

Answering the Big Questions:

The Month Following the 2014 NATO Summit

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Part Two of the 'Why NATO' Project

The 2014 North Atlantic Treaty Organisation summit in Wales was billed as arguably the most important for the alliance following the Cold War. Against a backdrop of tension in Ukraine and unrelenting chaos in the Middle East, the stakes are both immediate and long-term.

Originally intended as a relatively low-key meeting to look back on the conflict in Afghanistan, recent events meant the Summit earlier this month required urgent decisions on how to respond to the current crises and provided a much needed opportunity to re-define NATO's purpose.

The primary outcomes of the summit have been four-fold:

1. The decided-upon policy towards Russia and the Ukrainian crisis.
2. Issues and potential of the newly-announced Rapid Reaction Force.
3. The spread of the non-state armed group Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.
4. Addressing the long-term issue of unequal budget contributions from NATO members.

¹ With appreciation to Huw Anslow for his contribution to the production of this article.

1. Russia and the Ukrainian Crisis

The ongoing events in Ukraine dominated the second day of the Summit.² Russia's renewed aggression in Europe has radically altered NATO's assumptions of its eastern neighbour. Since the Cold War Russia has largely been written off as a threat, a strategic line of thinking that has been frantically re-examined in recent months.

The immediate outcome of the talks was a demonstration of NATO members' economic and financial clout, as the European Union agreed to apply further export restrictions on Russian state-owned energy and defence firms, the selling of military hardware, and applying asset freezes and travel bans to more of Putin's political allies.³

Elucidating on the new sanctions upon Russia, UK Prime Minister David Cameron stated that this newest round of sanctions will:

*"make it harder for its [Russian] banks and its energy and defence companies to borrow money; they will widen the ban on selling so called 'dual goods' like machinery and computer equipment which could be used for military as well as civilian purposes; and they will prohibit the provision of services for the exploration and production of shale, deepwater and Arctic oil"*⁴

A notable element of these sanctions was

² BBC (2), 5th September 2014, [Link](#)

³ Wall Street Journal, 5th September 2014. [Link](#)

⁴ Prime Minister's Office, 8th September 2014. [Link](#)

France's decision to suspend delivery of a Mistral Naval Assault Ship to Russia. French President François Hollande told reporters that the deal would not go ahead unless certain conditions would be met in Ukraine, most notably a cease-fire and a political agreement between Russia and Ukraine.⁵ The French government has been under increasing pressure from Ukraine and NATO members to cancel the deal, which entails a second ship, including by the US and UK.

One source asserted these steps were designed to push Vladimir Putin towards the "negotiating table and off the battlefield"⁶. Outgoing Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen made clear that the best way forward in the Ukraine crisis would be a political solution, calling upon Russia to "step back from confrontation and take the path to peace".⁷

Indirectly backing these sanctions with 'hard power' was NATO's agreement to maintain a new Rapid Reaction Force, to be analysed in more detail in Section 2. However, aside from this agreement (which is not explicitly targeted at Russia) NATO was reluctant to prescribe direct military or strategic involvement. Indeed, on the subject of supplying arms to the Ukrainian government, the Secretary-General stated that it is up to each individual member to decide whether or not to do so.⁸

In Ukraine, a cease-fire agreement made on the 5th September – during the Summit – remains (precariously) in place. The cease-fire would lead to major concessions for both Ukraine and the separatists, and in practice also for Russia. NATO has recognised that some Russian troops have left Ukraine in recent weeks, although NATO's most senior military commander, Gen. Breedlove, describes the cease-fire as a truce in name only.⁹

The durability of this agreement, and influence Russia will have during and after negotiations, may be the true test of the measures NATO has put in place. That said, if the primary goal of these actions is to prevent an escalation of the conflict – and crucially open Russian involvement – events are following the right path.

