In the last decade, NATO has made improving readiness a priority. The strategic shock of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and covert intervention in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 was a watershed for these efforts. At its 2014 summit in Wales, the Alliance adopted the Readiness Action Plan (RAP). Two years later, the Warsaw Summit developed the RAP measures further, changing NATO’s message from assurance of allies to deterrence of Russia. Readiness was a key issue also at the 2018 summit in Brussels. Somewhat overshadowed by U.S. President Donald Trump’s demand for greater European burden sharing, his administration launched the "Four Thirties Plan". It sets the aim that allies should be able to deploy 30 battalions, 30 major naval combat vessels and 30 air squadrons within 30 days (or less) by 2020. At the summit, allies endorsed the plan as the NATO Readiness Initiative. Meanwhile, allies took steps to strengthen the command structure and to deepen cooperation with EU notably on measures to improve military mobility.

In between these summits, allies have stepped up their exercise activity. Testing

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**Takeaways**

- NATO readiness has been improved since 2014.
- Three fundamental questions need further discussion: What should NATO be ready for? Do allies stand ready together? What is ready enough?
- A strategic debate on NATO’s purpose and nature in a changing and complex security environment is a key contribution to readiness.

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NATO’s readiness was one of the main goals of the high visibility exercise **Trident Juncture** that took place in Norway in the autumn of 2018. With about 50,000 troops, 10,000 vehicles, 70 vessels and 250 planes, Trident Juncture was one of the biggest NATO exercises since the end of the Cold War. It allowed the Alliance and individual member states to test their ability to move troops and equipment relatively quickly across the continent and to Europe’s northernmost flank. The participation of a U.S. carrier group underlined the role the United States plays for the defence of European allies. For Norway, the exercise provided an opportunity to test its concepts of host nation support and total defence, i.e. civil-military cooperation in case of a national crisis.

With every review of member state capabilities and every exercise evaluation, NATO’s and allies’ to-do list seemingly grows longer. Beyond the long and concrete list of gaps to fill and steps to take, however, lies a set of fundamental questions that NATO’s 29 allies have to consider. In this IFS Insights we address three such questions:

- **Ready for what?** Given their diverging threat perceptions and priorities, allies have agreed to a 360-degree perspective - an “all-inclusive” mission portfolio – for NATO. The approach is rational, but gives the Alliance a dilemma: What should be its priorities in the defence planning process? The forces needed to meet the various threats the allies identify, are not necessarily the same. Is flexibility still the answer, or is a division of labour better?

- **Ready together?** An easy, partial answer to the “for what” question is to spend more and thus cover more tasks. But are allies willing to invest in forces and capabilities for both collective defence and crisis management operations? Does the commitment to readiness rely on allies increasing their defence spending to the level of 2% of GDP? Do European efforts on defence strengthen burden sharing or does the discussion on strategic autonomy lead to duplication of efforts, decoupling from the United States and thus to a weakening of alliance cohesion?

- **Ready enough?** Is NATO ready to respond if a crisis breaks out tomorrow? Does NATO have sufficient forces available? Are efficient decision-making processes and command and control structures in place, and have response plans been sufficiently updated? Is the alliance able to move forces rapidly across borders and over large distances – by land, air and sea?

Many of these questions are difficult (if not impossible) to answer, yet important to address. In order to generate support for increased defence spending and the further development of NATO and allies’ capabilities, the common NATO interests and priorities have to be well thought-through and communicated. In conclusion, therefore, we argue that a strategic debate on NATO’s purpose and nature in a changing and complex security environment is equally indispensable for its readiness.

**READY FOR WHAT?**

The shock of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine refocused NATO’s attention on its traditional core mission of collective defence and deterrence. Allies in the East generally point eastwards towards Russia as the main, potential threat to NATO. Some allies, notably Norway, point North and West arguing that the Russian presence in the North Atlantic and the European Arctic needs attention, too. Allies in the South, however, tend to point across the Mediterranean to security challenges emanating from instability and conflict in North Africa or the Middle East. The spring of 2014 saw not only the crisis in the Ukraine, but also a major crisis in the Middle East with the rapid rise of ISIS/DAESH in Iraq and Syria. In the international media, the coverage of the **first meeting of the heads of state and government of the Counter-ISIS coalition** held in the margins of the Wales Summit, at times eclipsed the coverage of the latter.

