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NATO Deterrence by Denial Strategy in Europe and Additional Capabilities Required

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**NATO DETERRENCE BY DENIAL STRATEGY IN EUROPE
AND ADDITIONAL CAPABILITIES REQUIRED**

By Commander Alan Brown

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NATO DETERRENCE BY DENIAL STRATEGY IN EUROPE AND ADDITIONAL CAPABILITIES REQUIRED

*NATO remains a military alliance, and we are against having a military alliance
making itself at home right in our own backyard; in our historic territory.*

- Vladimir Putin, President of Russia

Introduction

The complexity of threats facing the NATO Alliance in Europe from Russian revisionism necessitates a rethinking of the force structures and strategies conceived of during the Cold War that were based upon “deterrence by punishment”, a retaliatory posture that forced the Soviet Union into an unsustainable balance of power, economic collapse and its eventual breakup in the late 1980s. Recognizing that conventional wars with the west are unsustainable, Russia successfully developed hybrid strategies over the past three decades that use strategies short of war to achieve national interests while at the same time maintaining their own credible military forces. The resurgence of Russian revisionism threatens Europe and the most dangerous scenario of Russia going to war with NATO using all options available up to and including nuclear weapons is best met with denial strategies.

While NATO has taken steps to implement deterrence by denial capabilities in response to Russia’s successful annexation of Crimea in 2014, they are arguably not strong enough to credibly deter a major Russian offensive in Europe, particularly in the Baltic States and Poland that make up the alliance’s eastern flank. With a resurgence in Russian revisionism, advances in the Russian Federation’s military capabilities, and aggressive posturing towards NATO members in the Baltics, it is no longer acceptable for European states in NATO to be over reliant on the US and deterrence by denial

capabilities should be increased vis-à-vis Russian threats that include conventional forces, hybrid warfare, and nuclear weapons in the European theatre. This paper will explain deterrence by denial strategies, explore threats to NATO from the Russian Armed Forces, and suggest additional capabilities that NATO should implement to improve deterrence by denial capabilities in Europe with forward deployed forces so the Kremlin will see immediate outcomes of aggression as less favorable than the goals being pursued.

Deterrence Strategies

Mazarr defines *Deterrence* as “...the practice of discouraging or restraining someone...usually a nation-state — from taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack. It involves an effort to stop or prevent an action.”¹ Deterrent by punishment can threaten penalties on the aggressor if an attack occurs, but there is also the strategy of punishment by denial, which seeks to deter unwanted actions by making an aggressor’s objective “...infeasible or unlikely to succeed” in the first place.² NATO deterrence strategy today, as it was during the Cold War, is primarily based upon deterrence by punishment and this was demonstrated in 2020 in Exercise Defender-Europe 20 that involved the deployment of 30,000 US and allied troops to demonstrate collective defence.³ However, the successful annexation of Crimea in 2014 revealed that there is also a need for NATO to have denial strategies to protect vulnerable members of the

¹ Micheal J. Mazarr, “Understanding Deterrence,” Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation (2018): 2. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Frans Osinga and Sweijns. *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies – Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*. The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press 2021. 36. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-419-8_7

alliance in Europe. While a formidable collective military deterrence against an attack on NATO members is required, deterrence by punishment may not always be the best strategy to prevent rapid land grabs.

Denial strategies offer better alternatives to deter Russian aggression that threatens alliance cohesion and vulnerable members such as the Baltic States. In evaluating the need for more deterrence by denial, planners must be mindful that perceptions of Russian leaders matter the most and this is the dominant variable to consider for a successful strategy. NATO must consider the delicate balance that exists in creating the perception that the costs and risks of aggression do not rationalize the objective sought.⁴ This needs to be done while not appearing to be preparing for war which could be counterproductive in that it could escalate tensions with Russia and conceivably provoke an attack if Russia felt it must attack to protect itself against imminent threat from NATO.⁵ At the same time, escalation and counter-escalation are tools of crisis management and the Alliance “...should not be self-deterred from taking necessary steps to increase its own security by outside criticism or ill-grounded concerns about provoking Russia.”⁶

NATO members in Europe need to be more prepared

NATO members in Europe should be more prepared to deter aggression on their own soil as they are “...under American pressure to spend considerably more on defence, especially since President Trump took office in 2017, and also under pressure to

⁴ Mazarr, 7.

