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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) ● Wojciech Lorenz (Managing Editor)
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Deterring Russia after Ukraine: CEE Divided on the Future of NATO Policy

Artur Kacprzyk

In the context of the Ukraine crisis, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Romania have called for significant strengthening of NATO's deterrence and defence policy and for permanent deployments of Allied troops in the region. This position is, however, not shared by the rest of the Central and Eastern European NATO members. Similar to Western European countries, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia do not feel as threatened by Russia's actions and do not support moves that could damage their political and economic relations with Moscow. Fundamental differences among the current positions of the regional Allies indicate a profound divide between Central and Eastern European NATO members.

The military dimension of security in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has gained significant importance after Russia unexpectedly used armed forces to change borders in the vicinity of NATO member states. From a CEE perspective, the Russian actions in Ukraine are particularly worrisome because they show Moscow's attachment to military power as an instrument of regional policy, as well as the Kremlin's willingness to act against basic rules of international law. The crisis has also proven that Moscow can use the presence of a Russian-speaking minority as a pretext for military intervention aimed at the "protection of ethnic Russians" abroad.

Moreover, concerns by some CEE countries are related to Russia's demonstration of its capability to conduct swift and unexpected military operations as well as an ability to take actions that do not meet the classic definition of an armed attack. In addition to the rapid mobilization of tens of thousands of Russian soldiers at the Ukrainian border, Russia has used special forces, supported local separatists, and conducted information warfare and cyberattacks, which together constitute a new kind of warfare referred to by some as a "hybrid war".

For the last several years, the Kremlin has taken a series of provocative steps against NATO itself, with the majority of its actions in the direct neighbourhood of the CEE members. These actions have included continuous violations of Allied airspace, beefing up of military presence near NATO's borders, and regular military exercises during which NATO has been the adversary. The CEE countries did not try to completely block cooperation between the Alliance and Russia in response. Rather, they underscored that NATO should collaborate with Moscow only in ways that do not collide with the interests of the CEE members.

Strengthening NATO in CEE

The Russian intervention in Ukraine prompted an exceptionally strong reaction from Poland, which requested an emergency meeting of the North Atlantic Council, which took place on 4 March. Warsaw, backed by the Baltic states, invoked Art. 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which allows any NATO country

to call for a consultation with the rest of the Allies in case of a threat to any member's security. The concerns of the CEE states were later reflected in a common decision by the Alliance of 16 April to temporarily boost NATO's military presence in the CEE.

Steps taken by the Alliance both before and after the April decision included mainly military exercises and interim troop deployments. Allied air, land and sea assets have taken part in a series of multinational and bilateral military drills in Poland, the Baltic states, and Romania, and in the Baltic and Black seas. Apart from that, the number of fighter planes participating monthly in the Baltic Air Policing mission has increased since March 2014 from the usual four to no fewer than 10. The U.S. has also strengthened its rotational detachment in Poland by sending an additional 12 F-16 fighters from Aviano Air Base in Italy. The F-16s will remain in the country at least until the end of the year.

Similar actions compose the main elements of the European Reassurance Initiative, announced by U.S. President Barack Obama at the beginning of June 2014.¹ More frequent exercises involving territorial defence-related scenarios were also listed by NATO defence ministers as one of the instruments of the Allies' Readiness Action Plan (RAP). The final version of the plan, which is aimed at enhancing the Alliance's capacity to respond to crises approximating Art. 5 contingencies, which require a response by all of NATO, will be approved at the NATO Summit in Newport, Wales, in September 2014.

However, the actions announced by the U.S. and NATO do not fully correspond with the calls by some CEE states that seek far stronger augmentation of deterrence in the region. Long-term changes in NATO's deterrence and defence policy will be the main subject of the talks at the NATO summit. The following issues raised by the CEE countries deserve particular attention.

