Russian Exercises and NATO Force Planning: The Need for a Real Strategy to Deal with Russia

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It is time for NATO to get real! Zapad 2017—the Russian exercise now beginning in Russia and Belarus—focuses on defending Russia against an attack by theoretical threat countries—like "Veishnoriya"—rather than NATO. Zapad means "west" in Russian, however, and it is all too clear that the exercise is really designed to act as both a serious effort to improve Russian ability to deploy forces against NATO, and as a warning to the Baltic and other forward states. At best, its yet another sign that Russia focuses on confrontation, not partnership, and sees its military modernization as a key lever in reasserting Russian power.

It is too early to determine how much of a threat the exercise actually poses. Some Eastern European states fear it could be as large as 55,000 to 100,000 military personnel. Some analysts also feel it may be designed to lead to a major increase in Russian presence in Belarus. Others analysts feel it could even be a cover for the kind of Russian expansion that a similar exercise turned out to be for the Russian advance into the Crimea.

Such fears may be more than a little exaggerated. In fairness, NATO held its own large exercises—with some 25,000 personnel—in Eastern Europe this summer. Russia says that its exercise will only total 12,700 personnel—a level that allows it to avoid exceeding the 13,000 personnel or 300 tank limit in the Vienna Agreement that requires Russia to allow Western observers who could accurately report in detail on the exercise's size and structure. Regardless of size, it seems more likely to be designed to increase political pressure on NATO—the new form of asymmetric warfare in Europe—than lead to major changes in Russian deployments or any form of direct aggression.

The key issue, however, is how NATO will respond to this Russian exercise and the far more fundamental changes taking place in Russian behavior and its military posture. So far, NATO's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, has focused on the growing lack of transparency and honesty in recent Russian exercises and the need for more transparency and honesty in this one. NATO has also built up some of its military capabilities in the forward area since the invasion of the Ukraine, and it has held a number of training exercises to reassure nations in the forward area in addition to major ones in Eastern Europe. (NATO reports this was 83 out of a total of 246 NATO exercises in 2016). The U.S. has built up its capabilities in limited ways in Europe, and more importantly in its capacity to rapidly deploy from the U.S. states.

NATO has yet to give any public sign that it has a coherent strategy to improve its overall military capability to deter Russia, or to show Russia that it has a real incentive to avoid putting
growing pressure on NATO. The current annual report of the Secretary General on NATO's goals and progress seems to deliberately avoid mentioning the changes in the Russian threat, and the sections in the full report on improving capabilities are so general and vague that they have no clear strategic focus. The section in the report on deterrence does clearly react to Russian actions in the Ukraine, but does not mention them or Russia by name.

NATO began to adapt its defensive posture in 2014 in response to major changes in the security environment—changes that have rendered that environment more complex and demanding. In the face of these changes, Allies agreed at the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July 2016 to further strengthen the Alliance’s deterrence and defense posture in order to better protect their citizens and to enhance NATO’s efforts to project stability in its neighborhood.

Some of this text is already overtaken by events. For example, other portions of the Secretary General's report focus on the threat to a Turkey that is distancing itself from the alliance. Turkey is now working far more closely with Russia in Syria and has turned to Russia for the S400 system to improve its air and tactical missile defenses.

Other text again summarizes NATO's actions in Eastern Europe as if Russia did not exist.

Only two years after its adoption by Allies in Wales, the Readiness Action Plan has largely been implemented. The size of the NATO Response Force has tripled to 40,000, with a Spearhead Force at its core able to move within days. Eight small headquarters have been established in the eastern part of the Alliance to facilitate training and reinforcements, if needed. At the same time, NATO has augmented Turkey’s defences, the Ally most directly affected by the turmoil in the south.

The Readiness Action Plan combines a series of measures related to assurance and adaptation. It balances requirements for increased military presence in some geographic areas with the ability to reinforce anywhere on Alliance territory. It marks significant advances in three areas:

—NATO’s ability to anticipate and take decisions to respond to potential threats from any direction

—the scale, composition and preparedness of the NATO Response Force, including the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force

—a renewed emphasis on the collective preparation of NATO’s largest military formations to enable follow-on heavy reinforcement of any Ally, if necessary

The Readiness Action Plan is designed to reassure all Allies in the face of the evolving security environment and to improve readiness and enable the Alliance to rapidly respond to changing demands. Through the design and implementation of this plan, NATO has also improved its 360-degree situational awareness.

Taken literally, this text gives the same 360-degree priority to defending the alliance against a sudden wave of hostile militarization in Luxembourg as it does to Russia. Fortunately, the report—while it still does not mention Russia—goes on to note that,

NATO has upgraded its high-readiness forces on land, at sea and in the air. The NATO Response Force has been substantially enhanced by tripling its size and increasing its readiness levels, with the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) at its core. Several Allies have already committed to taking the rotational lead of the land component of the VJTF until 2023, with the United Kingdom taking over the lead from Spain in 2017. The VJTF is ready to deploy within days.
To support potential deployment of these forces and to assist in coordinating planning, exercises, and reinforcements, the Alliance has established eight NATO Force Integration Units in Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. These units operate within the oversight of the Headquarters Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin, Poland, and the Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast in Bucharest, Romania.

