

More teeth for the NATO-Tiger

How the Framework Nation Concept can reduce NATO's growing formation – capability gap

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Fancy formations

NATO's spearhead force, the VJTF,¹ is the most recent example of NATO seeking to respond with new high-end formations to the security challenges that it faces in the East since the crisis in and around Ukraine, and in the South with its ongoing instability. But what if it was just an empty shell? What if the Allies were only creating new formations, without creating the new capabilities they would need to effectively fill these formations? The VJTF is deployable within days, ready to fight its way into a theatre – in theory. In practice, it was realized by re-labelling troops, rather than by setting up capabilities. In fact, soldiers, tanks and rifles to fill them were not newly set up, but taken from other formations.

Indeed, one of NATO's often-overlooked core problems is that the Alliance is facing a growing formation – capability gap. Too much attention is paid to the formations, such as the NRF or VJTF, while the harder work on increasing capabilities to fill these formations is neglected, deliberately or not.

Fancy formations have for decades been political and military boosters for the Alliance. The famous AMF (Air Mobile Force) and the much younger NRF are noticeable examples. The intentions behind these initiatives have been twofold: First, as political boosters they should make governments increase their contributions. Ministers prefer to sign something new rather than supporting the predecessor's legacy. But this is just to hide the second, decade-old objective: making European governments contribute substantial capabilities to NATO's joint effort.

If NATO is to live up to its task, that is, guarantee the defence of its allies, it has to provide credible capabilities. Otherwise,

the fancy new formations are simply Potemkin villages. This requires homework at the political, military and financial levels. Given the dire state of allies' individual defence capabilities and the not so positive prospects, it would make sense for Europeans to coordinate with each other and plan who specializes in what equipment, so that not all countries would need to provide everything, but all necessary capabilities would be available if needed. All Europeans recognize – at least rhetorically - the necessity of coordination in time of tight budgets – known as “Pooling and Sharing” in the context of the EU, and “Smart Defence” in the context of NATO – but this recognition has not yet been translated into practice.

NATO's growing formation – capability gap

Currently, NATO's new formations only create capabilities by reorganising existing capabilities, not by generating new ones. Hence, fancy formations do only half of the trick towards military power. They are the bones or skeletons, but for military power, also muscles, i.e. capabilities, are needed.

NATO's capabilities all come from the same limited pool. Only what nations – and to a marginal extent NATO itself – have, can be used. And this pool is shrinking constantly. This dwindling had a first high time right after the Cold War (“peace dividend”). The second came with the fiscal crisis in 2008. European NATO states lost about 25% of their capabilities over the last decade. What is left is often not usable, due to a lack of maintenance, and because equipment, such as tanks, is simply too old.

The process of losing European capabilities is far from over since the long-term political and military repercussions from decisions of the last years are still to come. Most European armed forces will continue to shrink as the financial crisis continues having a devastating and long-term impact on public

¹ Very High Readiness Joint Task Force.

² NATO Response Force.

budgets. As a result, the difference between smaller armies, such as Estonia with its 6000 personnel and larger ones, such as the 175.000 Germans, increases even more. Today, there is a significant military imbalance in Europe: only 8 states contribute 80% of all European forces. Vice versa, 80% of the states only contribute about one third of the forces: two third of EU and NATO countries have forces with less than 40.000 soldiers, half of the countries offer forces smaller than 30.000 soldiers, and one third is even below 20.000 soldiers.

What is hidden behind these figures is that due to budget constraints, smaller armed forces are forced to specialize in a few areas in which they can still afford to make internationally relevant contributions, such as NBC-defence, but without coordinating these specializations among them. Large states, on the other hand, have reduced their militaries to bonsai armies: while a full range of capabilities is still present, the quantities are far too small to continue operating unilaterally for a longer period of time. In addition, a modernization gap appears: Cost pressure prevents the acquisition of new assets like tanker and transport aircrafts, which make armies fast, agile, battle-ready, and sustainable.

The issue with reducing defence capabilities is not only that an army has less material and troops available. The alarming development is rather that the capability architecture is increasingly affected. This structure - consisting of know-how, command and control capacities, and equipment and infrastructure for operations - has for quite some time now been only available if important states jointly provided it. And, step by step, the ability to carry out military operations at all, is shrinking as capabilities in the areas of communications, logistics, and reconnaissance are increasingly absent, as are the so-called “niche” capabilities like air defence. In this way, gaps in capability and modernisation are also eroding solidarity.

This is mainly a European problem; the US though also faced with cuts, still play in a higher league of military power. Moreover, as the US defence budget is shrinking, the availability of US assets cannot be taken for granted to further fill European gaps.

Thus, NATO is deluding itself. It is not as capable as it pretends with the new formations because there is a high risk that they are just empty shells or exist at the expense of other formations but eventually add little to the toolbox. It is in the best-case window dressing, in the worst case careless and risky: Allied governments and publics might believe that there is defence capacity to act, but eventually, there is far too little of it.

