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NATO's revival of collective defence and the challenge of national commitments

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Executive summary

The approval of NATO's regional plans at the Vilnius summit in 2023 marked the most important step by NATO towards a fully-fledged collective defence for the first time in over 30 years. It was a sign of how seriously NATO leaders took the Russian threat. The regional plans are demanding and complex. They will almost certainly cost NATO members more than the current commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence, let alone 2.5% of GDP, which many now believe is necessary. They have received remarkably little public or parliamentary scrutiny. They raise several questions in terms of affordability, oversight of the military and even their compatibility with the oft-debated question of a European defence capability. It is doubtful whether the full resource and policy consequences of these plans have been fully examined or absorbed.

NATO's regional plans should be the subject of detailed parliamentary scrutiny by the various individual national parliaments, whose role should focus on ensuring that national commitments to NATO are consistent with the resources and political aims of their respective countries. In particular,

1. The true costs of implementing NATO's regional defence plans, both nationally and collectively, should be identified.
2. In light of a potential Trump presidency, the idea of a separable European military pillar within NATO should also be examined as a matter of urgency; NATO's military authorities should also explore this idea. At the very least, given the all-embracing and intensive nature of NATO's regional defence plans, the practical compatibility of a potential autonomous European defence with an actual NATO defence needs to be examined in further detail.
3. The system for securing national military commitments for NATO military purposes seems to give too much power to the NATO military authorities, particularly the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). This process, again, should be the subject of detailed public and parliamentary scrutiny.

Introduction

The most significant NATO decision of recent years is the one least noticed, analysed or understood by the public and parliaments. At the Vilnius summit, NATO leaders approved the so-called regional defence plans. Relegated to paragraph 34 of their communiqué, NATO's leaders announced:

"Today, we have agreed significant measures to further enhance NATO's deterrence and defence posture in all domains, including strengthening forward defences and the Alliance's ability to rapidly reinforce any Ally that comes under threat ... We have put in place a new generation of regional defence plans..."¹

In effect, these plans mark a definitive return to NATO's primary function of collective defence after almost 30 years of neglect and de-prioritisation in favour of so-called crisis management operations such as those in the Balkans, Libya, and Afghanistan.

It is no surprise that this decision has not attracted much attention, because after all, what is NATO if not a defence organisation? Making defence plans is its business. It is assumed that defence planning and plans is what NATO does naturally, and has done continuously. That would be a mistaken assumption.

For almost 30 years, driven by instability beyond its borders, NATO prioritised crisis intervention and management over collective defence. The outgoing NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has often declared reassuringly that NATO will defend every inch of NATO territory. Unfortunately, the irony is that before these regional defence plans are implemented, and that may take years², NATO does not have the capability to defend every inch of allied territory. Indeed, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it did not even have effective plans to do so.

Jens Stoltenberg had announced in June 2022, presumably in accordance with the developing plans, that NATO seeks to increase its high readiness forces to more than 300,000 troops³. The regional defence plans are, as yet, aspirations, not reality. The ultimate purpose of the regional defence plans is, of course, deterrence against Russia, that is, the prevention of war, which is a wider concept than defence. Deterrence includes NATO's nuclear posture and other instruments of power. In short, the historic absence of defence plans to defend its eastern flank was a significant flaw in NATO's overall deterrence policy.

¹ Authors' underlining.

² Jack Detsch, "NATO's Military Has a New Nerve Center", Foreign Policy, February 28, 2024.

³ Lili Bayer, "NATO will increase high-readiness force to 'well over' 300,000 troops", Politico, June 27, 2022.

Reassurance is not the same as defence

When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and stepped up its military support for the Donbas separatists in Ukraine, it was a wake-up call for NATO. NATO then began a slow, hesitant process of reconstituting its ability to defend collectively. At their Warsaw Summit in 2016, allies adopted a Readiness Action Plan⁴ to strengthen NATO's military readiness and posture. Primarily geared towards reassuring Eastern European members of the Alliance, the Action Plan included plans to establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force that could, when established, deploy to defend Allied territory within a few days. It should be emphasised that these were plans, not immediate capabilities.

