

# A reborn Alliance *NATO after Wales* in a troubled world?

Margriet Drent and Dick Zandee

When planned in 2013, the NATO Wales Summit was expected to focus on the post-Afghanistan NATO: less active in deploying forces and more focused on training and exercises. It turned out to be very different. In 2014 the turmoil in Kiev, followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the fighting in Eastern Ukraine, changed the agenda completely. On top of that, the Islamic State shook the world by its cruel and violent actions, further deepening the Syria crisis and destabilizing Iraq and the wider Middle East, with consequences for the inner cities of many NATO members. Suddenly, the Wales meeting of Allied Heads of State and Government became the most important NATO Summit in history or, at least, since the end of the Cold War. Perhaps the media overreacted — as often is the case — but more than two months before the meeting NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen had already labeled the Summit as “historic”.<sup>1</sup>

As the fighting in Eastern Ukraine intensified during the summer — with increased evidence of Russian involvement — and after the MH17 disaster, it became clear that NATO had to face a fundamental change in the security situation on its eastern borders. The Summit would have to address how NATO would respond to the new post-post-Cold War security environment. Did the Wales Summit deliver the new NATO, ready to deal with the new security challenges? Will it have the right instruments and the required capabilities to deal with the hybrid threats and challenges that Russia is using in its interference in Ukraine? Can deterrence and defense still work in a world of security risks that need more than a military response? What does it imply for NATO’s role and its cooperation with other organizations such as the European Union?<sup>2</sup>

## The ‘New Russia’

A more assertive Russian Federation has not emerged overnight. The Crimean land grab had been preceded by Russia seizing political and military opportunities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. Putin provided these break-away regions with his protection and has created de facto sovereign entities on Georgian territory. These post-Soviet entities are heavily dependent on Russia’s financial and

military support and remain a pressure point for Georgia. With the annexation of Crimea, the repeated references to ‘Novo Russia’ and the Kremlin’s heavy involvement with the rebel movements in Eastern Ukraine (including Transnistria’s announcement that it wants to become part of the Russian Federation) Putin’s government has started to rewrite Europe’s map. During the summer of 2014 NATO came to realize that it is facing a large, revisionist power on its eastern borders. For most Eastern European states, in particular Poland and the Baltics, Russia’s actions in Ukraine only confirmed what they had feared and had warned other NATO members against for years.

Quite suddenly, concerns about Russia’s intentions spread across the Alliance and the Summit in Newport would now ‘shape the future of NATO’.<sup>3</sup> Twenty years of budget cuts and fifteen years of focus on out-of-area crisis-management operations had given rise to doubts about NATO’s preparedness for conventional warfare.<sup>4</sup> An alarming House of Commons Report ahead of the Summit concluded that NATO suffered from depleted command structures, a lack of large-scale exercises and training as well as shortcomings in rapid response.<sup>5</sup> Particularly the Baltic states would be ‘easy prey’.<sup>6</sup> With large Russian-speaking minorities within their borders, a lack of strategic depth and assistance from



other NATO forces relatively far away, the Baltic states are considered to be the most vulnerable part of NATO. Although the risk of a conventional attack is low and another version of Russia's 'ambiguous warfare' tactics would be a more likely scenario, it was felt urgent that NATO remedy its poor ability to swiftly respond to a surprise attack on the Baltic countries. A major task for the Wales Summit therefore became launching the rebuilding of a credible conventional deterrent. In order for NATO to become what outgoing Secretary General Rasmussen repeatedly called "fitter, faster and more flexible" in the long term, the Allied ministers decided in May to draft a 'Readiness Action Plan' (RAP) to be decided on during the Wales Summit.

### NATO's response

In Wales, the RAP was indeed adopted and went hand in hand with a political 'Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond', making it unequivocally clear that "should the security of any Ally be threatened, we will act together and decisively"<sup>7</sup>, underlining NATO's Article 5 doctrine of collective defense. The RAP's purpose in reassuring NATO's eastern Allies was, however, also placed in a larger strategic context than that of collective defense against Russia

alone. The Wales Summit Declaration says that the RAP is supposed to respond "to the challenges posed by Russia and their strategic implications", as well as "to the risks and threats emanating from our southern neighborhood, the Middle East and North Africa. The Plan strengthens NATO's collective defense. It also strengthens our crisis management ability."<sup>8</sup> Pleas by Western European states to acknowledge challenges elsewhere on the European periphery were therefore not ignored.