Sustaining capabilities: how the FNC is squaring the capability – formation cycle

Aware of this dynamic, Germany in 2014 proposed the Framework Nations Concept (FNC). Since then, the FNC has turned into a fashionable concept to revitalise European defence cooperation. It aims to preserve European capabilities through sustained cooperation, thereby guaranteeing the continued capacity to act for European militaries. The development of multinational units would, in theory, increase sustainability and help preserve military key capa-

bilities. Smaller armies could plug their remaining capabilities into an organizational backbone provided by a larger “framework” nation. Politically, the concept represents a step towards transatlantic burden sharing.

FNC 1.0: niche capabilities

The FNC’s initial idea focused especially on niche capabilities. Accordingly, European states should form clusters, that is – groups of smaller and larger states that will henceforth coordinate more closely who will provide which assets and troops on a long-term basis. The “Framework Nation” takes the lead of such a cluster. It will provide the group with the military backbone, i.e. logistics, command and control, etc. Into this frame, smaller nations would plug their specialized capabilities, such as air defence or engineer units. Thus, the entire cluster would become more effective and sustainable, that is, capable of carrying out longer and more complex operations. Further, not every nation would have to provide - and pay for – everything; thus, more money would be available to procure what the group needs. The various individual clusters together could then provide a more coherent capability package.

Since 2015, the FNC-nations³ have begun setting up clusters for several capabilities, such as air defence or maritime patrol aircraft. Yet, results in terms of usable multinational capabilities are still to come. An initial operating capability is expected for most projects around 2017. This also points to the long timelines of such projects – they do not offer a quick fix.

FNC 2.0: towards larger formations

The changing security landscape is also affecting the FNC. The Russian invasion of Crimea has brought back deterrence and defence as core tasks for NATO. In practice, this means that NATO needs both larger command structures and the capabilities that larger formations like Divisions offer – about 10.000 soldiers. However, 20 years of crisis management have pushed Allied command and force structures into the opposite direction: The current standard formation is the much smaller brigade, about 3500-5000 soldiers.

Allies cannot switch back from crisis management to defence over night. Yet, they desperately need a driver to transform their forces. Therefore, the idea is to use the cluster approach of the FNC also as an approach to larger structures: Groups of states should not only deliver individual and smaller multinational capability packages; they should now strive to form a whole formation of the size of a division on a multinational basis.

With the reconsideration of such defence forces, planners also have to think beyond rapid response forces like the VJTF. While these are deterrence tools, real defence forces are needed on top of it. Here, the division is turning into the new brigade: the brigade has evolved over the last 25 years as the core formation for defence. Its size and capability set best meets the demands of expeditionary operations. It is

³ Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia.

the smallest unit capable of combined armed operations, i.e. able to integrate different types of units. However, especially for scenarios that involve large conventional confrontation, Brigades are not sufficient. This type of “Major Joint Operations” (MJO) will demand corps size forces, including naval and air assets in significant numbers. Hence, larger follow on forces like Divisions and Corps have to be reorganized and equipped.

The division is envisaged to become NATO’s new working horse. But these divisions can hardly be found among FNC national armed forces: only Germany and Poland offer relevant HQ structures and have organized forces in the way of a division. While NATO can offer a fair number of Corps level HQs, supplying divisions is up to the allies.

Hence, Divisions have to be generated multinationally. The starting point will be existing military structures: Germany considers offering two of its divisions as a framework to start the building of multinational formations and there is hope that Poland offers its divisional structures as well to establish a multinational formation. These backbones shall then be filled with contributions by other FNC-nations.

Remaining Challenges: political sustainability and military capabilities

This all sounds like a logical and technocratic task. However, it is highly political. The main challenge is the gap between ambition and capability. While many nations have begun to accept a German lead on the FNC, they seek visibility within the formation as a “junior partner”. Moreover, national sensitivities vis-à-vis individual partners are a risk to cooperation – this has been the case for the Visegrád countries. The same is true for government changes. Eventually, those nations that are not in favour of such multinational endeavours might see the shift from small multinational niches to larger multinational formations with caution: It renders their dependence and their loss of sovereignty visible.

As promising as it is, the FNC alone cannot solve the problem. Allied armed forces have to be ready, as a whole, to conduct 360 degrees of the mission spectrum. As a rule of thumb, 80% of capabilities needed for allied defence are the same or similar to what is needed for expeditionary operations. And even allied defence would start for most allies with an expeditionary operation into the theatre of operation. However, the biggest gaps are within this 80% spectrum of what is essential for every operation: Command & control, intelligence, surveillance reconnaissance, and lift.

The other 20% are mission specific like military police and riot control but also classical frontline capabilities. Yet, even for the 20% specific capabilities the money is lacking: Germany for example significantly reduced heavy armour platforms due to its conceptual shift towards stabilization operations.

