

A Maritime Commander's Reflections Ahead of the NATO Warsaw Summit

Peter Hudson



Which of NATO's goals from the 2014 Wales Summit have been achieved, and what challenges remain, particularly in the maritime environment?

As we approach the Warsaw Summit, the inevitable question will be asked: did NATO's Maritime Command in Northwood achieve the objectives assigned to it at the 2014 Wales Summit? An honest answer would be 'only partially'. This is disappointing, given the modest nature of the ambitions, but against the backdrop of global demand, it is not surprising.

The lead into the Wales Summit was a frenetic period dominated by a need to re-energise and adapt the Alliance to ensure contemporary effectiveness following Russia's adventurism in Ukraine and her illegal annexation of Crimea. A plethora of directives flowed, the majority of which were folded into the Readiness Action Plan, and most notable of all was the creation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), designed to demonstrate a credible contingency force by creating High Readiness Alliance units able to deploy swiftly at a time of need. Its *raison d'être* was strategic assurance, especially to eastern Allies, by demonstrating collective deterrence to potential aggressors.

Not surprisingly, significant emphasis was placed upon the generation of dependable, pre-nominated and correctly trained high-readiness brigades with prepositioned equipment and an ability to integrate swiftly with national structures. Additional command and control nodes within Central Europe evolved and the welcome drafting of Graduated Response Plans – articulating potential options at a time of crisis, most notably for the

Baltic and Black Sea regions – were advanced. The crisis in Ukraine forced the Alliance to revalidate its Strategic Concept and rebuild structures dismantled in the preceding decades to provide genuinely responsive tools in times of crisis.

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The maritime environment had rather more modest but nonetheless essential demands placed on it so that a genuinely joint VJTF could be created. This softer emphasis was not a perceived dismissal of the extraordinary range of effects that can be leveraged from the sea, but a tacit recognition that, unlike many other elements of the NATO machinery, the essential NATO maritime architecture remained firmly in place. At the time of the Crimea crisis, SACEUR had Standing Naval Forces (SNFs) with several groups of ships and thousands of sailors within the European theatre under his formal command. NATO Maritime HQ in Northwood (MarCom) controlled those forces and was able to redeploy groups in support of strategic intent; the ability to integrate additional national forces, to train and work with partners were all

established procedures and functioned well.

Despite this, NATO maritime was far from being in a healthy state. Of the four standing groups that should have been available, one – ironically the largely Baltic-based Mine Countermeasure (MCM) Group – was deactivated for want of a command staff, while the other groups were woefully underpopulated. This was a consequence of global operational tempo, taut finances, reducing fleet sizes and growing national ambivalence to activity largely dominated by low-level operations dealing with counter-piracy and counterterrorism which, through double tasking, severely eroded contingent capacity.

The counterterrorism operation, *Active Endeavour*, was hastily formed after 9/11 as an Article V mission, but was increasingly losing regional relevance as a result of impotent rules of engagement preventing meaningful operational engagement. Over the years, sea-based training, especially demanding, complex and full-spectrum joint exercises – which involved larger national task groups and were crucial to generating genuine capacity at scale – had markedly reduced. The well-crafted Alliance Maritime Strategy sat moribund on the SHAPE bookshelf.

This indifference had to be reversed if the maritime environment was to fulfil its obligations within a re-energising NATO. As a result, the principal objectives of the Wales Summit centred on genuinely enacting the 2011 Alliance Maritime Strategy, with its focus on



US Navy helicopters and hovercraft in action during the NATO *Trident Juncture* exercise 2015, which had both a deterrent effect and helped build interoperability. *Courtesy of Steven Governo/AP/Press Association Images.*

ensuring that NATO's naval forces (whether formally assigned or held at readiness) were ready, interoperable and prepared to contribute to allied deterrence, crisis management, co-operative security and maritime security.

