expected to shoulder a great deal of responsibility for their own defence. As one participant noted, ‘God helps those who help themselves.’

Planning & preparedness

- **Serious questions exist as to whether or not NATO’s decision-making structures and processes are sufficient to allow the alliance to act quickly in a crisis situation.** Given how cumbersome it can be to take a decision at the North Atlantic Council level, NATO could find itself in a position whereby facts on the ground change before NATO can act. There are also other options available to allies outside a NATO context to enable a rapid response, such as forming a ‘coalition of the willing’ for which NATO could eventually assume responsibility.
- **In order to ensure that NATO’s responses during crises are as smooth as possible, NATO and its member states must prioritize regular political and military exercises.** In terms of the politics, crisis management exercises must be conducted at the ambassadors’ level, and not delegated downwards. Militarily, NATO nations must participate in multinational exercises to ensure that the alliance maintains, and indeed improves, its current level of interoperability.
- **Nations need to consider their domestic legislation that allows them to field forces.** An additional challenge to a speedy response lies in the fact that many member states need to implement legislation before they engage forces in the field. Thus member states need to explore whether there are possible emergency workarounds, or whether they should advance legislation now that would allow them to be more responsive.
- **While the new NATO Defence Planning Process is a notable improvement over prior methods, it still falls far short of enabling the ‘joint’ planning necessary to ensure that NATO fields a coherent and cohesive force.** More collaboration among nations, earlier in their planning processes, could help nations find greater efficiencies in working together. More collaborative planning on capability reductions and divestment could also help ensure that key niche capabilities are retained.

- **In order to prevent strategic surprise, early warning and information sharing among allies must be improved.** While intelligence-gathering and -sharing is a national responsibility, NATO staffs could helpfully develop stability and conflict indicators to help NATO's PermReps build a better understanding of emerging and current strategic challenges. Often it is the challenge of 'sharing' that needs to be overcome, and in a timely manner, rather than 'gathering'.
- **Given the many tasks allies have assigned NATO, real questions exist as to whether the headquarters has enough staff to successfully accomplish its many assigned missions.** The 'zero nominal growth' decision in the Wales Summit declaration is a damaging one, as it essentially means that NATO will not add new personnel to its headquarters staff. Yet more personnel will be needed if NATO is to meet the new challenges the members face, and to fulfil the obligations laid out in the declaration.

Partners

- **Despite commitments made in Wales to 'deepen' NATO's relations with partners, there are a number of unresolved issues about how they might participate in, and integrate with, the organization.** The commitments that NATO will make towards them are also uncertain. Bureaucratically, ways to promote joint accreditation procedures must be found to enhance effective collaboration between NATO and its closest partners.
- **Although for the time being NATO membership may be off the table for Sweden and Finland, recent actions by Russia are pushing them ever closer to the alliance.** The heightened risk of engagement with Russia (accidental or otherwise) in the borderland and maritime areas of those countries is forcing NATO to think very carefully about how it would respond to a range of contingencies. NATO must be clear with its northeastern neighbours about what it will and will not do in light of those possibilities, and engage proactively on the question of what Sweden and Finland should do with their forthcoming resource increases.
- **While recent efforts by NATO to formalize its engagements with partners should be welcomed, the alliance should be careful to maintain a flexible and balanced approach.** The current focus on the Enhanced Opportunities Program risks privileging NATO's closest partners over its less deeply embedded – but in many ways equally important – ones. NATO must reaffirm its commitment to the latter and, in the short term, take steps to reverse the perception that the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative are being neglected.
- **Partners need to maintain a 'pilot light setting' with NATO that allows for swift ramping up of collaboration when necessary.** Both NATO and partner states need to maintain a threshold level of engagement in order to maintain current levels of interoperability. Doing so will help ensure that NATO is able quickly and effectively to integrate partners into operations in the event of a crisis.

- **Recent collaboration on a variety of non-military security issues has enabled NATO to develop stronger relationships with a number of supra- and sub-state actors.** For example, the stronger ties that it has built with the UN can partly be attributed to its involvement working on women's/children's issues. NATO should continue to recognize the value of this type of work in realizing its broader strategic objectives – both in terms of enhancing its credibility and in opening up avenues for dialogue with non-state partners. At the same time, the success that NATO has had in building ties with the EU suggests that it is informal networks, rather than structured cooperation, that holds the key to effective relationship-building.

Public diplomacy

- **In the wake of the summit, it is clear that NATO has not been as successful as hoped at communicating the RAP to its public.** While this in many ways reflects a long-standing cynicism about reassurance among the emerging post-Cold War generation of opinion formers, NATO must continue to learn from its experience about what makes effective public diplomacy. The public needs to feel that there is a tangible benefit to NATO membership, or else efforts such as this are unlikely to be very successful.
- **At the same time, it is member states, rather than NATO itself, that hold the key to effective public diplomacy.** For many countries, public diplomacy tends to be an afterthought to any action. Given the lack of public understanding of NATO, this has to change. NATO must continue to support member states to reconnect NATO to the broader range of security issues that loom in the public mind, beyond merely a narrow focus on traditional 'defence'.
- **Countering the disinformation and propaganda deployed by its adversaries will be a major challenge for NATO in the coming years.** However, rather than simply being defensive, an effective strategy will require NATO to be on the front foot – for example, scaling up its stream of funding to non-state actors involved in rebutting Russian propaganda or working to promote its success stories in Afghanistan. It will also need to be grounded in a fundamental recognition that the primary goal of many adversaries is not to win the argument, but simply to sow fear or doubt in the public mind in ways that support their objectives.
- **However, NATO and its member states need to ensure that they remain transparent, and do not copy their adversaries' habit of playing loose with facts.** A free media will continue to be one of the most powerful tools that allies possess, and NATO should therefore be wary of actions that undermine its perceived independence and credibility.