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Deterrence by Punishment: A Recommended NATO Response to Russian Aggression

Major Mark Sandner

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Major Mark Sandner

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Deterrence by Punishment: A Recommended NATO Response to Russian Aggression

AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to argue that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would benefit greatly from putting more emphasis on deterrence by punishment rather than deterrence by denial against Russia in Eastern Europe. This paper will make arguments against the use of a deterrence by denial strategy and suggest that deterrence by punishment allows greater flexibility to partner nations, and more accurately reflects what is feasible when considering the economic and geopolitical capabilities of NATO members. This paper will conclude with realistic recommendations for NATO as how to implement a deterrence by punishment strategy.

INTRODUCTION

2. Deterrence is “the use of threats to convince an adversary from taking an action.”¹ Since the end of the Cold War, NATO and its partners allocated most of their military effort into countering terrorism and non-state actors looking to disrupt the way of life of developed nations. Deterrence was a part of NATO doctrine, but military focus was on counter-terrorist operations instead of conventional threats. Up until 2014, no adversary seemed to be directly challenging the status quo of global politics. However, in the last decade, NATO has had to re-focus and re-think what its deterrence strategy looks like, as non-state and terrorist threats to partner nations has diminished, and the rise of conventional adversaries has increased.² 2014 was a wake-up call for NATO, as major events occurred that surprised many of the organization’s members. Russia annexed the Ukrainian state of Crimea through the use of hybrid and gray zone tactics,³ suggesting to the world that it does not accept NATO influence in ex-Soviet nations. In addition, Russia dramatically increased military presence and aggressiveness, showing an improved level of conventional military might⁴ across the entire Eastern European front.⁵

3. When analyzing Eastern Europe from a deterrence perspective, NATO’s response to Russian aggression can take two forms. The first is by adopting a deterrence by denial approach, and the second is a deterrence by punishment approach. This paper argues that deterrence by punishment is superior to deterrence by denial since it provides NATO with greater economic, military, and political flexibility to react to Russian aggression against its Eastern European allies. This paper will reinforce this statement by defining deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment, then analyzing the scenario in Eastern Europe and the threat from Russia. This analysis will provide an explanation of why deterrence by denial would be

¹ “The Origins and Evolution of Deterrence Theory,” Harvard Online Courses, November 10, 2018, <https://online-learning.harvard.edu/course/origins-and-evolution-deterrence-theory>.

² “NATO Review - Deterrence: What It Can (and Cannot) Do,” NATO Review, April 20, 2015, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2015/04/20/deterrence-what-it-can-and-cannot-do/index.html>.

³ “Time to Restore Conventional Deterrence-by-Denial,” Egmont Institute, June 17, 2016, <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/time-to-restore-conventional-deterrence-by-denial/>.

⁴ John-Michael Arnold, “NATO’s Readiness Action Plan: Strategic Benefits and Outstanding Challenges,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly: SSQ*, no. Spring (2016): 1.

⁵ “Russia’s Possible Invasion of Ukraine,” accessed January 19, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-possible-invasion-ukraine>.

disadvantageous in the current situation in Eastern Europe. After the conclusion of this paper, there will be several recommendations that would further augment the components of NATO's deterrence response.

DISCUSSION

Deterrence Defined

4. In a broad sense, deterrence by denial is a deterrence strategy that seeks to “deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed,”⁶ ideally making the aggressor think that their actions are not worth the cost. Deterrence by denial need not always refer to military assets, however what springs to mind for most people is the military capabilities that would make an adversary pay an inordinate cost for attacking a defended objective. The NATO build-up of the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap (GIUK Gap) during World War II and thereafter is a historical example of deterrence by denial.⁷ In the modern era, a strong build-up of defensive positions and forces in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, of the size that could repel a Russian invasion, would be an example of deterrence by denial. The use of anti-access area denial (A2AD) component capabilities,⁸ a conventional defence to a valuable region, is another example of deterrence by denial.