Given the multiple security challenges and divergent threat perceptions within
the Alliance, member states have agreed to “a 360 degree approach to deter threats and, if necessary, defend Allies against any adversary.” This is a sensible and necessary compromise for a diverse alliance; a compromise that in many ways was struck already in the 2010 Strategic Concept. Northern European allies contribute to crisis management operations and border security in the South, while southern allies participate in air policing in the Baltics and exercises in the North, demonstrating Alliance solidarity.

The challenge with the 360-approach for NATO and individual allies is prioritisation. The capabilities and forces necessary to meet a military challenge from a peer competitor like Russia are not necessarily the same as those necessary for crisis management, stabilisation and counter insurgency operations. The mantra of the ISAF period that allies must build flexible forces for use in both high- and low-intensity scenarios, is partly hollow. The requirements of the two tasks is far from fully overlapping. One example is anti-submarine warfare – a skill and capability that many allies did not see as important during the two decades of crisis management operations. Today it is back on NATO’s agenda as an area of long-term neglect.

The trend towards defence capacity building (DCB) instead of large-scale crisis management operations provides a certain reprieve from facing this question. Training and advising does not require the same resources in terms of number of personnel and equipment as a full-scale stabilisation operation like in Afghanistan. In the Middle East, allies have limited NATO’s role to defence capacity building, leaving it up to allies to join the anti-IS coalition on an individual basis.

It seems unlikely, however, that NATO is out of crisis management operations for good. A perhaps improbable, but not impossible scenario is one where a new civil war in the Balkans again draws NATO into an extensive and extended stabilisation operation. Similar scenarios may be conceived of in the Middle East and North Africa.

A question for NATO and the allies is therefore: What should be the Alliance’s priorities in the defence planning process? What should it be ready for? This question is highly pertinent, as NATO this autumn is starting its work on Political Guidance 2019 (PG 19). PG 19 is the political guidance document for the next cycle of the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). It provides, in other words, the political basis for the choices that allies will have to make in choosing and prioritising capability targets. Should the Alliance stick to the mantra of flexible forces or are we heading towards more specialisation, regionalisation, and a division of labour? While a division of labour, particularly a regionally based one, may be less than ideal from the point of view of alliance solidarity, it might become unavoidable given budget constraints. This brings us to the second issue.

READY TOGETHER?
The easy answer to the questions raised above is that allies should spend more on defence. They could then more easily accommodate the diverging needs NATO and allies are facing. The United States is to a large degree able to do this, and claims its European allies are not contributing enough.

Numbers support this claim: The United States accounts for about 70% of NATO’s defence spending. Some argue that this comparison is somewhat unfair given the differing needs and ambitions of most European allies and the United States, and that the U.S. spends only about five percent of its defence budget on European security. Regardless, acknowledging the imbalance in defence spending and accepting the necessity to change it in light of a more threatening security environment, allies in Wales adopted the Defence Investment Pledge (DIP). Since then, most of them have indeed halted the decline in defence spending. This does not mean, however, that they are fully committed to reaching the 2% of GDP goal now touted as an absolute goal by the Trump
administration. Several allies, among them Germany, stress that moving towards 2% is a considerable and sufficient effort and what allies actually agreed to in 2014. Germany has put 1.5% as its next target. This may be realistic given the many conflicting political pressures and will be a big step forward. Yet it will hardly bring about the sea change in European defence that many experts see as necessary to overcome the gap between tasks and available capabilities. Most importantly, it seems unlikely to satisfy President Donald Trump. He has elevated burden sharing and the 2% goal to the single most important issue for NATO and threatened severe consequences if countries do not reach this goal.

It remains to be seen if Trump’s approach helps make the alliance stronger or if his confrontational style proves mainly divisive and counterproductive. Together with the shock over Russia’s aggressive military behaviour and challenges stemming from instability and conflict in the south, Trump’s pressure has certainly led Europeans to take burden sharing more seriously. However, his blunt criticism of European allies combined with his general disdain for multilateralism is fuelling discussions on the need for Europe to act independently.

This has led to (renewed) calls for a “European army” and a debate on European strategic autonomy. While the idea of strengthening Europe’s defence is uncontroversial, many regards the vision of an autonomous European army as unfortunate and even provocative because it suggests a decoupling from the United States and a weakening of NATO. To be fair, this was never the agreed goal of EU defence integration and is not the intention of the current proposals either. The majority of Europeans continue to see the role of the United States as crucial for their security. Most of them also believe that the United States continues to value the advantages of a strong transatlantic alliance. Conversely, the United Kingdom, which traditionally has been the staunchest defender in the EU of transatlantic cooperation, has decided to leave the Union yet wants to remain part of European security and defence cooperation.