This is aggravated by the fact that ever more capabilities reach a limit, in terms of numbers, below which they will

have no military impact whatsoever. One even has to assume that the benchmark for militarily relevant sizes of a capability has increased due to the shift from brigade to division levels - and then also sustainability and redundancy count.

The agenda after the Warsaw Summit

Fancy formations have always been NATO’s political and military boosters. However, they do only half the trick towards military power. Thus, after the political boost of the Warsaw summit, NATO allies and especially the FNC partners have to go back to their homework: Adapting capabilities to the new realities.

Towards an FNC 3.0

This is especially true for the implementation of the FNC. Germany cannot do it alone: Not only does the FNC need partners. A look into the raw size and setup of the FNC countries reveals the limits of possible sets of larger formations. Thus, the FNC may have to reach beyond the current partners in NATO, especially when it comes to command structures, i.e. Britain and France. For geostrategic reasons, participation could also be offered to Finland and Sweden.

Honour smart input – Punish useless output

Doing more means spending more. Public money will remain a scarce resource in most allied countries. Against the current mainstream impression, there is no clear sign of a substantial change in spending trends. Particularly, governments should stop their traditional habit of poor spending, which was aggravated by the habit to spend without consulting other allies: Spending more thus implies spending smarter, i.e. on the right things, and in a coordinated manner.

While allies have agreed on capability priorities, these have not prevented existing gaps and redundancies – because many governments have ignored these priorities. Therefore, a top ten list of contributors to capabilities may help to give political incentives for better organised output: Such a list would indicate which ten allies offer highest contributions to one or the other capability. This could help allies to identify areas where they can be among the top ten contributors and thus matter to NATO and allies politically and militarily. It also helps to find areas where their capabilities do not matter at all.

Defence planning: Finding a new balance

A new balance is necessary between two axes: The capability vs. threat based planning; and the planning for the last or the next war. After the end of the Cold War, NATO allies have shifted from threat based and formation based planning towards capability based planning. This has been the answer to the change from a clearly identifiable threat into a more diffuse environment, where risks and threats are the drivers and nations had to prepare against the whole bandwidth of scenarios. Therefore, the answer was to not have the best capabilities for all threats but a bandwidth of capabilities that allows sufficient answers across the whole spectrum. Also, less attention was given to heavy capabilities or categories like sustainability and survivability.

Now it seems that the pendulum is swinging back towards a more threat based and formation based defence planning. Yet, there is a risk of overemphasizing one risk and underestimating other parallel developments and the time it needs to adapt current forces to new formations. During this transformation time, also the Russian threat will have transformed into something different and maybe new threats emerge that demand other capabilities. Hence, the challenge for NATO nations and their defence planning process (NDPP) is to arrive at a good mix of capability based and formation based approaches. While the current emphasis on structures is important to reach a new equilibrium, armed forces should not prepare for the last war. The 80% of capabilities that can be used in both scenarios – allied defence and crisis management - need to be spearheaded by mission specific packages for crisis management or defence.

Develop the FNC's industrial dimension

To keep military capabilities available and ready, defence needs an industrial base. Ensuring capabilities among partners thus also has industrial implications. The FNC can be extended into the defence industrial domain. Lead nations could have a responsibility to offer partners access to and support from the defence industrial base. The FNC thus should be extended to defence industrial and procurement cooperation. This would also answer the question of how to keep an efficient defence industry and which areas are of interest to the governments. In the case of Germany, FNC partners are asking precisely this question.

Create a common baseline: a defence sector review

Sustaining or even growing capabilities via cooperation would imply taking defence planning to a multinational level, especially for FNC nations. Partners would have to plan in a more detailed, reliable, and coordinated way. However, neither the militaries nor political leaders want

to publicly acknowledge the scale of mutual dependence among partners.

A more successful, more integrated defence planning starts with European allies knowing the realities of their own defence sector. Such a baseline for realistic defence strategies can result from a European Defence Review 2030. This would offer governments a candid assessment of what is available today and in 15 years' time, both in terms of capabilities and industrial base. It would provide a more systematic base for the future work on European defence and could spur a debate about developments from a truly allied perspective. The description of gaps and duplications would enable the development of well-grounded suggestions to identify future areas of cooperation. As the growing interdependencies among allies' security and defence policies will also become visible, questions about efficient and legitimate ways to organize these political interdependencies can be discussed. Public debate can pave the way for a strong mandate for more defence cooperation and joint planning. An independent commission should conduct such a review, in order to keep the process political but limit the influence of daily domestic politics.

All this is not only a technical but also a political challenge: Not ministries of defence but governments as a whole have to recognise that defence matters. They cannot live up to the new challenges and the promises made in Wales, and probably in Warsaw, without giving defence a new and higher-recognition. And spending more requires public support. Governments and their militaries also have to overcome the prevailing nationalism in this field: Gaining the capability to act and thus credibility as a defence actor will not come as a result of doing things at home and alone. Indeed, there is a long and difficult way ahead, in which the Warsaw summit is just a brief pause.

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