5. In contrast, deterrence by punishment “threatens severe penalties, such as nuclear escalation or severe economic sanctions, if an attack occurs.”⁹ Deterrence by punishment is not so much related to conventional defense as deterrence by denial is, but the broader scope of punishment that would come from committing to an attack on a state. The punishment portion would occur on the aggressor's military or civilian industry after the aggressor's action's have taken place, and in such a manner that the retaliation causes more loss than the initial aggression was worth.¹⁰ The success of punishment depends greatly on the commitment of the defender to follow through with threats of retaliation. If a defender threatens nuclear action or a strong military response, but doesn't subsequently commit when required, then the aggressor may follow through with their actions anyway, predicting a feint or a bluff. Thus, a strong deterrence by punishment policy must include a commitment to the deterrence strategy by the defender to go through with the punishment.¹¹ In Eastern Europe, an example of denial by punishment would include a large high-readiness reaction force, economic sanctions, and political backing of the USA. It should be noted that nuclear deterrence is a form of deterrence by punishment but won't be discussed at length as nuclear deterrence is a complex topic worthy of its own paper and is outside of the scope of this one.

⁶ Michael J Mazarr, “Understanding Deterrence,” n.d., 2.

⁷ “The GIUK Gap's Strategic Significance,” *Strategic Comments* 25, no. 8 (September 14, 2019): i–iii, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2019.1684626>.

⁸ “Elevating ‘Deterrence by Denial’ in US Defense Strategy,” *Atlantic Council* (blog), February 4, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/seizing-the-advantage/elevating-deterrence-by-denial-in-us-defense-strategy/>.

⁹ Mazarr, “Understanding Deterrence,” 2.

¹⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, United States: Cornell University Press, 1985), 14, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cfvlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4799673>.

¹¹ Jörg Noll, Osman Bojang, and Sebastiaan Rietjens, “Deterrence by Punishment or Denial? The EFP Case,” in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, ed. Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijjs, NL ARMS (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2021), 110, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-419-8_7.

NATO and Russia Eastern Europe

6. When NATO observed Russian progress with military capability in conventional and hybrid warfare, they made efforts to respond in kind. Crimea was an example of an effective hybrid strategy, utilizing conventional and gray zone assets that were supported by an impressive command and control (C2) system.¹² In September 2014, after the Crimea annexation, NATO unveiled their collective defence and deterrence strategy called the Readiness Action Plan (RAP). The RAP was designed to deter Russian aggression and “bolster the organization’s ability to respond to fast-moving crises, regardless of their origin.”¹³ The RAP included establishment of a 5000 troop Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), an increased air, land, and sea presence in Eastern Europe, and improved command and control (C2) elements.¹⁴ Increased troop presence was coupled with multi-nation exercises in Eastern Europe, and an agreement by NATO partners to increase defence spending to 2% of GDP.¹⁵ The VJTF currently operates as a mobile trip wire for the rest of the NATO forces, enabling the smaller force to observe the adversary, and alert the larger response force to Russian aggression. Also available to NATO would be additional “high-readiness and NATO’s heavier follow-on forces” according to the Secretary General’s Annual Report of 2020.¹⁶

7. While NATO’s presence in Eastern Europe is a substantial build-up of forces which shows the commitment of allied nations to Europe, it pales in comparison to the sheer weight of forces that Russia has amassed and would sufficient if NATO was looking to pursue deterrence by denial. Currently, Russia has an estimated 120,000 soldiers on the border of Ukraine, with tens of thousands more in reserve. including hundreds of armoured vehicles and tanks.¹⁷ With such a large force, Russia can achieve “local military dominance to carry out short, conventional operations with limited objectives along its periphery,”¹⁸ and would likely not be deterred by NATO’s smaller high-readiness forces. Gary Schmitt, a former staff director on the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, as well as a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, noted that “The upped (NATO) presence has been marginal in terms of numbers; the high-readiness force being created is limited in size, and the training exercises still pale in comparison with the scale of the exercises that have been conducted by the Russian military.”¹⁹ Therefore, if NATO were to pursue a denial approach, the number of forces in the region would have to increase significantly.