Permanent Stationing of NATO Forces in the CEE

Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have renewed their calls for a permanent deployment of land, air and sea Allied forces in the CEE. Similar requests were also made by Romania. According to these states, a permanent NATO presence in the region would clearly signal Russia that the other Allies are determined to defend the CEE members. Additionally, in the opinion of experts, regional troop deployments would drastically shorten the time of an Allied response to aggression, with rapid reaction abilities being especially important considering the pace of Russia's military operations during the Ukrainian crisis.²

Meanwhile, some Western European Allies argue that the permanent stationing of NATO units in the region would violate the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act, in which the Alliance pledged not to station “substantial combat forces” permanently in the CEE. Yet, there is no universally recognized definition of “substantial combat forces”. For example, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski characterized “substantial forces” as units larger than two brigades.³ Such interpretations are, in turn, opposed by Germany, which fears that any permanent deployments of NATO troops near Russia's borders could lead to an unnecessary escalation of tensions with Moscow.

The governments of the Baltic states, Poland and Romania seem to adopt the position that NATO is no longer bound by the provisions of the Founding Act because the past declaration on combat forces was, in the same document, related to “the current and foreseeable security environment”. According to these states, the Russian violation of the Act's principles has resulted in radical changes in the security environment and, in effect, at least temporarily removed NATO's political obligations.

In the opinion of Estonian President Hendrik Ilves, deterrence can be effective even if smaller units are deployed in areas directly threatened by aggression, even if they might be incapable of thwarting an enemy

¹ “FACT SHEET: European Reassurance Initiative and Other U.S. Efforts in Support of NATO Allies and Partners”, White House, www.whitehouse.gov.

² See, e.g., M. Hurt, “Lessons Identified in Crimea”, *Policy Paper*, International Centre for Defense Studies, April 2014, p. 5.

³ “Radosław Sikorski: Rosjanie nie przewidzieli konsekwencji aneksji Krymu” [“Radosław Sikorski: Russians have not predicted the consequences of the annexation of Crimea”], *Wirtualna Polska*, 3 April 2014, wp.pl. On the other hand, Russia has defined “substantial combat forces” as forces not bigger than a brigade.

offensive by themselves.⁴ According to this logic, an attack on any NATO troops would automatically mean an attack against the other members of the Alliance. Therefore, a would-be aggressor would have to face a high risk of severe retaliation from the attacked state's allies. The deployment of much stronger units would, by contrast, not only serve as a symbol of Allied solidarity but also would allow NATO to block a potential invasion.

The CEE does not present a unified front. Hungary has not requested a NATO permanent military presence on its soil, Slovakia has openly rejected the idea of Allied forces on its territory, while the Czech prime minister has not only opposed the potential deployment of NATO troops on Czech soil but has expressed scepticism about increasing the presence of such forces in other CEE states, too.⁵

Positioning Allied Infrastructure and Equipment in the CEE

Countries opting for permanent NATO military presence have also asked for Alliance assistance in the development of regional military infrastructure to underscore the credibility of NATO defence commitments and facilitate a swift reception of Allied forces in case of a conflict or crisis.

Both the U.S. and NATO as a whole have responded to these requests only to a limited extent by announcing that some military equipment will be prepositioned in Europe.⁶ At the same time, it is not yet certain whether storage sites will be located in the CEE or in other parts of the continent, especially as U.S. officials have hinted at potential upgrades to weapons storage in Italy. Additionally, the U.S. has vowed to explore possible improvements to local military infrastructure but so far Washington has given few further details on that matter, expressing only an intent to increase training sites in Bulgaria.⁷ From the CEE states' perspective, the most appropriate installations to upgrade would instead be ports, airfields and shipment points.

Although infrastructure expansion in the CEE is generally less controversial than the issue of troop deployments, some Allies, especially Germany, could still perceive the upgrades as "too provocative". The prospects for major infrastructure investments are also uncertain for financial reasons, as the majority of NATO countries have either cut their defence budgets or have at least not increased military expenditures.