2. Rapid Reaction Force

A key outcome of the Summit is the establishment of a Rapid Reaction 'Spearhead Force' of 4,000 troops able to operate anywhere within two-five days.¹⁰ The broader Rapid Reaction Force will consist of a joint force of around 13,000, with a pool of additional units to reinforce where necessary.¹¹

The announcement serves to address two recent criticisms of NATO: first, that the organisation lacks the capacity to act quickly in response to an immediate threat; and second,

⁵ BBC (1), 4th September 2014, [Link](#)

⁶ Huffington Post UK, 4th September 2014, [Link](#)

⁷ BBC (1), 4th September 2014, [Link](#)

⁸ NATO, 4th September 2014, [Link](#)

⁹ BBC (4), 21st September 2014, [Link](#)

¹⁰ BBC (2), 5th September 2014, [Link](#)

¹¹ BBC (2), 5th September 2014, [Link](#)

as a response to fears from the Baltic states of Russian action similar to that undertaken in Ukraine.

On the former, NATO members made a clear attempt to demonstrate capacity. The UK alone agreed to supply a quarter of the new force, and committed 3,500 troops to military exercises in Eastern Europe.¹² Immediate steps will be taken to establish pre-positioned equipment and military infrastructure in Eastern member states; an early sign is the military exercises in Lithuania that accompanied the summit.¹³

This force is to be initially deployed in the Baltic states, which is a necessary first step in reassuring Eastern European members of the alliance, particularly those – like Estonia and Latvia – with large ethnically Russian populations. Poland has been particularly vocal in arguing that NATO and its member states need to take the threat posed by recent Russian aggression more seriously and has requested 10,000 NATO troops be stationed on its territory.¹⁴ However, member states are reluctant to break a 1997 agreement not to establish new permanent bases in former Soviet states.

The Baltic states in particular fear the same Russian subterfuge which preceded the annexation of Crimea, such as the 'little green men': silent, well-armed troops which

constituted a covert [pre] invasion. NATO Gen. Philip Breedlove believes the Rapid Reaction force will constitute an important deterrent (or indeed response) to this form of 'hybrid war'.¹⁵

Politically speaking however, there is reason to be cautious of increased deployment on Russia's borders (hence the reluctance to break the 1997 agreement) as this remains one of Russia's core foreign policy concerns, partly leading to the current situation in the Ukraine. Hence the tempered proposed measures should be viewed as sufficient in the short term.¹⁶

Practically speaking, the force is positive in allowing NATO to actively respond to, or threaten to respond to, escalating situations and limit the risk of being outmanoeuvred by aggressors. It will be imperative to ensure the force 'has teeth' and is applicable to the varied theatres of conflict which threaten NATO security; otherwise, there is a risk that the force becomes viewed as a hollow threat to Russia.

3. Islamic State

The summit was also used as an opportunity to decide on a response to the growth of IS. President Obama in particular attempted to form the outline of a coordinated military strategy. This strategy would rely on US air strikes to target IS leaders and positions,

¹² Guardian (3), 5th September 2014, [Link](#)

¹³ Reuters, 6th September 2014, [Link](#)

¹⁴ Telegraph, 1st April 2014, [Link](#)

¹⁵ Atlantic Council, 17th September 2014, [Link](#)

¹⁶ For further analysis on NATO's defence strategy, please see: Allport, R, 'Renewing NATO's Defence Strategy'. Human Security Centre, Issue 3, No. 6.

simultaneously strengthen moderate Syrian rebel groups and enlist the support of 'friendly' regional governments.¹⁷

This was a marked difference to President Obama's comments a week before, where it was made clear there was no explicit and coherent strategy in dealing with IS.¹⁸ That at least some progress was made at the Summit must be regarded as a positive step in light of the deteriorating situation in Syria and Iraq. At the conclusion of the summit it was announced that a coalition of the US, the UK, France, Australia, Germany, Canada, Turkey, Italy, Poland and Denmark had agreed to combat IS, with a further intention of enlisting the support of Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan.¹⁹

This does raise certain issues. One in particular is the recurrence of members willing to commit resources to NATO operations, whilst other states lack the capacity or political will to do so. While this case is not wholly demonstrative, it raises the concern of a 'two-tier' system with core members dominating both strategy and finances, and the remaining members contributing little. Looking at the intervention in Libya, a similar pattern of contributing states is apparent.

