

Renewing NATO's Defence Strategy

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September 2014 will see the Welsh city of Cardiff play host to the most important [NATO summit](#) of recent years. Whilst originally envisaged to be a meeting that would primarily mark the political, if not practical, end of NATO's combat operations in Afghanistan, contemporary developments in Ukraine have seen the conference energised with new purpose. Whatever Russia's ultimate intentions in the country are following their annexation of Crimea, NATO - an organisation that was facing what some saw as existential questions post-Afghanistan - is now required to once again turn its attention to the defence of its member states.

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland are the four NATO members that now face the greatest challenge from a newly aggressive Russia. Already, NATO has tripled the number of fighter aircraft [deployed](#) to the Baltic States to provide air defence. On the ground, US troops have been sent for [training](#) in both the Baltic States and Poland as part of the wider US [Operation Atlantic Resolve](#). Canada has sent soldiers, aircraft and ships as part of its [Operation Reassurance](#). The British Army will also [deploy](#) a contingent to Poland for training this autumn. However, these are all simply stop-gap provisions until a genuine long-term strategy to contain Russia can be agreed upon.

The measures that need to be taken by NATO members to counter Russia are currently under discussion - with the hope being that a formal policy set can be announced at the conference in Wales. Already, a number of key actors within the organisation have begun to publicly outline their positions. The need to enhance the [NATO Response Force](#) has been [articulated](#) by outgoing NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Poland has [called](#) for the permanent stationing of a large number of NATO troops on its territory. Britain's prime minister, David Cameron, has also [urged](#) NATO member states to increase defence spending, whilst at the same time rather undermining himself by failing to pledge that the UK will do the same. NATO's long-term approach must, therefore, be a compromise between providing a meaningful shield for its eastern members, whilst at the same time remaining within tight financial limitations. It must also avoid being overly provocative - if only because of the need to avoid providing fuel for Russia's [propaganda machine](#).

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Taking all of these concerns into consideration, it is arguable that the model NATO needs to adopt to support the defence of its members in Eastern Europe can be identified by examining the strategy that it has applied in Norway. Even this summer, twenty-three years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a US transport ship was [delivering](#) additional military vehicles and supplies to be stored in a network of caves and above ground storage facilities in the Trøndelag region of central Norway as part of the [Marine Corps Positioning Program](#). The equipment is designed to provide sufficient assets for a brigade-sized force of US Marines for thirty days of operations. Although also available for training exercises and operations in areas such as the Middle East, the stockpile's primary purpose is to allow for the rapid deployment of a US force to support Norway in defending itself from any Russian attack. With the equipment already forward deployed, all that needs to be done is to fly in the personnel to use it - a far quicker proposition than shipping it all the way from the US. A similar approach was also used during the Cold War to support the defence of Western Europe: at its peak, the Prepositioning of Materiel Configured in Unit Sets ([POMCUS](#)) system sustained enough equipment for [six US Army divisions](#).

Some have proposed forward-basing military supplies in the Baltic States. However, in the harsh light of day, this would be unwise: it is very easy to envisage such stores being bombed out of existence, or even overrun by Russian airborne units and Special Forces, within hours of hostilities commencing. Instead, a more conservative option of building protected storage facilities in western Poland should be adopted. Early indications are that this is indeed the approach being considered, with the NATO leadership seemingly keen to base a new force around the already established [Multinational Corps Northeast](#) in western Poland. Although currently held at a low state of operational readiness (91-180 days' notice), the plan would appear to envisage transforming the headquarters into a full-time formation that would provide the command umbrella for at least the initial element of NATO's response to any Russian aggression. Whilst such a force would of course not be immune from interdiction, even a limited attack on NATO facilities in western Poland would be a vastly more dangerous undertaking for Russia than a move into the Baltic States.