As importantly, and more visibly, NATO established the so-called "enhanced military presence"⁵ - a military presence in the three Baltic states and Poland on a rotational basis. This military presence was composed of in-place battalion-sized NATO multinational formations to demonstrate that NATO, as a whole, would be engaged should Russia threaten or attack the Baltic states or Poland. The units rotated and were replaced every six months. Even in 2014, NATO collectively was still keen to preserve its partnership with Russia, and not provoke it by deliberately breaking the commitments it had made to Russia in 1997 on not deploying permanent and substantial conventional forces on new members territory⁶. So, a minimal NATO presence on its European eastern flank was designed to reassure vulnerable allies while not aggravating Russia.

Although presented as a purposeful strengthening of NATO's collective defence capability, the enhanced forward presence was primarily intended as a tripwire defence mechanism. Without a regional defence plan, as agreed at the 2023 Summit in Vilnius, to mobilise and deliver trained and equipped troops to the Baltic and other states, which the regional defence plans now aim to do, enhanced forward presence was incapable of effective defence, even with reinforcements. It is even likely that the enhanced forward presence was incapable of deterring given its minimal ability to defend. Nevertheless, the establishment of a NATO ground force presence on the eastern flank, for the first time since those countries became members, was a significant step in the restoration of a comprehensive deterrent posture towards Russia. As a "tripwire force", it signified that NATO as a whole would be involved should Russia seek to intimidate or attack NATO's eastern flank countries.

Ironically, one of Russia's excuses for invading Ukraine was that NATO forces and infrastructure were creeping nearer to Russia's borders. This Russian fear was exaggerated. The "enhanced forward presence forces", as conceived in 2014, were token forces. Only since the enlargement of NATO to Finland and Sweden and the approval of regional defence plans at the summit of 2023 has Russia had true cause for concern that substantial NATO military capabilities would be able to target

⁴ For further details see https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_119353.htm

⁵ For further details see, "NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance", https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm

⁶ For further details on the 1997 NATO-Russia agreement see "NATO-Russia: is there a future?", [Nicholas Williams](#), 21 May 2024 <https://www.ceris.be/blog/nato-russia-is-there-a-future/>

Russia, particularly its strategic assets in the Kola peninsula. In other words, with its invasion of Ukraine, Russia provoked the very situation (ie an intimidating NATO military presence close to its borders) that it had claimed motivated it to invade Ukraine in the first place.

A serious return to collective defence

There were many preliminary decisions in the years before the Vilnius Summit, leading to the apparent re-prioritisation of collective defence. In 2019, NATO's Military Committee s a new NATO Military Strategy⁷, which declared Russia as a "strategic competitor" which "must be contested". It was interesting and notable that this military strategy was initiated by the military themselves without prior political guidance as to what status NATO should have attributed to Russia.

It is a sign of the disconnect between the political and military structures of NATO that, for a while, NATO's military authorities considered Russia as a threat to be contested, and the North Atlantic Council (NAC)⁸ - its highest decision-making body – still considered it to be a partner, albeit a problematic one. The NAC was divided over preserving the possibility of partnership with Russia or breaking with it entirely. Russia's invasion of Ukraine definitively resolved that dilemma⁹. NATO's Military Committee developed their self-initiated military strategy in 2020 out of frustration that political hesitancy and disagreement among NATO members left them without a clear basis for developing the plans necessary to reconstruct an effective collective defence once again.

From the 2020 Military Strategy, which identified Russia as a threat for the first time since the 1990s, SACEUR¹⁰ developed a "strategic plan" in order to establish once more the basis and concepts for a NATO force structure capable of deterring and mounting a credible defence against Russia. Following on from the strategic plan, in the manner of cascading and ever more detailed military plans, SACEUR developed the regional plans that the summit in Vilnius approved in 2023. In the meantime, in catch-up mode, the NAC provided NATO's political guidance to NATO's military. They agreed on the 2022 Strategic Concept, which identified the Russian Federation as the most significant and direct threat to the allies' security. Formally, SACEUR's Regional Plans are the result of the 2022 Strategic concept.