Defence Planning and Command Capabilities

Poland and the Baltic states have stressed that regional contingency plans should be adjusted to the current political and military realities. The relevant documents have most likely not been updated since the 2010 Lisbon Summit, when, according to press sources, NATO approved new, albeit still very general, plans for Allied responses to potential attacks on Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The Alliance's decision was reportedly based on the requests of the same members as today, who then expressed concerns about their security after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.⁸ Warsaw has also sought to enhance NATO's command capabilities by proposing an increase in the readiness level of Multinational Corps Northeast, which is headquartered in Szczecin, Poland.

Nuclear Deterrence

Representatives of the concerned CEE states did not raise the issue of nuclear deterrence in their official statements. Some comments regarding this matter came instead from the Czech Republic's former deputy minister of foreign affairs, Jiri Schneider, who offered the opinion that Poland and Czech Republic would be

⁴ M. Kaminski, "An American Ally in Putin's Line of Fire", The Wall Street Journal, 4 April 2014, www.online.wsj.com.

⁵ "Slovak PM follows Czechs in ruling out foreign NATO troops", Reuters, 4 June 2014, www.reuters.com.

⁶ Pre-positioning could, for example, include the deployment of a battalion-sized set of U.S. Army fighting vehicles and tanks, as such American assets are currently pre-positioned in Germany.

⁷ J. H. Svan, "Pentagon: F-15 pullout from Europe may be on hold", Stars and Stripes, 17 July 2014, www.stripes.com.

⁸ "NATO has secret plan to defend Baltics: WikiLeaks", Reuters, 7 December 2014, www.reuters.com.

willing to provide bases for American tactical nuclear weapons on their territories.⁹ Schneider's remarks coincide with recommendations made by a few analysts from regional and external think tanks.¹⁰

It is likely that the CEE governments did not take a clear stance on the idea of basing tactical nuclear forces in the region possibly because of provisions in the Founding Act, as the Alliance had declared that it had "no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members".¹¹ As with troop deployments, whether that circumstance has changed is debatable. Moreover, a formal discussion on the relocation of tactical nuclear weapons to CEE states could reignite internal divisions within NATO that were particularly visible during the debate on the Alliance's Deterrence and Defence Posture Review document, adopted in 2012.

Missile Defence

Warsaw emphasized that construction of an American missile-defence base in Redzikowo, Poland, should be carried out according to the previously approved schedule, that is, by the end of 2018. Since the American missile defence system (European Phased Adaptive Approach or EPAA) is designed to defend Europe from limited ballistic missile attacks from the Middle East, the quantity and technical features of the interceptors, such as speed, that are to be placed at the Redzikowo base are insufficient to protect Poland against larger strikes from Russia. The presence of this type of American military installation on Polish soil would nonetheless symbolise the credibility of the U.S. military commitment.

Even so, the Polish government declared that it had no intention to press the White House for earlier deployment of EPAA. Warsaw also did not support an initiative by U.S. senators from the Republican Party, who submitted a bill that would require the administration to either locate EPAA elements in Poland no later than in 2016 or to deploy shorter-range missile defence systems in the CEE.¹²

NATO air defence assets are also desired by some representatives of governmental and parliamentary circles in the Baltic states.¹³ These units would serve as a protection against aircraft or missiles deployed in Russia's Western Military District.

Increased Military Expenditures

In light of the Ukraine crisis and ongoing modernization of the Russian army, many of the CEE states recognize the need for higher military expenditures. Currently, Estonia is the only CEE NATO member that meets the target of spending 2% of GDP on defence, a goal adopted at the 2006 NATO Summit. The second example comes from Poland, which has a military budget that amounts to around 1.95% of GDP, a level of spending required by Polish law. Furthermore, Poland announced a plan to increase its military budget to reach the 2% of GDP goal.¹⁴ Warsaw has also already launched an extensive military modernization program, which amounts to around \$46 billion (PLN 140 billion) through 2022.

⁹ E. Braw, "After Ukraine, Countries That Border Russia Start Thinking About Nuclear Deterrents", Newsweek, 15 April 2014, www.newsweek.com.