But what form should the prepositioning of equipment take? Clearly, it would not (and for financial reasons, could not) be on the same scale as seen in Western Europe during the Cold War. However, it would need to be meaningful in the sense that it could - in combination with lighter airborne NATO forces - allow for the provision of viable support to the member state or states under attack, and the embryonic element of a force to liberate any lost territory. A sensible compromise would, therefore, see sufficient resources

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prepositioned to support a US division (three or four brigades), a brigade each from Britain and France, and a composite brigade formed from the assets of other NATO members that are willing to contribute. In a crisis, it would be relatively simple to airlift personnel from their home bases to meet up with their respective stockpiles. Ironically, the contemporary fall in NATO defence expenditure would also make prepositioning relatively inexpensive: recent cuts now mean that many alliance members now have far more equipment than they need, so there would be a reduced requirement for additional purchases to support such a force. For example, the UK is currently in possession of almost four hundred Challenger 2 tanks, but the projected British Army future force structure only sees a need for around two hundred and twenty. Whilst it would not be cost-free to place surplus assets in forward storage areas due to the need to continuously maintain and upgrade them, the expenditure needed would be far from prohibitive.

If we return to the Norwegian defence model, it is important to note that - in spite of a limited population and geographical challenges - Norway is in no way simply a passive consumer of the defence resources of others. In addition to paying the storage and upkeep costs of US vehicles and supplies, Norway retains its own small, but capable, [armed forces](#) paid for by the highest per-capita defence expenditure in Europe. This brings us to the second element of NATO's response to Russia in Eastern Europe: ensuring that the vulnerable member states themselves are sufficiently equipped to provide meaningful resistance to any incursions.

Once again, the countries of greatest immediate concern are the Baltic States and Poland. The former three nations have a greatly constrained military potential given their population and economies. None possess a notable air force or navy, and each struggles to field a brigade-sized army. However, the current crisis has brought about [pledges](#) from Latvia and Lithuania that will see them double their defence spending from one per cent of GDP to the NATO target of two per cent of GDP by 2020. Estonia already meets this spending level, but is now [investing](#) in key systems such as the Javelin anti-tank missile, a weapon that will give the relatively light formations of their army the ability to engage the latest Russian armour. However, it is Poland that is the most pivotal of NATO's front-line states. Not only does it border Russian territory, but it is the only country in the alliance that is in a military and geographical position to render direct assistance to its northern Baltic neighbours at a speed that might prevent them from being completely overrun. Although already in possession of relatively large and well-equipped [armed forces](#), recent developments have spurred Poland to speed up the purchase of [new attack helicopters](#) and the [upgrading](#) of its air defence

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system - the latter of would will be vital in ensuring that NATO's prepositioned equipment is adequately defended. None of these spending or procurement decisions can eliminate the prospect that a Russian campaign could invade and occupy one or more Baltic States, but they do increase the price they would pay for doing so.

As well as direct public actions and statements of intent, it will also be important to make NATO's plans clear to Russia's leadership in private. Firstly, it must be conveyed that no scope will be allowed in any member state for the type of armed pro-Russian rebellion, complete with unspeaking but suspiciously well-equipped '[little green men](#)', that arose in Ukraine. At the slightest hint of trouble, NATO troops will be deployed to carefully, but firmly, put down any such movement. Such a declaration would hopefully communicate that any notions the Kremlin has of further 'cheap wins' in Eastern Europe are misplaced, and that any territorial ambitions they have would have to be accomplished the hard way. This leads to the second point that NATO needs to privately convey: any direct Russian attack into the Baltic States or Poland will not just be countered until a return to the [status quo ante bellum](#), but will result in NATO's invasion, occupation and (at the very least) demilitarisation of the [Kaliningrad Oblast](#), the Russian enclave that sits between Poland and Lithuania and provides the home of Russia's Baltic Fleet. The risk of having to politically deal with not just a foreign military defeat, but also almost one million Russian citizens under the indefinite supervision of NATO's armies, should do wonders to focus the minds of Russia's leadership.

There are reasons to be hopeful that the above contingences will never been needed, and that containment may prove sufficient to manage Russia until its current political phase runs its course. The apparent reluctance of the Kremlin to embark upon an operation of the scale required to secure at least the east of Ukraine appears to demonstrate a grasp of the magnitude of such military undertakings. The Russian government now also faces the challenge of keeping its population passive in the face of economic stagnation, a task that would be made unimaginably harder if wartime economic sanctions were imposed. '[Putinism](#)', as some have opted to call it, does not represent any great socio-political challenge to the West: it is simply a reheated version of the same corrupt nationalist authoritarianism that has failed countless times across the world. However, as an [opinion poll](#) taken after the annexation of Crimea shows, short and successful military operations can provide a political boost to the Kremlin. In the face of future opposition, it is far from impossible that the Russian government will once again seek to externalise its problems - even if the long-term consequences for Russia prove disastrous.

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