

Northern Europe Security Roundtable: Assessing and Deterring the Threat

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Hosted by CSIS, IFS, & SWP

Executive Summary

On November 4, 2014, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), in partnership with the Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies (IFS) and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), and with generous financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Defense, convened a roundtable of American and European government officials and think tank experts to discuss new security challenges in Northern Europe, as well as NATO's future deterrence role in Northern Europe. The discussion included two panels featuring Nordic-Baltic perspectives regarding the region's new security environment, NATO's response mechanisms, such as NATO's Readiness Action Plan (RAP), to address new security threats, and the role of U.S. leadership within NATO and in Northern Europe. The multiple views on the subject and key points raised in the discussion are summarized below.

Understanding the Threat in Northern Europe

Describing the current security environment in Northern Europe, it was stated that Northern Europe is not just experiencing bad geopolitical weather, but is instead undergoing abrupt climate change. As one participant argued, Russia's actions in Ukraine, including the incursions by Russian special forces and the presence of sophisticated weaponry, as well as snap military excises on Ukraine's borders and Russia's information campaign, signify a dramatic demonstration of Russia's political will and military capabilities. The sudden annexation of Crimea also illustrates Russia's effective and modernized, "hybrid" approach to warfare, which poses a potential challenge to NATO's credibility and its response capabilities. In addition to these destabilizing demonstrations, it was further argued that Russia has increased its military spending, conducted cyber-attacks against NATO states, and is using soft-power methods, including energy supplies and financing, to influence and corrupt politicians and to weaken European solidarity. As a result of Russia's renewed regional assertiveness and its specific focus on the Baltic region, the Nordic-Baltic region is feeling particularly vulnerable due to both its proximity to Russia and the region's high number of ethnic Russians.

In order to fully understand the changing security situation in Northern Europe, it is important to consider the role of history, particularly the historical relations between the region and Russia. The last 15 years of Russian relations have been characterized by a policy of accommodating and 'resetting' relations with Russia, a participant argued. Some experts and officials in the Nordic-Baltic region perceive this 'reset' strategy as one of appeasement and that Europe, and the U.S. to a certain extent, are responsible for creating today's Russia.

Post-Cardiff: Moving Forward from the NATO Summit

While it is important that NATO members believe in the strength and credibility of Article 5, a U.S. participant argued, in some ways it is more important for President Putin to believe in and respect the solidarity and strength of the Alliance. Although the NATO Summit in Wales was essential for reaffirming NATO's purpose and updating its collective defense measures, it is crucial that NATO's Readiness Action Plan be implemented. The primary focus of NATO should be the timely implementation of the RAP while maintaining a unified transatlantic policy stance towards Russia. It has been very difficult for NATO to formulate an alliance-wide assessment of the regional threat which Russia poses, as well as develop a rapid response to the current situation. Now, NATO must consider what the greatest threat is to the Nordic-Baltic region and how NATO allies will respond. Would a large-scale cyber-attack, a violation of air or maritime sovereignty, a Russian-induced propaganda campaign which causes mass domestic demonstrations, or the presence of unmarked troops on national territory be the catalyst to invoke Article 5 and a full-scale NATO response?

As the situation in Ukraine continues to deteriorate, Northern Europe is increasingly looking to the United States for strong leadership. Concern over energy supplies, especially during the winter months, has also spurred many European states to press the U.S. to lift its export ban on oil and to quickly develop the infrastructure to export natural gas to Europe. The Baltic States argue that the West should maintain pressure on Russia, primarily through a strong sanctions regime.

It was also suggested that Europe and the U.S. need to strengthen their 'strategic communications' efforts to counter Russian propaganda in both Europe and the U.S. Russia has developed strong anti-West networks and rhetoric that has permeated European states and the West should respond by developing a positive narrative that promotes the successes and strengths of the West, including the EU, the OSCE, as well as the successful reform of numerous European states. In addition, the U.S. and Europe should help their own populations understand why the issues related to Ukraine and Russia matter beyond the region of Eastern Europe.

