



# NATO, new allies and reassurance

By Ronald Asmus, Stefan Czumur, Chris Donnelly, Aivis Ronis,

Tomas Valasek and Klaus Wittmann<sup>1</sup>

★ NATO today spends too little time studying and assessing security risks, thinking about ways to defuse potential crises, and developing the means to react in the event of a conflict close to home. Some of its members worry that the alliance will not be able to come to their defence in a crisis.

★ NATO allies in Central and Eastern Europe have felt the most uneasy but other countries such as Iceland and Norway have voiced similar concerns. The alliance should take ‘reassurance’ measures to address this spreading sense of insecurity and improve its ability to respond to crises around its borders, wherever they come from.

★ Reassurance needs to be consistent with NATO’s obligations to Russia and with the allies’ efforts to reach out to Moscow. If handled well, reassurance would give the new allies the confidence they need to support a ‘reset’ in NATO-Russia relations, and to deploy their forces outside Europe in places such as Afghanistan.

★ Reassurance should consist of political and some military steps to discourage potential aggressors in Europe. These would complement, not supplant, the fight against terrorist networks in Afghanistan and elsewhere, which rightly remains a priority for NATO.

<sup>1</sup> *The authors write in their private capacities. The views presented here do not represent any institution or government with which they are associated.*

<sup>2</sup> *See the German Marshall Fund of the United States, ‘Transatlantic trends 2009’.*

NATO is due to update its basic document, the ‘strategic concept’, at a summit scheduled for November in Lisbon. One of the key issues it needs to address is the lack of trust and confidence in

the alliance among the countries that have joined NATO since the late 1990s. Many of them feel that NATO has been neglecting the possibility of ‘old fashioned’ conflicts like ethnic strife or a clash between states, possibly involving Russia. Public support for

NATO has been falling in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> Several governments in the region compensate for the lack of

confidence in NATO by pursuing bilateral security co-operation with the US. Some Central and East European leaders state in private that they fear that NATO would not be able to come to their defence in a crisis.

When NATO decided to accept Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in the late 1990s, it chose to defend the new allies by sending forces from abroad in times of trouble rather than by building permanent bases on their territory. This strategy – aimed partly at defusing Moscow’s concerns about the military dimension of enlargement – differed from how NATO protected most of its allies in Western and Central Europe during the Cold war, and the then candidate states initially opposed it.<sup>3</sup> To win them over the allies gave general guarantees on the overall size of the reinforcement that they would make available to protect the new member-states. The US pledged – with NATO’s highest military commander, SACEUR, at the table<sup>4</sup> – to dedicate two to three divisions (20,000-40,000 soldiers) to the task, and to upgrade or build airfields, bridges, gas depots and

<sup>3</sup> *See Ronald Asmus, ‘Opening NATO’s Door’, Columbia University Press, 2002.*

<sup>4</sup> *The Supreme Allied Commander Europe – SACEUR – is by tradition a US officer; the current holder of the office is Admiral James Stavridis.*

other military infrastructure needed to receive and host such forces in the acceding countries. Moreover, the alliance promised to revisit its decision not to deploy forces in the new NATO countries if the benign security environment of the day were to worsen.

There was a clear political link between the decision not to deploy forces in the new NATO countries and the need to develop the ability to send in the promised reinforcements. But the alliance has failed to follow through on its pledges and no such dedicated forces were built or exist today. NATO has in effect created what it has always opposed in theory – a group of member-states whose security is not underpinned by the same plans and preparations that the rest of the alliance enjoys.

This always made the new allies uneasy but their fears intensified as NATO's relations with Russia deteriorated over the past decade. When NATO and the EU accepted the former communist countries, many assumed that Moscow would stop trying to interfere in the politics of this region. But Russia continues to regard much of Central and Eastern Europe as a sphere of special interest and influence. In recent years, it has also sought to pressurise and marginalise the new NATO countries through measures such as oil cut-offs, cyber attacks and trade embargoes. While Central and Eastern Europe is freer and more secure than at any time in modern history, the region continues to be a contested zone.

This paper argues that NATO should take a series of 'reassurance' measures to improve the alliance's ability to respond in case of a conflict in Europe. And it should make reassurance a key part of its new strategic concept. This would benefit new and old allies alike by making NATO as a whole better prepared for conflicts on its borders – all borders, not just those of the new NATO countries.

### **Why the worry?**

There are many states in Central and Eastern Europe that worry about Russia, although most fear non-military forms of intimidation such as cyber-attacks rather than a war. Several long-standing NATO members such as Norway and Iceland share similar concerns. But Poland and the Baltic states are central in this debate. They worry about a military conflict with Russia, though a limited one rather than an outright war. They recognise that Moscow is not planning an invasion – and even if Russia were to threaten Europe as a whole NATO would enjoy military superiority over it. That is why NATO has been so relaxed about the risk of a 'big' war: the allies would have enough

warning time, and they have the arsenals and the military wherewithal to respond.