⁷ "NATO Chiefs of Defence discuss future Alliance adaptation",

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_166244.htm#:~:text=On%2022%20May%202019%2C%20the,in%20Chiefs%20of%20Defence%20Session,22%20May%202019.

⁸ The North Atlantic Council is the principal political decision-making body within NATO. Comprised of the NATO Secretary General as chairman and Ambassadors of all NATO members, it oversees the political and military process relating to security issues affecting the whole Alliance.

⁹ "In light of its hostile policies and actions, we cannot consider the Russian Federation to be our partner." NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, paragraph 9.

¹⁰ The Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) is one of NATO's three strategic commanders and is at the head of Allied Command Operations (ACO) based in Mons, Belgium. SACEUR is responsible to NATO's highest military authority – the Military Committee (MC) – for the conduct of all NATO military operations.

Cold War control of the military

NATO has always had a defence planning process designed both to harmonise defence planning activities among NATO members and, very importantly, to extract the required forces and capabilities from allies to satisfy the requirements of NATO's centralised military authorities. In the Cold War, NATO's military had fully developed defence plans based on the possibility of a surprise attack by the Warsaw Pact in a time of East-West tension – literally to defend “every inch” of allies' territory. By the end of the Cold War, NATO planning for war had settled into a routine, incremental, and repetitive annual procedure. Then, as now, the military pitched their requirement too high, at a level that they considered a necessary challenge.

The allies responded according to their military means, and, very importantly, according to their political and financial limitations. It was a process of finding the middle ground between NATO's demands and allies' constraints. The significant point of this process was that Allied capitals kept tight political control and oversight of the NATO planning process. Every two years, defence ministers would give guidance as to the level of ambition, and each year allies would declare what forces they were willing to make available to fulfil the NATO military requirement to defend and deter against the Warsaw Pact. Of course, the response of NATO allies was never enough for NATO's military authorities. But the effect of having NATO annually pressure capitals to fulfil the level of ambition that their own ministers had approved, helped to incrementally ratchet up the level of forces available to NATO – but only at a level and pace that the political authorities in capitals were comfortable with.

The NATO bureaucracy aside, the crucial point is that SACEUR, as the operational commander, has now fully developed and precise plans, as in the Cold War, once again to defend all areas, or in other words, “every inch”, of his area of responsibility. But the plans are only a step in a long process. It is more of a beginning than an end. The problem is that NATO has yet to secure the commitment of forces at the required level of high readiness and capability to deploy in time in accordance with their designated role in the plans. Nevertheless, the 2023 Vilnius Summit was a giant leap forward because it heralded the definitive return, endorsed by NATO's leaders, of a full-blown collective defence.

After a brief disconnect over the status to accord Russia following the 2020 military-initiated military strategy, the political and military wings of NATO are now aligned. The regional defence plans are more a serious statement of intent – a step, not an endpoint. There is still no effective Alliance capability, as opposed to a plan, to defend exposed allies, particularly those on NATO's Eastern flank, from the Russian threat. Developing and delivering the capability to do so will be NATO's priority political and military task in the years to come. But NATO's rediscovery of collective defence could still expose some difficult political-military strains.

The task and challenges ahead – a problem of oversight and control

The regional defence plans are a hugely ambitious undertaking. According to some accounts, the three regional plans (covering Northern, Central and Southern regions of SACEUR's area of responsibility) contain 4,500 pages. They have significant financial and political implications. To recreate NATO's defence plans virtually from scratch was a triumph of military planning, but a nightmare for political and financial control. Examples of the extent of the challenge are given below by way of illustration: first, the upward pressure on defence expenditure; second, the issue of how nations commit forces to these plans; and third, the intriguing question of whether an autonomous European defence capability, outside NATO, as advocated by President Macron and others, is now actually feasible and compatible with the complex and demanding NATO plans.

Are the plans affordable?