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Łukasz Kulesa and Frear. “NATO’s Evolving Modern Deterrence Posture: Challenges and Risks”. *European Leadership Network Issue Brief: Deterrence*, (May 2017): 6.

participate in deterrence operations against Russia.”⁷ While the United States remains indispensable to deterring the worst-case scenarios of conventional and nuclear war with Russia by punishment, the contingency in which Russia invades Europe and the US has either pulled out of NATO or is unavailable due to other conflicts must be considered.⁸ An outcome of the former Donald Trump presidency’s is that European officials have been forced to ask the question of whether “...Europe could cope on its own with Russia’s querulous foreign policy and revived military?”⁹ Whether the US remains part of NATO in the future or not, the Cold War deterrence by punishment strategy that was based upon escalation to strategic nuclear should be replaced by a continental Europe denial strategy in the long term to deter Russia.

Russian Strategies Deduced from Crimea Crisis

The 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia provides context of why NATO began enhancing deterrence by denial strategies to dissuade future aggression against the sovereignty of European states by conventional and hybrid methods. The annexation of the Crimea demonstrated Putin’s intent and willingness to use hybrid warfare that Matlary defines as follows:

As the name suggests, in a hybrid war, the two traditional types of warfare, conventional and asymmetric, converge. Some use of conventional force is combined with indirect, and often non-military, methods, such as providing support to the local population, creating agitation and pressure vis-

⁷ Janne H. Matlary, *Hard Power in Hard Times – Can Europe act Strategically?* (Oslo, Norway: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer International Publishing, 2018), 250.

⁸ François Heisbourg, “Europe Can Afford the Cost of Autonomy,” *Survival*, 63:1 (2021): 27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1881250>

⁹ Barry R. Posen, “Europe Can Defend Itself,” *Survival*, 62:6 (2020): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1851080>

à-vis the same, and helping or even creating insurgencies, while not admitting a military presence.¹⁰

Russia correctly assessed that the international community, NATO, and Ukrainian forces would be unable to effectively respond to hybrid operations. Russia skillfully used unmarked special forces soldiers to seize territory and key installations before sending in follow on forces and influencing the minority population to hold a referendum to annex Crimea from Ukraine to the Russian Federation in a democratic vote for self-determination. Accompanied by robust information and cyber operations, the prevailing narrative was that Russia did not invade Crimea but were there to protect the rights of near abroad Russian minorities.¹¹ This declaration by the Kremlin was particularly alarming for the Baltic States who would be vulnerable to similar hybrid warfare tactics given their Russian minority populations and geographical location next to the Russian border. While hybrid warfare deterrence is a matter of state responsibility, Putin signaled that he was prepared to reject rules-based order in the pursuit of Russian interests and NATO began preparations for denial strategies.

The riskier, high reward scenario that Russia could pursue is a *faits accompli*, or rapid seizing of territory with creation of anti-access area denial (A2/AD) to make retaking area lost very difficult. This is the most dangerous scenario since territory lost would require NATO to take costly actions to retake Russia's gains, which could expose fractures in the alliance if some member states were not willing to risk escalating the conflict that could conceivably escalate from conventional up to nuclear war.¹² If the Kremlin assessed the political will of NATO member states not credible to deter, an

¹⁰ Matlary, 17.

¹¹ Ibid., 56.

¹² Ibid., 32.

opportunity could be seized. Though an unlikely scenario, an argument can be made to have credible denial capabilities to prevent a *faits accompli* from occurring in the first place, but this would require considerable resources to be forward deployed.

NATO Denial Strategies

In reaction to the annexation of Crimea, NATO took several immediate actions that support deterrence by denial strategies. At the Cardiff Summit in September 2014, a Readiness Action Plan (RAP) was agreed upon that resulted in the creation of a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) within the existing NATO Response Force (NRF) available for immediate response to security threats. Osinga and Sweijds describe the VJTF as “...a reinforced, quicker spearhead—a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force potentially up to 13,000 troops strong, and then two complementing brigades with support (each 13,000 strong) forming a layered, sizeable reaction force explicitly linked to collective defence purposes and regularly exercised in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.”

Additionally, the United Kingdom Joint Expeditionary Force was also solidified at the Cardiff Summit that formed brigade-size expeditionary force on high readiness with Norway, Netherlands, the Baltic States, and as of 2017 Sweden and Finland contributing to the multinational force.¹³ The addition of Sweden and Finland is significant in that as host nations, NATO can use their land, sea, and airspace to access the Baltic Sea and States. NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs) were forward deployed in the Baltic States, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania to coordinate the high readiness and national forces in times of crisis.¹⁴ In 2015, the US took the lead and

¹³ Matlary, 252.