However, the summit provided a venue for the first clear approach in combating and containing IS from Western powers. Secretary-General

Anders Fogh Rasmussen warned in his farewell speech that IS posed a significant threat to Europe in exporting terrorism and extremist sectarianism. He argued that a military response was justified and necessary, as, "We [NATO] are on the front line of a new battle between tolerance and fanaticism, democracy and totalitarianism and between open and closed societies."²⁰ In the latter statement, one can possibly detect NATO's re-definition of purpose with interesting parallels to previous adversaries during the Cold War and War on Terror.

The focus of the strategy is according to President Obama to "degrade and ultimately destroy"²¹ IS, and consists of:

- An expanded, systematic campaign of air strikes in Iraq
- Bolstering the capabilities of the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga
- Providing deeper support and training to moderate Syrian rebels
- Bringing regional actors into the coalition to counter IS influence
- Selected strikes on IS targets in Syria

Indeed, since this policy course was agreed upon in Wales, the Guardian has described the US administration's actions as "markedly

¹⁷ Guardian (1), 16th September 2014, [Link](#)

¹⁸ CNN, 4th September 2014, [Link](#)

¹⁹ Al Jazeera, 6th September 2014, [Link](#)

²⁰ Tigner, B. IHS Janes Defence, 15th September 2014, [Link](#)

²¹ Guardian (1), 16th September 2014, [Link](#)

interventionist.”²² In recent weeks the US has undertaken at least 162 air strikes and there are now around 1,700 'non-combat' troops operating in Iraq to advise and train Iraqi forces. With regard to other coalition members, French forces have also begun carrying out air strikes in Iraq, and as of Friday 26th, the British Parliament has also approved military action. At the same time, 'boots on the ground' intervention remains off the table.

Clearly a politically and practically feasible strategy, there are however limits on the potential effectiveness of using air-power alone to combat a non-state actor. With a continuous reluctance for 'boots on the ground', the most likely (and hoped for) scenario is for the Iraqi government and Kurds to re-establish control and gain the capacity to independently eradicate the IS presence in Iraq.

The longer term situation in Syria will be much more unclear. NATO members have refused to consider Assad a potential partner – with good reason – but air strikes on IS will likely bolster the Syrian government, even if the hope is that the more moderate Syria opposition will be similarly encouraged. By not addressing the risk of adverse effects on the ground, Barnes-Dacey of the European Council on Foreign Relations argues the longer-term crisis in Syria will continue to grow.²³

However, if these actions are sustained, the

²² Guardian (2), 11th September 2014, [Link](#)

²³ Barnes-Dacey, J. European Council On Foreign Relations, 23rd September 2014, [Link](#)

Summit may have provided the opportunity for the first comprehensive strategy against IS to have been developed. It does however also raise the issue of contributing states, the practical feasibility of a limited campaign and on some level NATO's purpose in the 21st century. It is as of yet difficult to judge the potential success of the proposed action steps; however, as one of the two major crises requiring addressal, NATO passed what may prove to be an effective message.

4. Budget Financing

One of the major issues NATO has failed to address since the Cold War is the insufficient defence budgets of many members. A pledge was made to reverse these declining trends with a commitment to meet targets of spending at 2% of GDP over the next 10 years.²⁴

This had been a growing concern, particularly for the US, which contributes the lion's share of military spending. Prior to the Summit, commentators warned continued disinterest and unequal contribution from many members would precipitate NATO “sliding into insignificance”.²⁵ Robert Gates, former US Defence Secretary has been particularly critical, making harsh statements in 2011 that are still referenced today:

“The blunt reality, is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress —

²⁴ Prime Minister's Office, 8th September 2014. [Link](#)

²⁵ Schmitt, G. New York Times, 2nd September 2014, [Link](#)

*and in the American body politic writ large — to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defence.*²⁶

Upon brief inspection of NATO spending, one may argue this was not a particularly pressing concern in broader practical terms:

- The alliance as a whole spends approximately \$900bn on defence annually
- In contrast, the top non-NATO military expenditure is China, at approximately \$112bn, a fraction of the NATO figure. Russia's stands at approximately \$78bn.