¹⁰ See J. Bartosiak, T. Szatkowski, "America needs Poland that is more self sufficient", National Centre for Strategic Studies, 15 May 2014, ncss.org.pl; E. Lucas, A. W. Mitchell, P. B. Doran, J. J. Grygiel, R. Kron, O. Manea, K. C. Smith, "Central European Security After Crimea: The Case for Strengthening NATO's Eastern Defenses", Report no. 35, Center for European Policy Analysis, 25 March 2014.

¹¹ See "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation", Paris, 27 May 1997.

¹² R. Oswald, "GOP Pushing to Speed Up Deployment of Advanced Interceptors in Poland", Global Security Newswire, 6 May 2014, www.nti.org/gsn.

¹³ See G. O'Dwyer, "Baltics To Hike Budgets, Pursue Permanent NATO Troop Presence", Defense News, 26 April 2014, www.defensenews.com; S. Erlanger, "Eastern Europe Frets About NATO's Ability to Curb Russia", The New York Times, 24 April 2014, www.nytimes.com.

¹⁴ See J. Adamowski, "Russian, NATO Arms Race Takes Shape", Defense News, 7 June 2014, www.defensenews.com.

Lithuania has also declared a significant and ambitious increase in defence expenditures (from the current 0.8% to 2% of GDP through 2020), as have Latvia (from 0.9% to 2% of GDP by 2020) and Romania (from 1.36% to 2% of GDP through 2017).¹⁵

Although Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary have officially accentuated their “ambition to gradually increase defence spending towards the threshold of 2% of GDP”, none of these countries has considered any meaningful increase in military expenditures in the coming years.¹⁶ Hungary plans to increase its defence budget (currently 0.8% of GDP) by only 0.1% of GDP annually from 2016, Czech Republic (currently 1.08% of GDP) intends to reduce its spending next year and then to gradually raise expenditures in order to reach 1.4% of GDP in the medium-term, while Slovakia (currently 1% of GDP) stated that it would not boost its defence budget in the near future.¹⁷

The unwillingness of some CEE states to reach the 2% goal comes despite the calls from the more active countries in the region and long-standing demands of U.S. and NATO officials. Washington has recently issued increasingly blunt warnings that American military support for Europe could become uncertain if Europeans do not fulfil their spending obligations.

Credibility of Deterrence—Solidarity of the Alliance

During the course of the Ukraine crisis, Russia’s NATO neighbours became increasingly concerned whether the other Allies would be ready to undertake sufficiently quick and decisive actions towards the Kremlin if the need arises. While American troops comprise the majority of Allied forces deployed in the CEE after the events in Crimea and Washington has taken a relatively harsh stance towards Moscow, the reaction from Berlin and Paris has been much less firm.

Even though France and Germany participated in the Alliance’s military operations intended to reassure the CEE allies, neither country agreed to punish Russia with far-reaching sanctions and instead concentrated their policy on diplomatic efforts. Additionally, the German government has been a vocal critic of the permanent deployment of NATO units in the CEE and France has not cancelled the sale to Russia of two Mistral-class amphibious ships.

In the opinion of Latvia’s former defence minister, Artis Pabriks, whose opinion is representative of the perspective of Russia’s neighbours, Western European states do not perceive Russia as a direct threat to their security given its geographic distance. Instead, they are focused on economic cooperation with Moscow and try to avoid actions that could damage their relations with Russia.¹⁸ Pabriks warned that internal divisions among the NATO members and between CE and Western Europeans could embolden Russia to take more aggressive steps against the CEE states.

CEE: Divided on Russia and Deterrence

Clearly not all CEE states have taken an equally active part in the discussion on the possible augmentation of NATO’s deterrence and defence policy. Differences in the positions of the CEE states suggest that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the region is not necessarily willing to present a unified stance regarding issues of military security. Most recently, the limits of regional consensus were clearly revealed during the Warsaw summit of CEE presidents on 22 July.