Deterrence by Punishment – An Analysis

8. Given the imbalance of forces between NATO and Russia, deterrence by denial does not seem fiscally feasible. Deterrence by punishment is the better solution,

¹² “Time to Restore Conventional Deterrence-by-Denial.”

¹³ Arnold, “NATO’s Readiness Action Plan: Strategic Benefits and Outstanding Challenges,” 2.

¹⁴ Arnold, 5.

¹⁵ Arnold, 3.

¹⁶ Jens Stoltenberg, “Secretary General Annual Report 2020” (NATO, 2020), 16, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_03/20170313_SG_AnnualReport_2016_en.pdf#page=35.

¹⁷ “Russia’s Possible Invasion of Ukraine.”

¹⁸ “Time to Restore Conventional Deterrence-by-Denial.”

¹⁹ Arnold, “NATO’s Readiness Action Plan: Strategic Benefits and Outstanding Challenges,” 2.

and NATO partners in Eastern Europe tend to agree.²⁰ Effective deterrence depends upon making an adversary believe that the defender has the resources and will to make good on a punishment threat.²¹ A deterrence by denial strategy would require a vast increase in presence, with allied nations fielding a defensive force that would make a conflict not be advantageous for Russia. Given that most NATO nations fail to contribute the agreed upon minimum of 2% of GDP,²² a persistent force of that size in Eastern Europe is not feasible. A presence-first approach would cause tension within the allies and raise concerns about burden-sharing among those that shoulder more than their fair share (USA).²³ If Russia was looking to pursue a limited aims plan in Ukraine, a 5000-soldier strong VJTF would not be sufficient to halt a rapid Russian advance before they captured their objectives and were able to fortify territory. Thus, deterrence by denial does not seem a fiscally sustainable option.

9. A deterrence by punishment strategy would not look to place such a drain on NATO resources. In this case, the VJTF, acting as the mobile trip wire, would be more than sufficient to give notice to Russia's movements, and allow for a follow-on response by NATO that punishes the aggressive actions of Russia no matter how limited the aims were. A defence-in-depth strategy utilizing a trip-wire force has proven effective in history. During the Cold War, American troops deployed to Berlin numbered only 7,000. However, this small number was sufficient that if they were overrun, the casualties inflicted would guarantee that follow on action by USA and its allies would occur.²⁴ A smaller force can be an effective deterrence by punishment tool and would be superior to a larger deterrence by denial force, but only if NATO was ready and willing to "threaten the associate punishment in the event the trip wire is crossed."²⁵ In other words, allies must be willing to follow through with their threats should the need arise. A punishment strategy gives rise to questions about the aggressive nature of the response required, but it would be a much less contentious option than a deterrence by denial option that would require a larger standing force on Russia's border, something that could be misconstrued as escalatory.²⁶

10. While a deterrence by denial build-up of forces would make conflict unsavory for Russia, it would also create an unhealthy and damaging political climate for NATO. As per NATO's own doctrine, the alliance seeks to be in a purely defensive posture.²⁷ Instead of seeming purely defensive, a large build-up of forces may have the opposite effect. Russia might not want to accept such a large NATO force on its border, instead seeing it as an act of aggression. Deterrence by denial would be detrimental in this case if Russia saw their position deteriorating, and "misinterpret the large-scale movement of sizable forces...as NATO preparations for a pre-emptive

²⁰ Noll, Bojang, and Rietjens, "Deterrence by Punishment or Denial?," 125.

²¹ "It's Time to Rethink NATO's Deterrent Strategy," War on the Rocks, December 6, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/want-to-deter-russia-think-mobility-not-presence/>.

²² Jan Techau, "The Politics of 2 Percent: NATO and the Security Vacuum in Europe," Carnegie Europe, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/09/02/politics-of-2-percent-nato-and-security-vacuum-in-europe-pub-61139>.

²³ "It's Time to Rethink NATO's Deterrent Strategy."

²⁴ Arnold, "NATO's Readiness Action Plan: Strategic Benefits and Outstanding Challenges," 8.

