

Implementing the NATO Wales Summit: From Strategy to Action (Part II)

26-27 February, 2015

In February 2015, SWP-Berlin and Chatham House convened a group of international security experts and policy practitioners from a number of NATO member states. The purpose of the meeting was to review progress made on implementing the Wales Summit deliverables and to discuss next steps for allies as they look towards the 2016 Warsaw Summit. This report reflects many of the main themes and conclusions from the discussions, and includes recommendations on priority issues in advance of the next summit. This is not intended as a full description of the debate, nor should it be seen as a consensus document.

The principal Wales Summit deliverables: are they enough?

- **There is a general consensus that the initiatives announced at the September 2014 Wales Summit were a significant, but limited, first step.** More work towards instituting the deliverables is needed, particularly as Moscow has escalated its activities in Ukraine. Questions have emerged as to whether the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) offers a meaningful deterrent to Russian aggression while also reassuring allies in central and eastern Europe. To that end, some participants suggested that NATO ought to reconsider its basing and posture decisions in those nations most threatened by a resurgent Russia. Other participants suggested that NATO prioritize building a coherent response to 'hybrid' warfare that is not directly translatable to Article V.
- **NATO must come to a consensus on how it views Russia, and on its strategic intent for its relationship with Russia.** Except for revising paragraphs on Russia, there is probably no need to fully revisit the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept. A new Harmel Report might be useful in advancing NATO's discussions on its policy and intentions toward Russia. Publics across NATO member states – and, crucially, the political parties that represent them – must be convinced of the mounting challenge Russia poses to the European security order if a new, durable consensus is to be forged.
- **Concerns are mounting that promises nations made at the Wales Summit are not being implemented.** This is particularly true with respect to some nations' pledges not to further reduce defence spending. While Baltic and central European states have increased, or will be increasing, their defence budgets in response to the Ukraine crisis, some of the major NATO countries may soon fall short of the 2 per cent of GDP defence spending target agreed in Wales. It would be very dangerous if NATO were to become a two-tier group divided between those who can and will act, and those who won't.



- **NATO must prioritize agility and adaptability.** This might be achieved by organizing more realistic exercises (in border regions and with more partners); pre-delegating authorities to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) to act in the event of a crisis; significantly improving military readiness and response times; and better coordinating plans and priorities with other actors such as the European Union.

Acting faster, being flexible

- **There has been limited progress to date with respect to commitments made in Wales on delivering the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) and the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF).** Amid ongoing uncertainty about their overarching strategic functions, there remains particular ambiguity about whether the RAP and VJTF are primarily about countering Russian hybrid warfare, or whether they are designed to bolster NATO's broader deterrence posture. There exists disagreement about whether these instruments are (or indeed should be) essentially 'Russia-facing' or designed to address a wider geographical set of challenges – including those emanating from Europe's south and those emerging in the Arctic. NATO will need to forge greater consensus among member states regarding the operational concepts for these new entities.
- **Questions remain over whether the VJTF is on track in terms of its readiness commitments – and, in particular, its pledge to respond militarily to aggression against NATO member states within 48 hours.** While this gap can partly be attributed to resource shortfalls, there remains a strong feeling that lags in political decision-making are likely to pose the most significant barrier to rapid response. Short of a delegation of authority to SACEUR, member states must continue to enhance the coherence of existing decision-making processes – by ensuring that conversations in the North Atlantic Council (NAC) remain at a sufficiently high level to ensure speedy political authorization for action; by improving intelligence sharing; and through stronger joint early-warning analysis.
- **Despite the emphasis being placed on 'spearheading' forces, the larger question is whether the VJTF will be sufficiently supported by follow-on capabilities.** Without these, the VJTF will lack the basic war-fighting capability required for effective deterrence and escalation dominance. In this regard, VJTF scenario planning must be married to a clear discussion about the implications of a broader loss of European military capabilities.

Planning, spending and acquisition

- The defence spending pledge – wherein nations agreed to halt defence budget reductions and gradually raise spending to 2 per cent of GDP – is helpful, but there are near-term challenges to its implementation. Several member states had already legislated reduced defence budgets prior to the Wales Summit, while others are engaging in serious acquisition reforms that must be completed before meaningful increases in defence spending can occur. Still others are anticipating GDP growth, meaning that defence spending as a percentage of GDP may decline even if budgets hold steady. Yet given the myriad security and defence challenges the alliance faces, **if NATO member states are unable to achieve the intent of the pledge in a meaningful timeframe, US commitments to European security will become even harder to justify to Congress and the American public.** Finally, while the 2 per cent target was politically helpful, it does not adequately express NATO's collective capabilities and

readiness. **A new efficiency metric is needed that better describes ‘outputs’ for defence spending rather than inputs.**