The Secretary General's report also talks in broad, unspecific terms about a range of exercises, increases in readiness, and preparation for hybrid warfare designed to help deal with the same reliance on an unspecified mystery threat.

The Readiness Action Plan was NATO's initial response to a changing security environment in 2014. As the challenges to Allied security continued to evolve, Allied leaders agreed at the NATO Summit in Warsaw that a further shift in NATO's posture was warranted. As part of this shift, Allies agreed to establish a rotational forward presence in the Baltic and Black Sea regions to demonstrate solidarity, determination, and an ability to act in defense of NATO territory.

NATO's forward presence will include multinational battlegroups deployed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland and led by the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and the United States respectively. It will also include a multinational brigade for training, led by Romania, that will contribute to NATO's deterrence and defense in the Black Sea region.

Significant additional contributions by other Allies send the message that NATO stands as one, and that an attack on any single Ally will be considered, an attack against all. These troops will be under NATO command and control, which will include a multinational divisional headquarters in Poland.

NATO's forward presence will be an integral part of NATO's deterrence and defense posture. During peacetime, the multinational forces in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland will train with national defense forces in those countries to enhance interoperability, and improve their ability to operate locally. In case of aggression, these forces will respond in accordance, with the right to self-defense, in coordination with the national forces of the host nation.

The Secretary General and the NATO international staffs, however, can only say and do so much. They—like the militaries of each NATO state—serve their political masters. The practical problem is that these political masters do not seem ready to address the reality that today's Russia is asserting itself in increasingly threatening ways. They rely on largely meaningless generic goals when NATO really needs is a set of tangible and coordinated—hopefully even integrated—force plans designed to build up deterrence in the forward area, and persuade Russia it cannot expand its power by threatening states in the forward area, by any over military action, or by some form of political and military infiltration into the countries in the forward area.

There have been far better precedents set by better political leaders and Ministers of Defense. Back in the 1960s, NATO held a formal series of force planning exercises and began its first real net assessment of the NATO-Warsaw Pact balance. It focused on tangible military needs and military actions, and it did not dance around the identity of the threat. Later, NATO reacted directly by deploying the GLCM and Pershing II when the FSU introduced a whole new series of nuclear-armed missiles like the SS-20. As the Cold War eased, NATO focused on real-world arms control agreements like the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty and what became the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty.
These are the precedents that NATO's Ministers and political leaders should follow. NATO needs a new Force Planning exercise today, as well as public net assessments of the shifts in the balance and the threats to NATO. Instead, its political leaders and defense ministers focus on individual areas of force improvement with no clear strategic direction. They set an absurd goal that each country should spend at least 2% of the GDP on defense regardless of what it military capability buys or how well a given nation has structured its forces to provide for its own defense and that of the alliance.

The absurdity of denying the name and nature of the most important threat, of not having any public net assessments, and of not having any tangible strategy and meaningful public force plans and measures of progress, is all too clear. A major partner like Turkey may be sliding away from the Alliance while the forward states most threatened by Russia fall far short of the meaningless 2% goal and are increasingly caught up in successful Russian efforts to pressure some elements in their political systems.

Consider what the Secretary General’s annual report says about the real-world performances of NATO’s forward area states: Estonia (2.18%) and Poland (2.01%) are the only two forward area states meeting the 2% goal. The Secretary General’s 2016 annual report is a grim warning of insufficient effort by all the rest, although its military impact is impossible to estimate (Who, after all, could possibly know from a largely meaningless percentage?)

NATO lists the following official percentages for the most threatened states in 2016: Turkey (1.69%), Norway (1.55%), Lithuania (1.49%), Latvia (1.48%), (Romania) 1.41%), Bulgaria (1.30%), Croatia (1.21%), Slovak Republic (1.12%), Albania (1.11%), Hungary (1.02%), Slovenia (1.02%), Czech Republic (1.01%). Just how motivation-less could any goal have been?

The key states that underpin NATO's European forces do little better. Germany, once the conventional core of the NATO alliance -- and now perhaps the wealthiest European member in terms of the ability to spend -- has made massive cuts in its forces and readiness and spent only 1.2%. The U.K. spent 2.17%, but is still making cuts in its force plans and readiness. The same is true of France, which spent 1.79%, and Italy, which spent all of 1.11%. The U.S. spent 3.61%—but most of this goes to other theaters, and its forces in Europe are still a fraction of what they were during the Cold War. What good is a goal where meeting it or not meeting it says nothing about the end result?

NATO's Ministers and political leaders make things even worse by calling for each member to spend 20% of its total defense spending on equipment. This goal is set regardless of what it buys, whether it meets real military needs, and whether it is or is not a subsidy of national military industries and arms exports. The end result is that NATO's real-world force planning objectives seems to be, "We don't really care what you do, or what you waste, as long as it is 2% of your GDP and you throw 20% of that sum at some form of equipment buy."

Yes, some nations did increase their spending between 2015 and 2016, and others have pledged further increases. But, so what? Increasing spending in this way may or may not buy the right capabilities, and minor percentage increases may well take a decade or more to build effective forces after a decade of not spending and taking "peace dividends." Put bluntly, the peoples in
most European countries deserve a much better deterrent, their militaries deserve much better Ministers and political leaders, and NATO deserves real efforts at net assessment, force planning, and creating effective strategy that really can deal with a real world Russian threat.