¹⁵ “Lithuanian parties pledge better defence spending, seek permanent presence of US troops”, The Lithuania Tribune, 29 March 2014, www.lithuaniatribune.com; “Saeima: defence budget must reach 2% of GDP by 2020”, Baltic News Network, 12 June 2014, bnn-news.com; “Romania to Boost Defense Spending”, Novinite.com (Sofia News Agency), 3 April 2014, www.novinite.com.

¹⁶ “Budapest Declaration of the Visegrad Group Heads of Government on the New Opening in V4 Defence Cooperation”, 24 June 2014.

¹⁷ “Defence minister expects protracted conflict in Ukraine”, Politics.hu, 30 June 2014, www.politics.hu; I. Willoughby, “Sobotka: Medium-term target for defence spending 1.4 percent of GDP”, Radio Praha, 20 May 2014, www.radio.cz; “Fico: Slovakia won’t up its defence budget despite crisis in Ukraine”, The Slovak Spectator, 12 May 2014, spectator.sme.sk.

¹⁸A. Pabriks, “Germany Must Take Baltic Security Concerns More Seriously”, Atlantic-community.org, www.atlantic-community.org.

Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and Romania

The Baltic states, Poland and Romania are the most determined proponents of strengthening NATO's deterrence and defence policy in the CEE. The strong reaction of the Baltic states follows largely from the fact that these countries share a land border with Russia and that the Russian-speaking minority in those countries constitutes a significant part of their populations (Latvia, 27%; Estonia, 24%; and to a lesser extent Lithuania, 5%). All three of the Allies demand increased NATO activity in the region due to their very limited military capabilities, dictated by modest human and financial resources, and their weak geostrategic positions. In case of an armed conflict, NATO's assistance would be crucial in every dimension: air, land, sea and cyber. Moreover, the permanent presence of Allied troops is strongly desired because the Baltic states are situated between Kaliningrad Oblast and the rest of Russia's territory. Therefore, in the event of a military conflict with Russia, Moscow's forces could quite easily impede any NATO attempts to reinforce the Baltic states.

Warsaw responded to the crisis in Ukraine as firmly as did the Baltic states. Poland's stance results partially from concerns about the presence of Russian forces, including the possibility of tactical nuclear weapons, in Kaliningrad Oblast and in Belarus, and partially from Warsaw's ambition to play the role of a regional leader. Poland's situation, however, is not as dire as the Baltic States', considering the distance from mainland Russia and lack of a Russian-speaking minority on Polish territory. Besides, the size and dynamics of the Polish economy allows Warsaw to finance a comprehensive military programme that in the medium-term will decrease Poland's dependency on the Alliance in some areas, such as air and missile defence.

Romania is clearly disturbed by the growing activity of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the general destabilisation of the Black Sea region. Its calls for a more substantial NATO presence are related especially to fears of a potential repeat of a Crimea scenario in bordering Moldova. Unrest in Transnistria or Gagauzia could lead to further tensions in the region and to an increased number of Russian units stationed along Romanian borders.

Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia

Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia have been trying to avoid antagonistic rhetoric that would strain their economic ties with Moscow, especially given that from these countries' perspectives, Russia does not pose a tangible threat given its distance. Hence, Budapest, Prague and Bratislava do not perceive drastic hikes in defence budgets or permanent troop deployments as necessary. Hungary's stance is in line with a longer trend of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government to distance the country from both the EU and U.S. and strengthen economic and political ties with countries broadly defined as "East", including Russia.

Still, there are some internal political divides with regard to NATO policy, especially in the Czech Republic. Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka's remarks against an increased NATO military presence in the CEE drew harsh criticism not only from the opposition and President Miloš Zeman but also from Sobotka's coalition partners from the KDU-CSL party.¹⁹ Furthermore, in Slovakia, demands for more substantial engagement on NATO policy were voiced by experts and representatives of the parliamentary opposition.²⁰

Bulgaria

During the Ukraine crisis, Bulgaria has expressed its worries about the destabilisation of the region and underscored the need for strengthened defence capabilities in the Black Sea. On the other hand, Sofia has not formulated as clear and far-reaching requests of NATO as did the Baltic states, Poland or Romania. So far, Bulgaria, the airspace of which is regularly approached by Russian warplanes, has proposed the establishment of a joint Air Policing Mission with Turkey and Romania and requested more frequent joint military exercises, but not permanent troop deployments. Sofia's restraint is dictated largely by strong

¹⁹ "PM draws fire for saying Czech Republic will not call for NATO troop increase", Radio Praha, 4 June 2014, www.radio.cz.