What was not stated explicitly in Vilnius was that the fulfilment of the plans would be a long and very expensive business. The 2% of GDP goal for defence will not be enough. It is now regarded as a floor, not a ceiling. And there are already suggestions that the spending target will need to be revised upwards, to 2.5% of GDP at least.

But will a 2.5% GDP NATO target be enough? When approving the regional plans, allies did not get a price tag: the military drew them up but did not cost them. The attitude was that NATO needed a military plan urgently to defend exposed allies, and the military, in their customary efficiency, delivered these plans quickly. But these plans have cost consequences in terms of significantly upgrading the readiness and capability of existing forces. The price tag for these plans needs to be considered and discussed more widely.

As explained elsewhere¹¹, the NATO 2%, or potentially a 2.5%, GDP target does not equate with the defence capability that allies either collectively or individually need to establish.

The 2% target was established to encourage allies to spend more on defence. It was meant to reverse the downward drift of defence expenditure which was a marked feature of the post-Cold War era. It had nothing to do with capability, except insofar as, originally, it was claimed that 2% of GDP devoted to defence was the minimum necessary to sustain and maintain an adequate national defence capability. Based on no practical calculation it has become the accepted indication of national intent and credibility on defence.

¹¹ Simon Lunn and Nicholas Williams, "NATO Defence Spending: The Irrationality of 2%", ELN Issue Brief: Defence Spending, June 2017.

No one knows how much the implementation of these regional plans will cost. Inevitably allies will fall short. This is an area where parliaments as the providers of the national resources needed for the fulfilment of these plans must become involved. Parliaments in member countries vary widely in their powers of oversight and scrutiny over defence, varying from reactive to intrusive¹². It is doubtful, whatever their parliamentary powers, that European parliaments have any clear idea of the significant costs that the fulfilment of the regional plans will entail.

How will SACEUR extract the commitment of forces from allies?

Another question which arises is how successfully SACEUR will manage to extract the forces needed from allies. While NATO leaders were happy to approve the regional plans, did they understand and fully accept the direct implications for them as individual allies?

The plans are highly complex and demanding. Very few outside NATO's military understand them. They were formulated relatively quickly by NATO's military structures in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They were motivated by the assessment that Russia poses the most significant and direct threat to allies' security. The NATO Military Committee and North Atlantic Council were briefed on them as they were developed. So far, so good. But how much public or parliamentary interest and scrutiny have they received from individual allies who are now committed to financially resourcing the plans in terms of both manpower and capabilities? For such an important NATO initiative, almost certainly and unfortunately, too little¹³.

The lack of national scrutiny is understandable. Little has been revealed publicly about the plans or the planning procedures designed to fulfil them. As well as the aim to have 300,000 troops at high readiness to deploy within 30 days, another 500,000 at lower states of readiness are also required to be available¹⁴. Importantly, on paper, NATO does not lack troop numbers. But it does lack 300,000 high-readiness, trained, and equipped troops with the means of rapid deployment. And it lacks enablers and air defence. The NATO planning system will now exert itself to extract those key capabilities from allies while setting goals for readiness and deployability. NATO's military authorities will begin the task of extracting, or rather cajoling, allies to provide forces and capabilities to fulfil the plans.

For this purpose, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE)¹⁵ will deal directly with national Chiefs of Defence and their planning staffs to obtain the national force commitments required to fulfil the regional plans. In this military-to-

¹² For a discussion of the powers of parliaments in the field of defence and security see "Ensuring Democratic Control of Armed Forces – the Enduring Challenges" Simon Lunn. Connections: the PFP Quarterly Journal 2023

¹³ Parliamentary accountability for NATO policies is exercised through the national parliaments of member states. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NPA) has no formal status or role. In providing a forum for parliamentarians from member and partner parliaments to meet and exchange views the role of the NPA lies in creating greater transparency and understanding of Alliance activities.

¹⁴ See the New NATO force Model chart: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-infographic-new-nato-force-model.pdf

¹⁵ Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe is the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Allied Command Operations headed by SACEUR.

military process, SHAPE will state its detailed requirements for fulfilling SACEUR's regional defence plans. The argument that SACEUR wants and needs an increase in military capability to fulfil the military plan will be almost impossible to counter or question. There risks being a defence requirements engine penetrating from SACEUR to the heart of national systems whose demands will be difficult to query by capitals, even when the requirements may be unaffordable or inflated.