Alongside this, the low-intensity operations in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean were to be overhauled, and in the case of counter-piracy, forces were generated specifically for the operation rather than exploiting one of the contingency groups. Improving SNF participation was to be achieved by injecting greater flexibility in deployment planning, enhancing training opportunities and tightening connectivity with larger national maritime task groups, such as the US Navy carrier battle group and European amphibious groups, which would form the kernel of Immediate Follow-on Forces in any response option.

In sum, improved operational resilience was to be generated by dependable, more proficient on-call forces focused on deterrence, with an ability to integrate seamlessly with follow-on task groups and to rapidly transition to war-fighting operations in times of crisis.

While these were the stated goals presented at the Wales Summit, it

seems that they have only been partially achieved to date. Today the SNFs, the bedrock of the naval spearhead force in the VJTF, still remain badly under-resourced, albeit with some numbers artificially boosted by NATO migrant operations in the Aegean. This continuing shortfall tempers the Alliance's ability to deftly move forces to counter hybrid threats and assure smaller allies of NATO resolve. There is an overt tension between well-meaning political rhetoric and operational reality which has to be acknowledged. The fundamental dichotomy that pitches extensive and strategically important national tasking by individual member states against contingent and assurance work on behalf of NATO continues to exist and has deepened markedly, as recent events in the Mediterranean demonstrate.

Put simply, there is too much demand on too few ships, and there is no foreseeable change. The leaders of the Alliance have tried to reassure themselves that in times of genuine crisis the assets will be made available; after all, they say, there are more than 125 Alliance combatants at sea in and around the NATO area of responsibility at any one time: 'when the chips are down, navies will deliver'. Well, perhaps.

SHAPE recently introduced a process known as SAVANT (Ships Available At Sea for NATO Tasking), inviting nations to commit assets to the SNFs in an on-call capacity. The ambition to truly understand availability is laudable and has forged tighter communications, although it is not as valuable as a fully integrated force that know each other well, which is the goal in the other environments. Cynics might say it suffers the same weaknesses that bedevilled the old structures (such as the NRF): ill-defined standards of readiness; no collaborative involvement in the design of operational schedules; complete faith that transfer will be forthcoming; and an inability, within the context of Graduated Response Plans, to be assured of actual force availability. It hardly reflects the vision laid out in Wales, but it is still early days.

A parallel dynamic has recently developed which mitigates some of these more structural weaknesses. With the return of the Russian Navy to the sea in force, with new and more capable missile-launching submarines and frigates, the Allied navies have taken an interest. MarCom has become the co-ordinating hub of cross-Alliance naval intelligence and surveillance activity, which also sends a strategic signal that NATO Allies will not be intimidated away from international waters in the Baltic, Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

NATO's enduring strength comes from agility in crisis response and the genuine deterrent effect assigned forces create. The next stages of NATO adaptation, to be agreed in Warsaw, centre on the evolution of the new structures to enhance speed of response through the stationing of permanent NATO forces in Europe, especially in the Baltic and Central states. In other words: be strong, be ready and be seen to be ready.

There is no doubt that collectively the Alliance has an extraordinary array of capabilities which, especially in the maritime, far outmatches any potential adversary. Yet it is through the sophisticated employment of assigned forces in the formative stages of fledgling tension, before events justify the sobriquet 'crisis', that NATO commanders shape strategic outcomes.

The lack of a balanced immediate response under MarCom is still a critical weakness and it remains the case that two ships in a standing force under MarCom, with an ad hoc promise of a few more if needed, significantly restrains commanders' thinking. The maritime is the arena with the greatest opportunity and genuine flexibility in employment; today, this inherent advantage can only be weakly exploited by the SNFs.

To mitigate this necessitates taut links with follow-on forces to ensure rapid construction of a balanced, sustainable Maritime Task Force. After Wales, the structure of SNF groups was correctly adjusted to incorporate submarines, maritime patrol aircraft and a multi-role ship, such as an amphibious landing platform, able to accommodate a variety of lodger capabilities, such as special forces or disaster relief teams. These assets, along with the nominated senior commander and staff, are now held at seven days' notice or less to deploy – in principle and if resourced by nations, they provide a balanced initial force able to secure access to and shape the operational theatre.