- **Inflation, as well as growth in personnel costs, reduces what nations are able to procure at any given level of defence spending.** This affects the ability of nations to research and procure new capabilities without making cuts in other areas. Thus, it becomes even more important that member states making defence cuts talk to NATO’s planning staff to do so in a managed and cooperative way. Large nations should consider cutting capabilities ‘horizontally’ (i.e. reducing numbers but maintaining a full spectrum of capabilities). Smaller countries may have to cut ‘vertically’ and maintain niche capabilities. All NATO nations must ensure that their assets are deployable, as any contingency – from combating hybrid warfare in the east to managing crises in the south – will necessarily be expeditionary for most member states.
- **As NATO revises its Level of Ambition in advance of the June Defence Ministerial, allies must develop plans to respond to sub-Article 5 contingencies.** NATO must be prepared to act appropriately in the event of a ‘hybrid’ attack, such as an ambiguous, politically challenging Maidan-like event happening in the Baltics. The new Level of Ambition must also better articulate the balance between NATO’s emerging priorities (i.e. *vis-à-vis* crisis management to Europe’s south and collective defence to the east).

Building relationships beyond NATO’s borders

- While the enhanced opportunities scheme announced in Wales was an important step in terms of maintaining the credibility of NATO’s partnerships with key players, its ambitious partnership frameworks elsewhere risk being stretched beyond utility. Over the past few years the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) and Mediterranean Dialogue, in particular, have begun to look decreasingly fit for purpose. NATO allies and partners need a better mutual understanding of what they can offer one another, and these relationships need to be balanced to ensure that the benefits of partnership accrue appropriately to both sides. Meanwhile, NATO needs to be cautious about further expansion of its partnerships.
- **Despite moderate increases in public and political support for NATO membership in Finland (and, to a lesser extent, Sweden), the possibility of those states joining the alliance during the current crisis appears remote.** Yet it remains strongly in NATO’s interests to intensify its cooperation with these partners. Bilateral decisions – for example, the US sale of JASSM missiles to Finland – have been the most significant factor in strengthening NATO’s northeastern flank. Yet increasingly NATO itself will have to take the lead: for example, by moving beyond joint peacetime training exercises to thinking about enhancing operational cooperation with Finland and Sweden in crisis scenarios.

Building public and political will

- NATO faces a complex set of challenges in improving public understanding of, and support for, the alliance. It has to contend with the changing attitudes of the post-Cold War generation, whose security priorities have largely been shaped by terrorism, failing states and crime, rather than the threat of interstate war. At the same time, it has to justify itself to a public that is focused on other

domestic issues and thus wants its leaders to spend and do less militarily. While NATO itself will play a key role in meeting these challenges, primary responsibility for building support for the alliance among the public will continue to rest with capitals.

- While new technologies (e.g. big data) and the leveraging of partners (e.g. think-tanks) will play an important part in NATO's public diplomacy, **public support will ultimately rest on its ability to communicate through actions as much as through words.** Commitments on collective defence and security, particularly in those states to the east and south of the alliance, will be meaningless without concrete measures demonstrating that NATO has both the capability and political will to act. Action and rhetoric must align.
- **Vladimir Putin's strategic communications efforts have met with mixed success.** While public opinion in Russia has been receptive to state propaganda about the Ukraine crisis, there is a general feeling that President Putin's credibility among Western publics has been irrevocably undermined by the transparency of his misinformation campaign. NATO should be cautious about the possible counterproductive impacts of engaging in 'reciprocal propaganda' with its own populations. Still, there may be some legitimate scope to take active measures aimed at shaping Russian public opinion – for example, by supporting critical media outlets among the Russian diaspora.

Looking towards the Warsaw Summit

- **In the past year events have moved at breakneck speed, with unexpected developments forcing NATO nations to fundamentally reconsider their security agendas prior to Wales.** Thus, we should be wary of fixing agendas now. That said, NATO could usefully focus on implementing the deliverables announced at the Wales Summit and, in so doing, building the longer-term capabilities and capacities necessary to make the alliance more agile. Perhaps most vitally, NATO must develop consensus regarding the alliance's longer-term strategy for dealing with Russia, including generating a common understanding of the challenge at hand among member states' publics and parliaments.
- **With ongoing gridlock in the UN Security Council (UNSC), NATO will eventually have to engage in a serious and frank discussion about circumstances in which it would be legitimate to act without UN authorization.** This is especially important given that some of the circumstances and scenarios under which NATO might have to act would be 'hybrid', and therefore politically and strategically ambiguous. Russia must not have a *de facto* veto over NATO activities.
- **The Warsaw Summit must also demonstrate that Wales was the beginning of a NATO conversation regarding the emerging security order.** The event must not be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a milestone in a broader work plan to improve security for NATO and its member states. Initiatives such as the VJTF and RAP must be a part of a longer-term plan for NATO following the Ukraine crisis. Furthermore, should present trends continue, Moscow could perceive the Warsaw Summit – and initiatives announced at that meeting – as threatening. NATO must develop a response plan to deal with Russian aggression in advance of, and during, the summit.

