The Paradox at the Heart of NATO’s Return to Article 5

John R Deni

To respond effectively to the threats NATO faces in its eighth decade, and to safeguard the promise of collective defence enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, the Alliance must refocus time and resources on fighting its adversaries in the grey zone.

Since 2014, NATO has refocused on Article 5 and territorial defence as an appropriate and necessary response to Russia’s invasion and ongoing occupation of Ukraine. Prior to 2014, the Alliance had spent nearly a quarter century shifting its capabilities, manpower, force structure, doctrine, strategy and equipment toward expeditionary warfare. Conventional, heavy manoeuvre warfare and territorial defence were set aside while most Alliance members built expeditionary capabilities and lighter formations, all the better to conduct operations far from the heart of Europe.

On top of this shift in strategic focus, there were also purely budget-driven cuts to Allied military forces. During the late 2000s and early 2010s, many European member states cut military force structure and manpower as part of fiscal austerity measures following the sovereign debt crisis. As a result of these two phenomena – the embrace of expeditionary warfare, and austerity-driven defence cuts – many of NATO’s leading members have gradually lost the ability to conduct large-scale, or even medium-scale, combined arms manoeuvre against a state adversary.

Russia’s actions in Ukraine changed all of that, reversing what had been long-term trends in Alliance strategy and plans. Additionally, Moscow’s aggression – as well as concerns over the rising threat of returning foreign fighters – led to reversals in Alliance resourcing. In 2015, defence budgets in Europe began rising, and by 2017, nearly all European NATO member states were spending more on defence than before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The increase in defence spending is already having a serious impact on NATO capabilities and capacity. So far, much of the increased spending has been devoted to acquiring more advanced military technology, replacing worn-out equipment, and building additional capacity. Continued reliance on Soviet-era equipment among many newer Allies and underinvestment in modern equipment during the long war in Afghanistan across most of the others have meant that modernisation and recapitalisation were long overdue. At the same time, some European Allies also began spending more on military manpower. They did this to fill out the ranks of units that were only whole on paper, to build entirely new units in an effort to increase capacity, or both.

NATO remains in a defensive crouch when it comes to grey-zone challenges – Alliance rhetoric, exercises and actions emphasise response and reaction

Initially, spending on personnel and procurement crowded out readiness and training, despite the rhetoric of the Wales Summit in 2014, the Warsaw Summit in 2016 and the Brussels Defence Ministerial in 2018. However, since these events, readiness spending has gradually increased through efforts such as the Readiness Action Plan, the Enhanced Forward Presence initiative and the Four Thirties initiative. In addition to these multilateral efforts, the US has finally decided to truly reinvigorate its own readiness program with a REFORGER-like training event next year. The exercise entitled Defender 2020 will involve the deployment of roughly a divisions’ worth of troops from the US to Europe, and it will mark the first time in a quarter century that such a large force has crossed the Atlantic for a single exercise.

At the core of this deployment are two heavy US brigades – one will fall in on prepositioned stocks, and one will bring its equipment over on ships. Sixteen Allied countries will participate, along with elements of NATO’s command and force structure. Additional US Army units and forces from the other US military services will also join in. The exercise will include reception, staging and onward movement through ports across northwestern Europe; a division command post exercise; a division live fire exercise; and a joint forced entry exercise. The bulk of Defender 2020 action will occur between late April and late May 2020, and it will unfold across the Benelux countries, Germany, Poland and the Baltic states.

This collective defence training event holds a variety of significant implications. First, there clearly will be major operational and tactical readiness and interoperability benefits for the thousands of US and Allied troops involved. During the Cold War, it was common for a US soldier to spend at least one multi-year assignment in...
NATO military forces during NATO exercise Trident Juncture 15 at the San Gregorio training area, Spain, 2 November 2015. Courtesy of Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum/Wikimedia/CC BY-SA 2.0
Europe – today, the massive drawdown of US forces in Europe since 1989 have made such tours a rarity, and so US forces have far less familiarity operating in, with and through European Allies. Second, Defender 2020 will test the ability of US and Allied military to exercise movement through Europe. Over the last quarter century, much of Europe’s transportation infrastructure has been privatised – this may make it more difficult for military forces to get timely access in a crisis. Moreover, there are serious concerns about whether the transportation infrastructure east of the former border between East and West Germany can handle the sheer weight and size of US armoured forces. Bridge weight capacities and overpass height restrictions are just two of the critical factors under examination in this exercise. Finally, and most importantly, Defender 2020 holds major implications for the strategic messages it sends to friends and foes alike. For US Allies, it should help reassure them that the US can indeed throw a sizable force package across the Atlantic into a contested environment in short order. It should help to undermine the notion that there exists an impenetrable anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) bubble in northeastern Europe, preventing reinforcement of Poland or the Baltic states. For Moscow, Defender 2020 should convey that NATO’s commitment to readiness is far more than mere rhetoric, and it should help to deter any plans for a snatch-and-grab, fait accompli invasion of Baltic-state territory.