¹⁴ Ibid.

deployed heavy weapons to Poland and other states including about 250 main battle tanks and 1200 vehicles.¹⁵ To deter and defend against potential adversaries on NATO's eastern flank, an enhanced forward presence (eFP) consisting of four multinational combat-ready battle groups were deployed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, a standing naval force established in the Mediterranean and Black Seas, and a tailored forward presence to conduct air policing activities based out of the Baltic States, Romania, Bulgaria, and Iceland.¹⁶ The question of whether eFP is a "tripwire" to trigger deterrence by punishment or is a denial strategy is cause for debate. However, the argument will be taken that they are intended to hold out until reinforcements arrive and are therefore a denial capability.

Nuances of Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP)

The strategy of deploying four multinational battle groups to the Baltic states is described in official NATO documents as for defence and deterrence and has caused some debate amongst academics as to whether the strategy is based on denial or punishment.¹⁷ Analyzing eFP vis-à-vis the Russian *faits accompli* scenario reveals sound reasoning for a multinational force denial force integrated into the host nations defence plan to dissuade Russia from invading. For the *faits accompli* scenario, a RAND study showed "...that Russia could take Riga and Tallinn in 60 hours and that NATO would need to deploy at least seven brigades in the area to be able to fight this."¹⁸ There are

¹⁵ Ibid., 253.

¹⁶ Government of Canada, "Operation REASSURANCE(Europe)," Last accessed 4 June 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/transition-materials/caf-operations-activities/2020/03/caf-ops-activities/op-reassurance-europe.html>

¹⁷ Osman Bojang and John Jacobs, "Denial or Punishment? Perspectives on the Deterrence Strategy behind NATO's EFP in Lithuania." *Atlantisch Perspectief* 43, no. 3 (2019): p.16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48581491>.

¹⁸ Matlary, 259

many factors that contribute to why Russia would be able to achieve an initial conventional victory quickly in the Baltics. The area is already heavily defended with A2/AD systems located in Kaliningrad, so the four battle groups and host nation forces could be easily “disrupted, neutralized or destroyed” before the VJTF or JEF reinforcements could arrive.¹⁹ Kaliningrad has missile technologies that can cutoff timely reinforcement to eFP in the Baltic States which would be required for credible deterrent by denial. For eFP to be a credible denial force, it would require several more mechanized infantry brigades and more forward bases, fighter aircraft and missile shields to suppress A2/AD capabilities.²⁰ As well, for NATO to achieve a credible deterrence by denial strategy in East-Central Europe, options would be needed to respond to tactical nuclear weapons because Russian military doctrine integrates nuclear capabilities as part of escalation from conventional to nuclear to de-escalate.²¹ Although denial strategies are generally considered to be the most effective, the requirements for NATO to achieve credible deterrent by denial capabilities would require slight increases to European defence budgets. Pressure should be continued by the US on “...European states that are unwilling to spend much on defence and, in many cases, [are] also risk-averse.”²² Politically, eFP draws its strength politically from Article V where an attack on one is an attack on all. A battalion sized battle group in each Baltic State and Poland currently does not meet the force ratio requirements for a worst-case scenario of Russian state-on-on state aggression and should be increased.

¹⁹ Osinga F and Sweijs, 212.

²⁰ Matlary, p.260.

²¹ Ibid., 261.

²² Ibid., 259.

As demonstrated in Crimea, Russia is fully capable of employing hybrid methods to cause confusion surrounding the facts of the events and it will require more than military means to deter a hybrid war in a Baltics that stays below the Article V threshold. If this were to happen, denial forces would be susceptible to subversion tactics designed to cause political division since eFP is made up of national contingents controlled by their capitals.²³ The host nation would be responsible “...in the event that national minorities begin fighting inside their own home state, [since] there is little reason [or justification] for NATO to react.”²⁴ The hybrid strategy is a deliberate strategy used by Russia to avoid serious counter-measures from NATO.²⁵ Being very difficult to deter and prove accountability, NATO needs to maintain situational awareness of cyber operations, subversion, and disinformation in partnership with host nation governments. As such, denial strategies are difficult to define in the hybrid domain but are worthy of more study and consideration in overall deterrence because they are part of Russia’s toolbox for new generation warfare and will likely be incorporated regardless of level of conflict.

Cyber Warfare Capabilities needed

Although the Warsaw Summit included provisions for improving national resilience against hybrid attack, NATO responses to cyber-attacks are some of its most underdeveloped capabilities and its hybrid strategy has yet to be well-integrated.²⁶ Deterrence by denial is at its core with the premise “...that better cybersecurity decreases the probability of network penetration and thus influence the cost-benefit calculations of

²³ Ibid., p.263.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 256.

²⁵ Ibid., p.255.