The RAP consists of a reinforcement of the NATO Response Force's (NRF) ability to deploy rapidly by the establishment of a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). A revamping of the much criticized 'rapidness' of the NRF was indeed long overdue. After the political decision in Wales, this VJTF or 'spearhead' of the NRF is still in its planning phase, but it will consist of land, air, maritime and special-operations forces. It will reach Initial Operational Capability within a year and Full Operational Capability a few months later. This new Force will also need command and control centers (probably located in Poland, the Baltic states and Romania), the prepositioning of equipment (including fuel and munitions) and the construction of infrastructure. The RAP entails 12 measures, among them

Fighter jets prepare for refueling during an exercise. NATO's 'Readiness Action Plan' entails 12 measures, among them increasing the frequency of exercises (photo: U.S. Air Force/Kevin Wallace)

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increasing the frequency of exercises with emphasis on advance planning and responses to 'hybrid wars', including working more with other international organizations.<sup>9</sup> Remarkably, the EU is not mentioned in this context. The nature of Russia's tactics necessitates a broader socio-economic and political approach, which makes the EU a likely candidate.

Except for reassuring its Allies, the NATO Summit shows that there is little the Alliance can do about the Ukraine crisis itself. Ultimately, a political solution is required. The Summit showed NATO's unity in political and diplomatic support for Ukraine, while enhancing the Distinctive Partnership that it already has with the country through additional support to the reform of Ukraine's defense sector and improving interoperability between Ukrainian and NATO forces.<sup>10</sup> The Baltic states and Poland had their minds set on permanent NATO bases on their territory as part of the RAP, but this was deemed as a breach of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, particularly by Germany. In this Act, which is mostly considered as having political rather than legal significance, NATO stated that it would not need to station additional permanent bases for its collective defense or other missions. The use of the legalistic explanation for refraining from new permanent bases is more likely meant to disguise differences of opinion on whether such an act would be too provocative towards Russia or a measure too expensive to realize. The RAP in its totality, including all extra reassurance measures, constitutes a de facto permanent presence of NATO forces on the soil of the Baltic states and Poland. It also has stopped a further decrease of US forces in Europe, which is of utmost importance. President Barack Obama's European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) requires rotational presence on the territory of the eastern Allies, and probably US support to the RAP would require suspending the US European Command's force reductions and possibly increasing rotational forces from the United States.<sup>11</sup>

### Better capacities?

Putin has brought NATO back to its core business, but what will it mean for the Alliance's military capacities? Over the last two decades most Allies have restructured their armed forces to lighter, better deployable and leaner capacities. Tanks, artillery and other heavy weapons have been reduced by tens of thousands across Europe. Budget reductions in recent years have further decreased the ambition levels (the amount of forces countries can deploy and sustain). In some cases capacities have been reduced to the minimum or even disbanded; for example, the Netherlands no longer has tanks.

The NATO Summit set ambitious targets on the input side. Member states currently underspending should make an effort to reach the defense spending norm of 2% GDP within a decade. As in the past, this target will most likely remain nothing more than a promise on paper. In many countries it would imply almost a doubling of the defense budget, which is unlikely to happen due to restrained government spending. Nevertheless, the free fall of defense spending has come to an end. Hopefully, the Summit marks the turning point in reversing the trend.

Concerning output, the Allies will have to reconsider what forces NATO will need in the future. Continuation of the Kremlin's aggressive policy and the build-up of a modernized Russian army close to NATO territory might lead to a call for heavier Allied forces. The Summit has announced the adaptation of the NATO military strategic posture and has called "for improving the robustness and readiness of our land forces for both collective defence and crisis management". The need to bolster collective defense — after years of neglect — will lead to a call for heavier Alliance land forces with more fire-power. Developments in the Middle East and North Africa reinforce this call. The

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Islamic State (IS) has tanks and other heavy weapons at its disposal. Extremist groups in North Africa may follow suit. The days of rebels armed with only Kalashnikovs are over. Reversing the trend from light land forces to more

robust and meaner armies does raise the question of financing. Marginal increases in defense budgets will not be enough. Putin, the IS and other adversaries will be crucial. If the situation at Europe's borders deteriorates further, Allies will have to draw the conclusion that defense spending has to increase substantially.

### Adapting to other challenges

The Summit also provided a timely opportunity to discuss the quickly emerging threat of the Islamic State. President Obama announced the formation of a coalition of the willing to counter the IS threat. Air strikes began a few weeks later. An immediate role for NATO is not foreseen except for a potential mission to train and assist the Iraqi security forces in the framework of the NATO's Defence and

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Security Related Capacity Building Initiative. According to the Wales Declaration this Initiative aims “to project stability without deploying large combat forces”. It reflects the reluctance of NATO Allies to deploy troops on a large scale for crisis-management operations of longer duration like ISAF. Declining domestic support for such operations and defense budget cuts are important driving factors. By early 2015 the number of deployed NATO troops will be one-tenth (around 15,000) of the number of military active in Allied operations a few years ago. Training is becoming NATO’s new growth business with the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan as the most important component, as it is for the European Union currently conducting several such missions in Europe and Africa. Hopefully, the Initiative will also lead to close coordination with the EU and to streamlining national training programs which have grown in recent years without much international coordination.