However, contrasting these figures, are some worrying trends:

- Between 2012-14, NATO spending has fallen by \$93 billion (Source 9).
- During that time NATO members comprise 13 of world's top twenty fastest declining defence budgets.²⁷
- Increased Russian aggression in Europe comes alongside a rapid increase in Russian military spending.

Indeed, it is argued that NATO's financial dominance should not allow any false

assumptions around security. Russian defence spending has been expanding at a rapid rate for several years, with military spending forecast to reach \$98bn in real terms by 2016 – greater than German and French defence spending combined.²⁸ While still a fraction of NATO spending, forward planning from the alliance should monitor Russian intent alongside reduced NATO capacity, particularly upon lower-contributing European members.

However, aside from the practical considerations of increased military spending, the aforementioned political considerations present a particular concern. This pledge represents a recognition that NATO cannot depend solely on the US to shoulder the financial burden of the alliance, a cause of significant consternation for US policy-makers.²⁹ With regard to the figure of \$900bn, \$600bn is from the US alone. Without parity, the long term commitment to and security gained from the alliance are undermined.

The Wales Pledge made at the Summit detailed that every NATO member spending less than 2% of GDP on defence will aim to increase spending to 2% in real terms.³⁰ A second financial target established that a fifth of all defence budgets should be dedicated to procuring major new equipment.³¹ These agreements have the potential to address the

²⁶ Schmitt, G. New York Times, 2nd September 2014, [Link](#)

²⁷ IHS Janes, 3rd September 2014, [Link](#)

²⁸ IHS Janes, 3rd September 2014, [Link](#)

²⁹ The Spectator, 6th September 2014, [Link](#)

³⁰ Prime Minister's Office, 8th September 2014. [Link](#)

³¹ Prime Minister's Office, 8th September 2014. [Link](#)

unbalanced spending within the alliance, and assuage US concerns.

However, the true test of these pledges (the test failed when this agreement was previously made) is whether or not they are stuck to by NATO members, en-masse. Taking the UK, eager to demonstrate it is an active member of NATO at the summit, as an example: whilst David Cameron laid out why members should contribute more, UK spending looks likely to fall behind the benchmark by 2017, despite years as one of the few members to meet the 2% target.³²

A weak response to Russian aggression, following a dire conclusion to the Afghanistan campaign and reliance on US support in Libya may have reduced appetites for contributing to NATO, and this pledge may turn out to be NATO's true make or break moment.

Conclusions

In confronting such pressing short term issues, twinned with profound and long term considerations, the Summit itself can be viewed positively.

The sanctions against Russia and a unified front of condemnation is arguably a contributing factor to the ongoing cease-fire in Ukraine. Additionally, with these measures backed by a newly instituted Reaction Force, enough work may have been done to prevent an escalation.

Some will argue for a stronger response, including more drastic troop re-deployments or more direct support for the Ukrainian government (i.e. through supplying arms more widely), however allowing this to be done on a bilateral basis ensures far more unity among NATO members, and a less contentious diplomatic relationship with Russia.

The Reaction Force, in of itself, is a positive move for NATO, being widely applicable and giving an otherwise unwieldy collection of militaries a capacity for immediate force-projection. With regard to IS, a strategy has been formulated which is feasible and politically acceptable and that regional states and NATO members outside of the US are currently contributing to. As stated, there are limits to the proposed action. Indeed, the multiple views on how to confront IS activity in Syria, as well as the wider issue of Syria altogether, remain unclear.

Many of these policies, and particularly the question of military contributions among member states, will be truly tested on their sustained application by all NATO members. The future of NATO will remain unclear until the results of the agreements made at this summit are demonstrated; however, in the short term, the alliance has made positive steps in addressing the issues it needed to.

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³² Farmer, B. The Telegraph, 5th September 2014, [Link](#)

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