²⁶ Kulesa and Frear, 5

an adversary to the degree that it either disincentives an attack or grinds an attacker to halt over time.”²⁷ Kulesa and Frear identify that uncertainty exists within the Alliance on cyber issues and suggest that offensive cyber capabilities will likely be an important element of modern deterrence. Given the likelihood that Russian offensive operations will include full-spectrum hybrid threats, enhancement of cyber capabilities should be part of an overall NATO defence by denial policy. Specially trained cyber units/teams should be incorporated into denial force structures such as eFP and VJTF deployed in host nations to provide cyber protection/attack capabilities to deter Russian cyber-attacks working in concert with responsible national agencies.

A2/AD Countermeasures required for Kaliningrad

For the VJTF and JEF to rapidly respond to the Baltic countries and Poland to reinforce eFP as part of a denial deterrence, the A2/AD corridor in the Kaliningrad enclave would need to be neutralized not only for vanguard protection, but to prevent retaliatory strikes that threaten much of Europe. Lasconjarias identifies that “...Moscow’s integrated air defense system and short-range land attack missiles already cover the Baltic countries in their entirety as well as large swathes of Polish territory. Some interactive maps insist on showing that if medium-range missiles are included in the A2/AD package, then most European capitals are at risk...”²⁸ At present, Russia’s A2/AD capabilities are already capable of denying NATO reinforcements throughout the Baltics that are geographically only connected to NATO through a narrow land bridge.²⁹

²⁷ Osinga and Sweijjs, 393

²⁸ G. Lasconjarias. “NATO’s Response to Russian A2/AD in the Baltic States: Going Beyond Conventional?” *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 2(1) (2019): 79, <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.18>

²⁹ Osinga and Sweijjs, 94.

Those positioned in Kaliningrad are a serious concern because they could block follow-on forces from reaching the Baltic states by land, sea and air.³⁰ NATO needs to share common skills across members for Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD), Airborne Electronic Attacks (AEA), anti-submarine and mine counter measure capabilities, operating in a communications degraded environment, exercising on larger scales, and invest in common A2/AD capability development.³¹ It can also be argued that the Baltic States and other NATO members should arm themselves with similarly offensive A2/AD capabilities instead of just relying on the US to be able to penetrate Russia's missile shields.³²

Tactical Nuclear Weapons vis-à-vis Russia

There is an argument for NATO to have a clear nuclear deterrence by denial strategy to counter Russian military doctrine that includes nuclear "...as a second-strike capability after a nuclear attack or in a conventional war where the existence of the state is at stake, although their role can be 'de-escalatory' in conventional war".³³ Heisburg highlights that "...the risk of war in Europe cannot be analyzed independently of the nuclear factor"; this was evident throughout the Crimea crisis when the Kremlin broadcast the nuclear aspects of the unfolding crisis followed by President Vladimir Putin emphasizing the importance of nuclear deterrence on state-run media.³⁴ Russia would not likely win in a war of attrition with NATO and the threat of tactical nuclear weapons

³⁰ Ibid., 115.

³¹ Lasconjarias, 80.

³² Matlary, 260.

³³ Matlary, 68.

³⁴ Heisbourg, François (2021) Europe Can Afford the Cost of Autonomy, *Survival*, 63:1, 28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1881250>

can be used as a force multiplier and deterrence for A2/AD. At present, NATO has some tactical nuclear capability in that US B-61 nuclear gravity bombs are based in Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands and most NATO European air forces can support. However, these are US dependent, and NATO does not include nuclear weapons in its escalation model, only considering them as an ultimate deterrent. Some academics suggest that tactical nuclear weapons be considered in the escalation ladder as “...an efficient way of improving NATO’s strategic position vis-à-vis Russia.”³⁵ Though it would be challenging politically, NATO should adapt a tactical nuclear denial policy to counter the Russia’s early use doctrine for employment of tactical nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

In summation, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a turning point that required NATO to revisit and quickly beginning to implement deterrence by denial capabilities to deter Russian revisionism that particularly threatened the Baltic States and Poland on NATO’s eastern flank from a limited warfare attack. The forward deployment of four multinational battle groups as an enhanced forward presence (eFP) with a rapidly deployable vanguard meets the minimum requirement of a deterrence by denial, ensuring that an attempt of a *faits accompli* would be met by host nation and alliance defensive forces that would invoke Article V, making any initial success undesirable because VJTF, JEF and arguably US Forces would quickly follow on to support the eFPs. If an overwhelming Russian offensive were to occur, the denial plan would likely fail and consequently, NATO members need to add more denial capabilities to remain credible by

³⁵ Osman Bojang and John Jacobs, 18.

increasing the size of the eFPs and VJTF to force ratios, investing more in A2/AD defence/offense, as well as updating and communicating the alliance's policy for the use of tactical nuclear weapons in force escalation scenarios.

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