In our view, the system for extracting commitments by NATO for NATO purposes does not have the safeguards that applied in the Cold War, when NATO's military requirements were filtered through an elaborate force planning system, with allied capitals with their wider financial and political constraints firmly in control. The new system of direct NATO military-to-national military engagement seems to give too much power to the NATO military authorities, particularly SACEUR. This development, again, should be the subject of detailed parliamentary scrutiny by the various individual national parliaments whose role lies in ensuring that national commitments to NATO are consistent with the resources and political aims of their respective countries.

Is a European defence no longer feasible outside NATO?

Donald Trump's possible return to the US presidency is causing alarm bells to clang in European capitals. The prospect has intensified the debate within and among some European capitals on alternative European defence arrangements. Is it possible that, unintentionally, the approval of NATO's regional defence plans has rendered futile the search for a European defence capability outside NATO?

Most EU countries have managed to balance their commitments to NATO and an emerging EU defence capability without great problems. In theory the EU has 18 battle groups available to it as a military contribution to its Common Security and Defence Policy. EU battle groups are multinational military units, usually composed of 1,500 personnel each. They form an integral part of the European Union's military rapid reaction capacity to respond to emerging crises and conflicts around the world. On a rotational basis, two battle groups are always on standby for a period of 6 months. Most of the units available to the EU are also committed to NATO's defence plans: only some of the larger EU countries, like Germany or France, keep their EU and NATO commitments separate.

With the primacy of the Russian threat and the intense demands of NATO's regional defence plans, a separate autonomous EU defence capability risks becoming ever more unattainable. In the past, the double commitment of forces both to NATO and EU resulted in a lower priority for exercising, training, and readiness for one or other of these organisations. In the current security climate, with the focus on Russia, NATO commitments, including a heavier schedule of exercises, will inevitably be accorded priority. Military obligations to NATO will be placed far higher in military urgency than those to an EU or European defence potential.

It is possibly an unintended consequence of the plans, but with most European military forces now having to give priority to the intense and intricate requirements

of NATO plans, a purely European capability may be impossible to realise - even as a breakout or hedging possibility, in the event of a Trumpian disengagement or even, in extremis, for the purpose of defending purely European interests. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept did not give guidance on constructing a European pillar within NATO. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how an alternative or even a complementary European defence capability outside of NATO can be mounted when most European military forces will be committed to high readiness and high priority NATO tasks dedicated to containing and contesting Russia. At the very least, the compatibility or not of a potential European defence alongside an actual NATO defence needs to be examined in further detail.

Public and parliamentary scrutiny of NATO's Defence Plans must be enhanced

From the above analysis, it is open to question whether Ministers of Defence have understood the full political and cost implications of the defence plans that they and Heads of State and Government approved at Vilnius in 2023. Their military forces will be locked into NATO plans with their heavy schedule of training and exercising. Heightened readiness requirements will mean heavy costs, and the prioritisation of NATO capabilities over EU and European ones.

Faced with the argument that the plans, all 4,500 pages of them, require certain capabilities as a matter of urgency, Ministers will struggle to push back on them on cost, political, or strategic grounds.

Though NATO commitments are voluntary, there will be heavy pressure to comply. It will be important, in this process of give and take between capitals and NATO's military authorities, to take care that political control and oversight should not be weakened, and public and parliamentary scrutiny be enhanced.

July's NATO summit in Washington will be briefed on any progress made in fulfilling the regional defence plans. SACEUR will probably declare that the plans are on track to being "executed", but at a level of fulfilment which is partial, and therefore bears some risk. That is, every inch of NATO territory is not defensible – not yet at least. NATO leaders agreed the regional defence plans at Vilnius in 2023. They will hear at NATO's Washington summit in July 2024 that there has been progress in implementing them. It is doubtful, however, whether full resource and policy consequences of these plans have been fully examined or absorbed.



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