²⁵ Arnold, 14.

²⁶ "NATO's Options - Preventing Escalation in the Baltics: A NATO Playbook," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/03/28/nato-s-options-pub-75883>.

²⁷ Stoltenberg, "Secretary General Annual Report 2020," 15.

attack on Russia.”²⁸ This would have severe ramifications not only in a conventional warfare sense, but in the employment of nuclear weapons; a large build-up of NATO forces could lower Russia’s threshold for use, creating the exact opposite global scenario that a deterrence by denial strategy is aimed to maintain.²⁹

CONCLUSION

11. For logistical, strategic, and political reasons outlined in this paper, a deterrence by punishment strategy would provide an efficient and effective response to Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. This is partly due to NATO’s historical hesitance to maintain a large, persistent force with the required component capabilities in one place for an extended period. By maintaining a deterrence by punishment strategy, NATO would not allow accidental escalation to occur, and would play to the strengths of the defence-in-depth strategy that NATO already has in place in Eastern Europe. Ensuring the VJTF is multi-national would threaten NATO invoking Article 5³⁰ to the max extent possible, a punishment response that Russia simply cannot ignore. A deterrence by denial strategy on the other hand would be costly in both manpower and funding, two things that most allies are not looking to contribute more. Deterrence by denial looks to counter a conventional threat, and while accomplish that goal, there are other facets to countering Russia that go beyond conventional means, such as cyber and nuclear responses. While these were not touched on in this paper, putting all of NATO’s resources into countering conventional forces ignores the gray zone tactics that will more likely be used by Russia as they seek to make gains in Eastern Europe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

12. Recommendations are meant to reinforce and better enable NATO’s deterrence by punishment response and is not an exhaustive list. These three items are simply factors that would make deterrence by punishment more amenable to partnered nations, and contribute to the NATO goals of deterrence, which are de-escalation and defence of partners.

13. Recommendation 1: Bolster VJTF high-readiness forces. Bolstering the high-readiness response forces would increase the component effectiveness of the alliance’s trip wire strategy, while not requiring the cost of a persistent deployment of a large force. This would signal to Russia that NATO is prepared for aggressive moves against its allies, but the size of the force would not trigger a reaction from them like a denial-based build-up of forces on the Russian border would. The USA is the largest contributor of forces,³¹ thus pairing them up with European countries to ensure the VJTF force is multi-national would be most effective at easing the personnel burden on smaller nations.

14. Recommendation 2: Include political decision-making in military exercises. As John Michael Arnold recommends in his NATO Strategic Benefits document,³² NATO civilians and politicians should be familiar with the decision-making process that would occur after a military or limited objective action has been taken by Russia.

²⁸ “NATO’s Options - Preventing Escalation in the Baltics.”

²⁹ “NATO’s Options - Preventing Escalation in the Baltics.”

³⁰ NATO, “Collective Defence - Article 5,” NATO, accessed January 22, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm.

³¹ Arnold, “NATO’s Readiness Action Plan: Strategic Benefits and Outstanding Challenges,” 21.

³² Arnold, 24.

Doing so would familiarize politicians with what decisions they need to make, and how to evaluate the military actions taken by Russia to decide on the correct, reciprocal punishment response. This would also allow officials and politicians to wargame likely Russian response to their decisions, fostering better cooperation when such a response is needed in real time.

15. Recommendation 3: Allow NATO members to contribute to their 2% GDP military spending through indirect means. Very few of the NATO members have built up to the 2% of GDP that was agreed upon in 2014.³³ In lieu of military spending, development aid, infrastructure, post-conflict reconstruction, counter-propaganda efforts, and outreach to local populations in Baltic and Eastern European states could be allowed to be contributions to the 2%. Expenditures like this could be more amenable to certain populations who are far removed from conflict. While countries would not be directly funding military action, they would be contributing to the bigger picture defence strategy of NATO, adding to its resiliency and ability to punish any aggressive action with quicker response times before and after a conflict.

³³ NATO, “Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales,” NATO, accessed January 22, 2022, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm.

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