At the same time, there are strong arguments for closer security and defence integration among Europeans. No European state can bear the financial burden of maintaining modern, “full-spectrum” armed forces on its own. Moreover, the existence of multiple types of national weapons systems is a waste of resources and a hinder to interoperability. Finally, Europeans need the ability to act militarily in situations where the United States has other priorities or chooses to play a minor role. Some experts suggest that Washington should support European strategic autonomy for sake of better burden sharing.

The key question before and now is how Europeans can build a strong European defence without weakening NATO. In France and Germany, the idea of a European army is popular among those who see Trump as the ultimate argument for an independent EU security and defence policy and Brexit as an opportunity to achieve this goal. Yet even in Berlin and Brussels, political decision-makers and military leaders are sceptical of the realism of this concept. Germany’s defence establishment prefers instead to build a “European Defence Union” or “Army of Europeans” from below, through concrete initiatives. In the words of Germany’s chief of defence, many of these initiatives are already in place. They include capability development as part of the EU’s Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). They also include bilateral agreements such as German-Norwegian naval cooperation, the integration of German, Dutch and French brigades, and multinational sharing of airlift capacities. The British-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the French proposal for a European Intervention Initiative also fall into this category. Last but not least, the pragmatic approach to closer defence cooperation includes initiatives aimed at strengthening the European pillar of NATO, such as the Framework Nations Concept and participation in multinational headquarters. Being ready together – in face of an article 5 situation or in response to a crisis in Europe’s neighbourhood – means
that European forces must be compatible with NATO standards and structures.

Since no European ally envisages a security framework that excludes NATO and the United States, participants in the debate on strategic autonomy should abstain from empty and potentially provocative rhetoric. Instead, Europeans should concentrate on two questions: how can closer European cooperation contribute to strengthening NATO’s readiness? In which cases would Europe want to act alone or take the lead and how fit for purpose are existing capabilities and command structures for doing so?

**READY ENOUGH?**

The final issue is whether the Alliance is ready enough. This is the most practical of the three issues and for many allies the most significant. Unlike during the Cold War, when substantial combat forces were forward deployed along the NATO-Warsaw Pact border, allies have in the last decade chosen a somewhat different approach to assurance of allies and deterrence of Russia. The forward deployed NATO forces today consist primarily of the four battalion combat groups that form the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltic States and Poland. Most allies consider the eFP a reasonable compromise as the forces deployed are military meaningful as a tripwire yet constituting no offensive threat to Russia. Moreover, they are small enough to constitute an acceptable expense to allied defence budgets. In addition to NATO efforts, the US continually rotates an Armoured Brigade Combat Team to Poland.

The eFP is a tripwire force, not a force supposed to be able to defend the Baltic States and Poland from a determined attack. To defend these allies, NATO relies on the ability to reinforce the eFP quickly. To be able to do that, four aspects are of particular concern: available forces, response plans, mobility and decision-making.

Of the four, the need to increase the readiness of NATO forces has garnered the most public attention. This includes the creation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and the enhanced NATO Response Force (eNRF), adopted as part of the adaptation measures of the 2014 Readiness Action Plan. In the NRF, the VJTF constitutes the force that is on stand-by in a certain calendar year. Lead elements are on 48-hour readiness, while the remaining have up seven days to get ready. The enhancement of the eNRF consists of placing the stand-up and stand-down VJTFs – the forces preparing for VJTF duty in the following year and the forces that completed their duty the previous year – on enhanced readiness. These forces, called the Immediate Follow-on Forces Group (IFFG), have a readiness time of 30-45 days. Fully assembled, the three sets of NRF forces constitute a sizable formation – including a division of three brigades in the land domain.

Ahead of the 2018 Brussels Summit, the US launched its Four Thirties readiness plan, later endorsed by the Summit as the NATO Readiness Initiative. The initial proposal was more political than practical in nature and allies will have to work out the details. The aim of having 30 battalions on 30 days or less readiness shows this clearly. Unless the battalions are organised into brigades and divisions, they have limited value particularly in a high intensity conflict scenario. As an instrument to highlight readiness and a target to aim for, however, the initiative is useful. To fulfil the aims set by it, allies not only need to prepare their forces for higher readiness, but also devote sufficient resources. Readiness is expensive, as equipment must be constantly maintained to the highest standards and personnel compensated for the extra burden that being on high alert involves.