Crucial thereafter is the link to the bigger carrier task groups, the amphibious forces and wider capabilities drawn from specialist assets, including afloat logistics and maritime intelligence and surveillance units, which would flow into a region if the lead elements of the VJFT fail to dampen tension. Fundamental to all is the joint perspective – delivering decisive land effect from the sea, correctly aligned with other component commanders working to a joint plan.

Two observations are worthwhile here. First, and somewhat paradoxically given the fragility of the SNF groups, NATO decided to lengthen the notice to move for many of the major follow-on forces: for example, a carrier group which in the past had been held at ten days' notice for NATO operations was relaxed to 45 days. The logic of this decision remains somewhat opaque and appears to be founded on the simplistic desire to retain coherence between land and maritime formations, as well as the reticence of some nations to formally pre-assign units to NATO, even if only for large-scale operations, for fear of

unwelcome interference from Brussels. However, this sends a contrary signal and plays to the ongoing ad hoc nature of the readiness force, and thus should be revisited.

Second, if this is to be effective, the overall complexity and scale of training should be significantly improved in both the maritime and joint environments. The Wales Summit endorsed the reconstitution of major exercise events on a triennial basis, starting with *Trident Juncture 15* (TJ15) held late last year. This was a welcome step in rebuilding atrophied skills and was well received both for its deterrent effect and the restored focus on building interoperability and tactical integration. Its procedural nature was understandable, but future events should stretch commanders and their teams through meaningful joint interaction in both the planning and downstream execution. The inevitable sea-based stovepiping with limited joint interaction seen in TJ15 will need to be addressed in future events.

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Those nations with larger assets must, on occasion, show more willingness to assign them to the exercise programme to ensure ambitions for high-end warfare are delivered; it is well over a decade since a US CVN participated in a major NATO-led exercise. NATO has had a reputation for challenging doctrine and procedures, for experimentation and tactical development; this has to be rekindled.

There is no doubt that command of NATO's maritime operations is much improved. The decision taken in Lisbon 2010 to create a single Maritime Command proved wise. MarCom has growing influence and is an effective environmental advocate to SACEUR, commanding operations with quiet assurance and forging tight links with the five HRF(M) commanders and the wider NATO Maritime Enterprise. Its relationship with the three-star US-

led Striking Force (NATO) is mature and mutually supporting. If MarCom is to complete its evolution from an authoritative Component Commander to a Joint Commander, it will require modest additional expertise in areas such as logistics, targeting, strike and littoral manoeuvre; assumptions made on access to additional manpower from willing troop-contributing nations have proved to be groundless. This recalibration of Allied Command Operations manpower, however unappealing to NATO HQ, is a feature across all the operational commands.

Formal NATO operations in the Indian Ocean are likely to conclude in the near future and the emergence of Daesh in Libya has given Operation *Active Endeavour* a new relevance, sparking a political determination to complete its transformation in order to address all contemporary maritime security threats, delivering a more meaningful NATO contribution in this complex region, particularly as relationships with the EU strengthen.

As the Warsaw Summit approaches, it is clear progress has been made. Nevertheless, the maritime sphere should renew its focus to make good those promises made in Wales; if it succeeds, it will easily adapt to evolving demands that flow from this and subsequent summits. Further expansion of troop deployments in and around the Baltic and Black seas will require closer joint links. The maritime community will need to reconcile operating in complex areas dominated by bastions such as Kaliningrad and Crimea (presence is, after all, an essential component of assurance) with operational dexterity, which flows from demanding joint training and tactical innovation.

The competing pressures of global operational activity and the desire to honour the ambition for rapid response will continue to test and complicate decision-making; it is not an easy equation to reconcile. Maritime NATO has shaken off the strategic torpor of the last ten years but, as always, there is still much to be done.

Vice Admiral Peter Hudson CB CBE
Commander of NATO Maritime Command at Northwood from February 2013 until October 2015.