

NATO's Eastern Promises?

Demands for permanent deployment of NATO troops on the Alliance's Eastern Flank risk divisions at a time when political unity is at a premium.

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Ahead of the June 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw, Poland and other new Member States are stepping up calls for the Alliance to expand its presence on their territories. The military logic is straight-forward: permanently stationed NATO troops would dispel any doubts about the credibility of NATO's Article 5, and decrease the likelihood of Russia's provocation or outright aggression. However, in the absence of a broad political agreement on such a sensitive move in the Alliance, the initiative could prove self-defeating, driving a wedge between Western and Eastern member states and undercutting NATO's fragile consensus on Russia.

Analysis: The Politics of Permanent Deployment

At last year's summit in Wales, NATO leaders agreed a series of measures in response to the conflict in Ukraine – so-called "Readiness Action Plan" (RAP) which envisaged the creation of a 5000-strong spearhead force – but stopped short of permanent deployment of combat troops on the territory of NATO's easternmost member states. A year on, pressure is mounting on NATO to make that leap.

Leading the charge is Andrzej Duda, Poland's new president and the host of NATO's June 2016 Warsaw summit. Days after assuming office, Mr Duda made headlines by complaining about Poland being [treated as a "buffer zone"](#), and launched a diplomatic offensive to galvanize regional support for new bases; at his instigation, leaders of NATO's Eastern flank members are to meet in early November in Bucharest to discuss the issue. Defense chiefs of the three Baltic States have already issued a formal request to host a NATO battalion-size force stationed on their territories.

Meanwhile, as Russia shows little sign of withdrawing troops from Donbas or scaling down strategic confrontation with the West, NATO is busy expanding its military footprint in the region. It recently opened a new military outpost - so-called Force Integration Unit, housing tens of local and NATO staff – near the Russian border in Lithuania. Similar facilities will soon be erected in Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, and linked up to the Szceczin base, which is to be doubled in size to 400 personnel by the end of 2015. The move follows a US decision in June to pre-position heavy equipment, including tanks, armored vehicles and artillery, in these countries.

Nonetheless, barring a dramatic military escalation in Ukraine or a new flashpoint in the Baltics, a decision on new bases in the East remains far off. Germany and France oppose it, fearing it would derail the fragile Minsk process, which they had invested so much political capital into and [which now appears to be taking hold](#). Budgetary constraints, or legal impediments arising from the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 - which prohibits placing "substantial combat forces" on the territory of acceding Members "in the current and foreseeable security environment" - [can probably be worked around](#). The real concern in Berlin and other European capitals is that it would mark a point of no return in the downward spiral of Russia's relations with NATO and the EU.

Either way, in spite of Mr Duda's recent mobilisation drive, there is no cohesive caucus behind the initiative. Washington is sympathetic but non-committal. Countries of the Eastern flank are divided: the wavering governments in Prague or

Sofia could perhaps be swayed to support bases in the East, but not so Budapest or Bratislava, with Prime Minister's Viktor Orban's falling public support in the former, and a looming general election in the latter. Furthermore, after the rift between Germany and post-communist countries over the EU's handling of the refugee crisis, regional leaders can ill-afford to pick yet another fight with Angela Merkel.

Outlook: The Dangers of Disunity

The prohibitive politics of permanent NATO presence means that if hawkish-leaning Member States - for instance, a PiS-led cabinet in Poland – were to push the idea too aggressively, instead of gaining stronger assurances, they would risk sowing political discord. This is the lesson of the ill-fated campaign for Ukraine's and Georgia's Membership Action Plan in 2008: instead of bringing the post-Soviet partners closer to NATO, it set the stage for an acrimonious summit in Bucharest, and a thoroughly ambivalent political message, which, in turn, created conditions for Russia's invasion of Georgia a few months later.

Advocates of new NATO bases face a dilemma. They must weigh the probability of convincing skeptical European Allies – and consequent gains in security as a result of forward deployments – against the odds of the initiative ending in a bitter political row and undercutting the Alliance's strategic unity in dealing with Moscow.

For the most vulnerable Member States, the latter scenario is fraught with security risks of its own: when it comes to the credibility of NATO's deterrence, especially in the context of Article 5, political cohesion and mutual trust are a precious resource, in the same way as military assets or combat readiness are. In an Article 5 situation – say, a hybrid attack in one of the Baltic countries – political and decision-making processes in the North Atlantic Council will matter as much as military logistics. An Alliance strained by divisions and bickering will inevitably be slower to respond.

Therefore, at the moment, it seems more prudent to focus energy and expend political capital on ensuring that NATO Readiness Action Plan is implemented in full. This entails completing the build-up of the 40 000-strong NATO Response Force, as well as the 5000-strong Very High Joint Readiness Task Force, and strengthening the infrastructure, command structures and information networks in the region. Coupled with more frequent and larger NATO military exercises, it would amount to a real increase in NATO military presence in Eastern flank states, albeit on a rotational basis and without a concerted focus on combat duties. It would also make for a significant upgrade in NATO's deterrence posture – even without the symbolic power of permanent bases.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Governments of **the most vulnerable Members in the East** should consider the political feasibility of NATO's decision on permanent deployment of troops on their territory, and be prepared to make maximum use of alternative and more flexible pathways toward a stronger Allied deterrence;
- ◆ Governments of **NATO Member States** that oppose permanent deployments in the East should demonstrate greater appreciation of the security concerns and threat perceptions felt by Poland and the Baltic states and step up the implementation of the Readiness Action Plan;
- ◆ Governments of **the Visegrad group** should sustain a common view on NATO's strategic response to the threat posed by Russia's destabilization of European security (as embodied in the RAP), and use it as a basis to develop a wider consensus among the Eastern Flank Member states;

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