The Broader Context: Maintaining Working Relations with Russia

While Russia's current actions in Northern and Eastern Europe must be deterred, it is important to remember that in addition to the security focus on its Eastern flank, NATO's southern flank is increasingly exposed. The threats emanating from the Islamic State in the Middle East, instability in the Sahel, and Iran's nuclear program must also be addressed with the engagement of Russia. The future challenge will be to determine how the U.S. and Europe can engage the Kremlin on global issues, while also maintaining a firm position in regards to Ukraine.

It was suggested that the bilateral relationship between Norway and Russia be considered for best practices as a relationship that pursues pragmatic relations with Russia through strength and resolve. Norway and Russia share a 195 kilometer land border and a 23 kilometer maritime border and have successfully developed numerous cross-border relationships, including cooperation between border guard units, search and rescue (SAR) capabilities in the Arctic region, and people-to-people interactions through cross-border activities which continue despite events in Ukraine. While Norway wishes to maintain positive working relations with Russia, Oslo also seeks to strengthen NATO's collective defense profile and its ability to deal with the increased instability in Northern Europe, in addition to seeking enhanced cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic region.

Bilateral, Regional, and NATO Response and Reassurance: The Future of Deterrence

According to some experts, “the best reassurance comes from good deterrence.” Russia’s unconventional use of force in Crimea and Ukraine, however, has raised important questions about what modern deterrence looks like in today’s international system. Russia’s rapid and sophisticated approach in Ukraine makes it increasingly difficult for NATO and its partners to decide which hard and soft power tools will best deter further Russian aggression.

While NATO struggles to implement its new deterrence strategy (i.e. the RAP), NATO collective defense and deterrence measures have already been undertaken. There is currently more U.S. armor in Estonia, Poland, and even Germany than there has been in many years and the U.S. has pledged \$1 billion through the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) to support enhanced American military presence in the region and implement a rigorous regional exercises and training schedule. The U.S. also intends to participate in the RAP, as well as provide support to regional military forces in Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere.

Regional Reassurance Measures

Strong leadership will be crucial to reassuring European states and deterring Russian aggression. While Europe has generally looked to the U.S. for leadership in this crisis, it was also emphasized that European leaders, such as Chancellor Merkel, are taking a firm stance against Russia. Strong leadership in Europe will not only help to reassure NATO members in Northern Europe, but will also help to create a more unified position within the EU in regards to sanctions policy. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the combined strength of NATO and EU solidarity (as a deterrent to Moscow’s efforts to divide Europe and split Europe from the U.S.), and focus on providing sustained support to Ukraine. The transatlantic community must avoid using Cold War terminology and continuously refute – by word and deed – Russia’s narrative of a weak, decadent, and fragmented Europe.

Today, President Putin and a revanchist Russia are seen as the greatest threat to German security while NATO and EU solidarity are seen as the greatest reassurance mechanism. However, it was emphasized that history plays a particularly important role in Europe, and especially the narrative of deterrence in Germany. Since the end of WWII and later the reunification of Germany, there has been a significant reluctance in Germany to use military force and a predilection for political and diplomatic solutions. However, there is a growing perception in German society that political solutions do not always work and that sometimes strength is necessary to respond to aggressive actors. For instance, a poll conducted in August 2014 by the Berlin-based Infratest Dimap found that 70 percent of those polled believe that the EU is right to respond to Russia’s assertiveness and aggression with sanctions, compared to only 9 percent that supported isolation and a firm response in June.¹

In addition to the RAP, the NATO Framework Nation Concept (FNC) will likely be an important tool in terms of reassurance, in both the mid- and long-term once it is fully implemented. Germany’s, and Northern European NATO Allies’ role in the FNC, is evident by their engagement in Multi-National Corps-Northeast

¹ Harriet Torry, “Germans Back Tougher Stance Toward Russia Over Ukraine – Poll,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/germans-back-tougher-stance-toward-russia-over-ukraine-poll-1407495865>.

(MNC-NE) in Szczecin, Poland, as well as their intended role in the RAP's new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The 2014 Trident Lance exercise involved 4,000 LANCOM personnel, including personnel from MNC-NE and in 2015, Germany will take the lead in the formation of the VJTF. To enhance effectiveness, there must be a synchronization of defense planning and spending in future FNC clusters like MNC-NE, as there should be among NATO member states in general. While FNC may significantly contribute to NATO's response capabilities in Northern Europe, many experts and officials argue that FNC should also incorporate NATO's partners, such as Finland and Sweden.