In 2015, defence budgets in Europe began rising, and by 2017, nearly all European NATO member states were spending more on defence than before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine

Despite the necessity of exercises like Defender 2020, new purchases of advanced military equipment and the expansion of military manpower (all underway since 2014), these steps together constitute a growing paradox that the Alliance has been slow to recognise and respond to. That is, just as the Alliance is becoming more focused on and more capable of responding to an Article 5 threshold-crossing event, the probability of a conventional manoeuvre warfare scenario is decreasing. Put another way, major improvements in the Alliance’s ability to defend the territory of its member states are necessary, but it is becoming ever more obvious that these steps will not be sufficient for collective defence in NATO’s next decade.

Many European security analysts believe an Article 5 threshold-crossing event is unlikely in the coming years. Russia is a declining state along several measures, especially in economic terms, and over time the acute threat that it represents today should diminish. Certainly, it has made advances recently in limited military capability areas, such as indirect fires and precision munitions. Yet, the Russian playbook evidently continues to eschew frontal attacks on states that are members of a military alliance, at least in the air, sea, land and space domains.

A frontal attack in one of these domains or some other egregious assault compelling NATO to invoke Article 5 would not play to Russia’s strengths – instead, it would actually expose its many weaknesses, ultimately resulting in certain defeat. Moscow’s military and governing elites know this. For this reason, the Kremlin has consistently chosen to emphasise and leverage its comparative advantages to make effective use of its clearly limited resources. The military policy tools that facilitate this do not resemble armoured columns crossing national frontiers. Rather, they include fomenting civil unrest with the goal of creating a justification for Russian military or paramilitary action in unaligned, neighbouring or near-neighbouring states, as seen in Moldova (1992), Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). They also include cyber attacks, such as that unleashed on Estonia in 2007. They include influence peddling and the cultivation of patronage networks. And they include semi-deniable election interference, as occurred in the US in 2016 and 2018 and in Europe in recent years as well. All of these policy tools represent asymmetric responses to US and Western power, especially military capacity and capabilities. They enable Moscow to cost-effectively pursue the disintegration of Western power and the Western alliance, as a way of achieving Russia’s strategic and material ends. Given the current state of the Russian economy and the rather grim outlook for the years to come, Moscow is very likely to continue pursuing these sorts of policies in the coming decade, because it lacks other options.

Over the last quarter century, much of Europe’s transportation infrastructure has been privatised – this may make it more difficult for military forces to get timely access in a crisis

The fundamental challenge facing NATO between now and the Alliance’s 80th anniversary is figuring out how, where and when it will counter and compete iteratively with Russia – but also China – in the grey zone, the space between war and peace, or between offense and defence. Because grey-zone challenges do not neatly correspond to classical notions of those which fall in the military’s domain and those which do not, they are particularly vexing. This is why adversaries such as Russia and China employ grey-zone tactics and operations – they allow Moscow and Beijing to confront the West on more favourable terrain.

The good news is that NATO’s leaders appear to understand the character of the competition, and have taken several steps to address the challenge. The Alliance has reportedly developed a strategy outlining NATO’s role in responding to grey-zone or hybrid threats. In some cases, grey-zone scenarios are finding their way into NATO and member states’ exercises. And critical infrastructure protection, energy security and societal resilience...
have become important topics of discussion at Alliance-sponsored events and seminars, and among Alliance-affiliated entities such as centres of excellence.