More difficulties lie ahead for NATO to adapt to hybrid warfare threats which consist of a wide range of covert military, paramilitary and civilian tactics such as those Russia applied in Eastern Ukraine. Non-traditional threats, short of open warfare, require non-traditional responses. The Wales Summit refers “to enhancing strategic communications, developing exercise scenarios in light of hybrid threats, and strengthening coordination between NATO and other organisations (...)” Yet it is questionable whether the Alliance will be able to deal with such challenges. The Ukraine case has already shown the limitations of NATO’s potential to stop ambiguous warfare. Were comparable

tactics to be used on the territory of a NATO Ally, sending a rapid response force would do little against propaganda, political manipulation and armed gangs at the local level. Sanctions are the business of other organizations like the EU. The same applies to energy policy, economic assistance, fighting crime and corruption, enhancing democracy and minority rights and strengthening the rule of law. Adapting to hybrid warfare threats implies above all that NATO’s actions will be closely coordinated with those of other organizations. This makes the Alliance more dependent on decisions of other actors, which further complicates the design of coherent and effective responses to these new challenges. It requires in particular much closer coordination with the EU and underlines the need to end the deadlock in formalizing EU-NATO relations and to adapt the cooperation between the two main actors to the new security environment.

The close relationship between external and internal security adds to NATO’s struggle to find its role and tasks. While NATO’s military power can be applied to intervene in armed conflict and consequently to stabilize the security environment, the fights against terrorism, international crime and illegal immigration all fall under the responsibility of civilian internal security actors. Of the quickly emerging threats cyber-attacks are perhaps the exception. The Alliance already has a role in protecting its communications and command & control systems. The Wales Summit added a new element: cyber defense is now part of NATO’s core task of collective defense — an issue which was quite controversial amongst Allies in the past. Yet, one can wonder what NATO could do should one or more of its member states fall under cyber-attack as happened in the case of Estonia in 2007. Attribution of cyber-attacks remains extremely difficult as they can be carried out from all over the world by proxy hackers.

### Conclusions

The Wales Summit struck the right tone on reaffirming NATO’s commitment to Article 5 and was suitably dismissive and firm on Russia. The ‘proof of the pudding’, however, ‘will be in the eating’, and the traditional cracks in the unity NATO displayed with regard to Russia are still visible in between the lines. The Readiness Action Plan, once implemented, could provide a more robust signal of conventional deterrence. The Summit was, however, less convincing in pinpointing solutions to ambiguous warfare. The tricky part of hybrid or ambiguous actions is that they progress incrementally towards a threatening situation while remaining under the threshold of an Article 5 situa-

A statue of a peace dove made from Kalashnikov barrels welded together in Sofia, Bulgaria. The days of rebels armed with only Kalashnikovs are over. Reversing the trend from light land forces to more robust and meaner armies raises the question of financing (photo: Flickr/Daggerstab)

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tion. It could therefore have been expected that the Allies would be clearer in how to deal with these types of situations and how, for instance, Article 4 of the NATO treaty could be upgraded and defined more precisely. Moreover, the Summit missed the opportunity to strike deals with other international organizations, most notably the EU, which probably have a much more important role to play in deterring these types of threats.

The United States' halting the downward trend on the presence of its troops in Europe is probably more important, both concretely and symbolically, than any measures that the NATO Summit came up with. The danger is now that European countries will gratefully receive the renewed American commitment, demonstrate their willingness to provide more defense spending on paper and subsequently lean back. The dire security environment and the fragile political agreement in Washington do not allow this attitude, and Wales is also just a first step towards a NATO that is up against the current and future challenges.

Among the most urgent challenges is the situation in the Middle East. The Wales Summit was used as a platform to shape a coalition of the willing to destroy the IS Caliphate. In time NATO could be involved in Iraq and

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perhaps Syria for capacity-building purposes, but almost all Allies are involved one way or another in the coalition under US leadership. However, containing, pushing back and destroying the IS Caliphate is one goal, while

reaching a long-term solution is another. Political-diplomatic initiatives are needed in parallel to the military effort, and NATO can be just one of the building blocks. What the rise of the IS does teach NATO, however, is that non-traditional adversaries can make use of both counter-insurgency tactics and employ heavy capabilities at the same time. NATO's Allies will therefore need to stock up on their capabilities that can deal with these types of adversaries.

The Wales Summit affirmed the ongoing relevance of NATO as a guarantor against hard security threats. However, it is also clear that the nature of new threats, be they in the

cyber domain, of the ambiguous Russian type, or stemming from religious fanatics, require further transformation of NATO and closer cooperation with organizations like the EU. For now, the main challenge for the new Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, is making sure that Allies remain 'on the ball' with implementation of the Wales Summit as well as further preparing NATO for the turmoil of the 21st century.

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Would you like to react?

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1. 'Wales Nato Summit will be historic, says secretary general', *BBC News*, 22 June 2014.
2. This article will not assess systematically all elements of the Wales Summit Declaration, though the authors have taken these into account in responding to these questions.
3. 'Secretary General: Wales Summit Will Shape NATO's Future', *DoD News*, 4 September 2014.
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11. Daniel Wasserbly, 'SACEUR wants to halt US force cuts in Europe', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 24 September 2014, p. 10.