Having forces on high readiness is of little use if the forces have no ready plans for what to do, or are unable to move quickly to their area of operation. Also in these fields, NATO has made progress since 2014. In terms of planning, NATO introduced a new set of plans called Graduate Response Plans (GRP). There are several such plans, with separate plans for different geographic parts of NATO’s periphery. The GRPs are more concrete than the main existing plans and – an important
difference – they can be executed quickly. Much remains to be done, for instance in better tying the various plans together on the strategic level. However, judged by Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's old dictum "plan are worthless, but planning is everything", NATO is doing fairly well.

The same is the case for the challenge of moving forces quickly around in Europe, an aspect tested as part of the recent Trident Juncture 2018 exercise. Facilitating such movement – termed a "military Schengen" by a former commander of US Army Europe – has received substantial attention in both NATO and the EU. In NATO work is carried out under the label Enabling SACEUR's Area of Responsibility, while the EU uses the better-known term military mobility. As facilitating military mobility involves both legal and infrastructural issues, the EU has not only more instruments available, but can also draw on substantial EU infrastructure funds.

Ultimately, highly ready forces, solid planning and improved military mobility are of little use if political and military bodies are unable to generate decision-making "at the speed of relevance" – to use US Secretary of Defence Mattis' words. Also in this field, the Alliance has made progress. As part of the Functional Review of NATO Headquarters, allies are looking at decision-making procedures. While clearly frustrating in many circumstances, NATO decision-making processes do not represent an insurmountable obstacle. Allies are fully capable of making decisions quickly when needed. The best example is the 12 September 2001 decision by the NATO Council that, the attack on the United States the previous day was an armed attack covered by Article 5 if directed from abroad. More important for NATO's readiness is therefore the increased authority given to SACEUR, NATO's chief operational commander, to prepare the VJTF for deployment without further approval from NATO HQ. This allows SACEUR to ready forces while allied capitals and NATO HQ discuss what course of action to take.

NATO's overall score on the question of ready enough is thus arguably a glass half full. Much work remains. This includes notably the infrastructure side of military mobility. This assessment is based, however, on the approach chosen by allies to assure and deter: few forward deployed forces and rapid reinforcement. The fundamental question thus in a sense remains: Is this approach sufficient to meet the potential threats? Are the forward deployed forces and, even more importantly, the rapid reinforcement forces large – and rapid – enough?

**CONCLUSION**

NATO has significantly improved its readiness since 2014. Forces, plans and command structures are being updated, interoperability and mobility is constantly tested and enhanced. The financial means to ensure readiness in line with the ambitious goals of the four thirties plan may not be in place yet and for many allies the 2% goal might very well remain out of reach. However, a turnaround (Trendwende) has occurred and allies are spending more to fill existing gaps. Allies and NATO have achieved a great deal since 2014. Whether the steps taken are enough to deter a potential opponent and to react to an unforeseen crisis, is difficult to assess. In the end, alliance cohesion, political agreement on the nature of the threat and on the appropriateness of the response will play a decisive role.

This is why allies have to engage in a discussion of difficult questions such as the balance of deterrence and dialogue in the relationship with Russia, NATO’s role in countering international terrorism, or the challenges posed by rapid advances in weapons technology and cyber warfare. The role of nuclear weapons and missile defence, arms control and counter-proliferation, and many other issues should also regularly be put on the agenda. In order to make NATO ready for the future, these discussions need to continue, behind closed doors and in public. At what point the Alliance is ready to engage in a comprehensive process to
write a new strategic concept that replaces the one from 2010 is unclear. Despite reassuring signs about continued American commitment to Europe’s defence, allies are deeply unsettled about Trump’s ambivalent attitude towards NATO and to multilateral order more generally. Under the impression of his appearance in Brussel last summer, some wonder if the alliance should even hold summits anymore. Yet summits and extraordinary events like NATO’s 70th birthday in 2019 provide opportunities for decision-makers and experts to reflect on the purpose and nature of the Alliance in a changing security environment. Arguably, an open, frank and thorough debate is as important to NATO’s readiness as the availability, interoperability and mobility of forces and capabilities.
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