However, in several important aspects, the Alliance response remains handicapped. Although NATO declared in 2016 and again in 2018 that it could consider a hybrid attack as grounds to invoke Article 5, the bar seems high – perhaps impossibly so. Achieving consensus – and quickly – in the face of an ambiguous attack or in response to ostensibly unrelated low-level provocations will not be an easy task. Perhaps more importantly, NATO remains in a defensive crouch when it comes to grey-zone challenges – Alliance rhetoric, exercises and actions emphasise response and reaction. It is precisely for this reason that grey-zone challenges against NATO are likely to be effective – actors such as Russia and China are evidently undeterred by the Alliance’s defensive posture, and attacks on Western institutions continue to this day. To be clear, defence is important, but in the current international security environment, offense and the competitive actions in between the two are equally important.

Given the arguably inadequate Alliance response to date, some guideposts may be helpful to illuminate the path ahead as NATO attempts to ensure collective defence remains robust into its eighth decade. First, Article 5 is an imperfect tool for determining when and where the West must spend blood and treasure in defence of its interests and way of life. Despite Alliance rhetoric regarding hybrid warfare as a potential Article 5 trigger, the threshold for Alliance-wide action is too high, and adversaries like Russia and China know it – this is why they pursue grey-zone tactics in the first place. To facilitate the speedy response that will be necessary to meet the needs of Allied defence against grey-zone challenges, greater, routine use can be made of Article 4 and Alliance-wide consultations and coordination on issues and topics that go beyond conventional military operations that are NATO's bread and butter. For instance, the Alliance can and should conduct more vigorous, regular consultations and intensified coordination on topics such as keeping Chinese investment out of sensitive information-technology and logistics sectors, limiting and rolling back Russian broadcast and print media penetration of Western markets, undermining the Kremlin’s and Putin’s trustworthiness within Russia, and exposing Russian and Chinese official corruption at home and abroad, all as mechanisms to compete and thereby strengthen collective defence.

Second, efforts at resetting the relationship with Russia are bound to fail, most likely at Russia’s hands. Russian political leaders — whether they are czars, politburo chairmen or ‘elected’ presidents — are strongly incentivised by domestic politics to demonise the West and therefore to pursue adversarial, zero-sum policies. Although there are many variables that contribute to a country’s foreign policy formulation, geopolitical factors play a significant role in Russia. More specifically, Russia’s porous and largely indefensible borders have, over centuries, contributed to a strong perception of insecurity — an insecurity that some Russian political leaders have become skillful in exploiting for political and personal gain.

The early-to-mid 1990s, when Russia appeared to be a partner, was an anomalous period in relations between Russia and the West, and it ended quickly when Boris Yeltsin was pressured on his political right flank to abandon close coordination with the West. Today, the problem is not Putin, or even Russia’s authoritarian form of government. Rather, the problem is Russian geography and history, which fundamentally shape its domestic political culture and the incentive structure confronting politicians there.

Third, embracing a robust, diversified Alliance nuclear deterrent — including a counter for Russian intermediate-range nuclear forces now deployed in Europe — for the purposes of collective defence is one means of enabling member states’ militaries to expend more effort and more resources in deterring, countering and rolling back Russian and Chinese moves in the grey zone. Resources are obviously limited, and so difficult budgetary choices must be made as Alliance members assess how many eggs to place in a single basket, such as conventional manoeuvre warfare on land, at sea and in the air. Put another way, excessive focus on worst-case scenario conventional manoeuvre warfare leaves the Alliance ill-prepared for more likely and arguably more insidious grey-zone tactics. Effective and efficient collective defence demands greater emphasis on the most likely threats.

Fully embracing a diversified nuclear deterrent, getting beyond efforts to reset relations with Russia, and broadening NATO’s scope of consultation and coordination are and will remain controversial within the halls of the Alliance’s headquarters. However, such steps are necessary if the Alliance hopes to truly provide for its members’ collective defence through the next decade.

John R Deni
John is a Research Professor of Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational Security Studies at the US Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute. He is the author of the book NATO and Article 5 (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) and a forthcoming book on strategic transformation within Europe and implications for US security.

The views expressed in this article are the author’s, and do not represent those of RUSI or any other institution.

This article is part of a special series of pieces published in recognition of the NATO Engages Conference, co-hosted by the Atlantic Council, GLOBSEC, King’s College London, the Munich Security Conference and RUSI. NATO Engages will take place in London on 3 December 2019, the day before the Annual NATO Summit.