²⁰ "Ukraine crisis prompts NATO military activity; Slovakia currently not participating", The Slovak Spectator, 6 May 2014, www.spectator.sme.sk.

historical and cultural ties to Russia, which is also a main supplier of energy. Moreover, Bulgaria plays host to hundreds of thousands of Russian tourists every year.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Russia's intervention in Ukraine has confirmed the validity of concerns of its neighbours—Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia—which had been calling for strengthened deterrence measures in the region ever since joining the Alliance. An equally firm reaction also has come from Romania. Although during previous debates on NATO policy Alliance members had avoided describing specific countries as a threat, the recent events have induced these states to explicitly depict Russia as a potential adversary.

Although the CEE countries undoubtedly assign a leading role to conventional forces, they have not yet determined the potential importance of nuclear weapons in revised NATO policy. It is likely that the concerned governments have not referred to the basing of tactical nuclear weapons in the region due to the very limited likelihood of that happening and because of the controversies that would arise. At the same time, the utility of nuclear arms in dealing with such nontraditional forms of aggression as Russia's operations in Crimea, could be simply seen as marginal.

The concerned states should clarify the potential tasks and sizes of the proposed conventional units, the deployment of which is considered by Poland and the NATO Baltic members as the most crucial issue. On one hand, these forces could symbolize Allied solidarity and serve as a tripwire for broader intervention. On the other hand, the stationing of larger formations would suggest that such units are necessary not only for assurance but also for defensive purposes. Regional NATO members strive most actively for the presence of ground forces probably because they perceive them as most effective in countering the kind of operations Russia conducted in Crimea. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the deployment of land units could also be related to fears of traditional land-based aggression, not just a Ukraine-style "creeping invasion".

The clarification of these states' demands would be much less problematic than persuading the rest of the Allies to share the attitudes of Poland, the Baltic states and Romania. The Western European countries' unwillingness to take a harsher posture against Moscow will most likely remain the biggest issue in that matter.

The likelihood of implementation of the concerned states' requests for deterrence and reassurance would be much higher if all of the CEE states were to present a unified and decisive stance. Even if Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia did not protest a reconfiguration of NATO strategy, their passivity surely would not be of much help in Warsaw's or Tallinn's efforts.

However, the significant differences in the positions of the region's allies show that there is a fundamental security perception divide between the immediate neighbours of Russia and the rest of the CEE states. After all, even Russian military intervention in the direct vicinity of the Alliance and Moscow's increasingly hostile rhetoric towards NATO have not thus far induced Hungary, Czech Republic or Slovakia to independently call for substantial and permanent reinforcement via Allied deterrence and defence policy.

Despite appearances, the discord between regional allies was still visible at the Warsaw presidential summit shortly after Russian-backed separatists downed the Malaysia Airlines plane with almost 300 passengers on board. Although all presidents backed less controversial calls for updated contingency planning, NATO forces increased readiness level, and improvements to local infrastructure, the leaders were clearly far from agreement on potential troop deployments in the CEE. The heads of state endorsed the idea of a "visible" Allied military presence in the region, but avoided any references to potential permanent basing of NATO forces.²¹ Therefore it is hard to expect that Prague, Bratislava and Budapest will change their positions at the Wales summit or during subsequent discussions on NATO policy.

²¹ "Prezydenci chcą wzmocnić wschodnią flankę NATO" ["Presidents want to strengthen NATO's eastern flank"], National Security Bureau, 22 July 2014, www.bbn.gov.pl.