Faced with Russia’s military aggression and its use of hybrid warfare in Ukraine, NATO remains caught in the double bind of shrinking defense resources and a continued lack of consensus on how to respond to this aggression beyond political condemnations, the imposition of economic sanctions, and enhanced exercise and readiness measures. NATO’s new Eastern Front—consisting of the most active NATO members, the Baltic States, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria—wants physical assurances that NATO will prevent potential Russian aggression, not reassurances that NATO will respond to aggression after it has occurred.

Herein lies the challenge: until NATO adequately shores up its Eastern Front with permanent military deployments, NATO’s regional security and deterrent posture will continue to erode. Yet, several NATO countries insist that the permanent stationing of NATO forces near Russia’s border not only would provoke additional Russian military action but also contravenes the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act (irrespective of Russia’s own violation of...
NATO’s easternmost states are also apprehensive about U.S. policy persistence and its sustained focus on Europe as events in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region draw attention and resources elsewhere. Against these political odds, establishing an effective deterrence regime against Russia along NATO’s eastern frontier remains a daunting task.

It seems clear that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s “Novorossiya” (or “New Russia”) aims at reclaiming either direct or indirect Russian influence over the post–Soviet space—which could include NATO members Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. The immediate goal of Russia’s irredentist policy in Ukraine is to maintain its hold on the east of Ukraine and to consolidate its gains there. The presence of Russian forces in Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia can be viewed as part of a larger Russian regional military strategy, likely to be accompanied by a gradual tightening of Russia’s grip on other post–Soviet states.

The September 2014 NATO Summit in Newport, Wales, demonstrated strong rhetorical unity among the 28 members, but debuted a limited package of reassurance measures for NATO’s eastern allies. Allies agreed to a Readiness Action Plan, which will create a rapidly deployable 4,000-troop task force to spearhead NATO’s response force, in addition to an enhanced regional exercise and training program. This reassurance package also augments the presence of 600 U.S. soldiers in the Baltic States and Poland, enhanced NATO air policing, and the readiness of NATO’s Multinational Corps—Northeast Regional Headquarters in Szczecin, Poland.

Unfortunately, NATO allies were only able to agree to a “persistent” rotational force presence in the east and not a permanent deployment. The current formula of “persistent rotations” conveys a message to Russia that the crisis along NATO’s border is a temporary phenomenon rather than a new and long-term destabilizing force. The hoped-for deployment of NATO’s 4,000-troop spearhead force stands in stark contrast to the continuous mobilization of tens of thousands of Russian forces along Ukraine’s border over the past six months.

NATO allies have also not been able to outline a new, overarching deterrence doctrine against hybrid warfare tactics. For example, in Eastern Ukraine Russia has deployed special force units disguised as separatist militants; utilized information, cyber, energy, and trade warfare tactics; and agitated ethnic Russian communities in order to achieve its aims. NATO remains underprepared to confront such unconventional challenges. Although NATO has created—or will shortly—Centers of Excellence in cyber warfare, energy security, and strategic communications in an attempt to address specific elements of hybrid warfare by enhancing policies and awareness (not surprisingly each of these centers resides in a Baltic State), the alliance has yet to make any decisive changes.

As NATO confronts and attempts to deter the long-term security implications of “Novorossiya,” the Alliance will continue to rally around transatlantic unity and solidarity, as well as the shared commitment to uphold Article 5 treaty obligations. As Russia continues to further test NATO’s resolve in and around its territory, the Alliance must develop a new and flexible deterrence strategy against hybrid warfare that permanently stations NATO forces in the East, in addition to the readily available rapid-reaction forces. To implement this strategy, NATO should consider deploying at least one heavy brigade combat team (BCT)-sized deployment to the region with a mix of U.S. and European NATO troops. Likewise, the Szczecin HQ in western Poland could be substantially augmented with more senior leadership and staffed with more NATO personnel.

Against the backdrop of Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, its seizure of Crimea, and its encroachment into Ukraine, NATO must trans-
NATO’s hesitancy will further embolden Russia to exert pressure along NATO’s periphery. This reluctance must be overcome, not only to prevent NATO from being rebuffed but also to maintain the credibility of the alliance itself. As NATO prepares to deter hybrid warfare, it must also retain deterrence capabilities against a potential direct threat by Russia against NATO’s eastern flank. By developing a robust deterrent posture built on a permanent troop and asset deployment along the frontier combined with transatlantic unity, Moscow will be unable to erode confidence in NATO’s Article 5 commitment to its eastern members. Failure to do so will call into question NATO’s viability when Russia decides to probe a NATO member in an attempt to expose the lack of Alliance resolve. The political framework for implementing such a deterrent strategy has already been established in the outlines of President Obama’s recent speeches and statements in Warsaw and Tallinn, and reinforced by remarks from European leaders and the new NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

Without a sufficient NATO deterrent policy, NATO’s hesitancy will further embolden Russia to exert pressure along NATO’s periphery. At present, NATO’s response has been to focus on de-escalation rather than deterrence. Hence, efforts to seek political accommodation and compromise have hobbled a larger strategic deterrent redesign that is imperative if NATO is to remain a credible alliance.