However, large-scale military conflict is only one type, and arguably the least likely, of possible confrontation with Russia. A smaller regional conflict, which is much harder to plan against or deter, is a far more probable scenario.

It could take several forms. Some of the Baltic states, in particular Estonia and Latvia, have sizeable Russian minorities on their territory. They are concerned that Moscow could use the presence of those minorities as a pretext for limited military incursion. Lithuania and Poland worry about a conflict emerging over the Kaliningrad corridor – the narrow artery through which Russia supplies its exclave by the Baltic Sea. And Poland fears that if a conflict between Ukraine and Russia broke out, it could extend to Polish borders. Recent Russian military exercises along the borders of the Baltic states and Poland have added to the Central and Eastern Europeans' concerns.

These countries look to the alliance to deter Russia. But NATO today does a poor job at planning for conflicts of the kind listed above. Modern militaries prepare for contingencies by observing a few basic principles. They maintain robust military forces capable of defending against a wide range of threats. They hold exercises to rehearse defence against the most probable attack scenarios: this keeps the units sharp and helps to identify the military needs of a particular contingency. Governments also keep extra units 'just in case' because not all threats can be accurately foreseen and understood. To improve their odds, countries also maintain a permanent watch, constantly analysing political and security trends around them and assessing their potential consequences. This allows governments to react quickly to rapidly emerging threats.

Such analysis and planning, which routinely takes place in many defence ministries, becomes highly political in NATO. The alliance is having trouble producing an objective threat assessment because governments disagree on what it should say, and they withhold or manipulate intelligence to advance their point of view. NATO has been so preoccupied with the war in Afghanistan that few officers in its military headquarters keep an eye on threats closer to Europe. The missions in Afghanistan, Kosovo and elsewhere have consumed so much money and attention that NATO rarely holds military exercises rehearsing the defence of its borders. On paper, the alliance remains fully committed to protecting its allies against a threat coming from Europe. In practice, it does not do enough of the daily work that is required to stay ready for such an eventuality – much to the Central and East Europeans' concern.

The new allies' fears intensified when NATO's cohesion broke down over the Iraq war. In 2003, Turkey asked NATO for assistance in case the US attacked Iraq, and Iraq retaliated against Turkey. A group of NATO members led by Germany and France, which opposed the war against Iraq, thought that consultations on the subject were premature since efforts to defuse tensions with Iraq were still under way. They blocked NATO from holding formal consultations – with the effect of denying a worried ally, Turkey, the protection it sought from NATO (though the alliance eventually found a way to assist the country, using a bureaucratic fudge to circumvent German and French objections).

In August 2008 NATO failed to see the Russo-Georgian war coming, and when hostilities broke out it could barely do more than issue a statement. The allies disagreed on how to assign blame for the war, and on whether – and how – to confront the two sides involved. NATO's purpose is to prevent and if necessary stop military crises on the continent, and it played that role successfully up to the Balkan wars in the 1990s. Since then, it appears to have lost its ability to ensure stability and security in Europe.

One can assert – and many do – that the alliance's response would be fundamentally different if Russia attacked a NATO member, as opposed to Georgia, which is not in NATO and therefore not covered by its mutual defence clause. But it is not self-evident that the alliance's creaky consultation mechanisms would suddenly spring to life and start dealing with the crisis effectively; the alliance would probably lose crucial time in responding. Nor would the fault-lines currently dividing and hampering NATO magically disappear in such a case. Without a proper understanding of the situation on the ground, the allies could find themselves divided over who to blame for hostilities and whether to respond.

### **Why reassurance?**

NATO needs to make it a priority to reduce doubts about its readiness to implement its mutual defence clause. If the alliance put in place measures to better prepare for threats in Europe there would be two benefits.

First, reassurance would increase, not weaken, NATO's ability to conduct missions beyond Europe. Allies need to feel safe at home if they are to deploy their best forces abroad. When NATO governments first sent troops outside their own territory, to the Balkans in the mid-1990s, they could tap into a pre-existing sense of credibility and political solidarity, which came from decades of working together to defend Western Europe. NATO's ability to perform its mission at home helped to build up support for missions abroad.

Today, a reverse dynamic is setting in. Doubts over NATO's commitment to defend Central and Eastern Europe threaten to drain support in the region for the Afghan mission. Reassurance measures can arrest the trend, and strengthen support in the new member-states for the operation in Afghanistan. And they can accelerate the transformation of the new allies' militaries: if they feel secure at home, they will have less need to invest in equipment needed for self-defence and have more reasons to buy the hardware needed for far-off missions such as Afghanistan.

Second, reassurance is also a precondition for 'resetting' relations with Russia. The alliance will never be able to engage Moscow effectively as long as some of its own member-states feel insecure. These governments will resist any opening to Russia, and efforts to convince them of the contrary will fuel their suspicions that NATO is putting Moscow's concerns ahead of theirs. To make the alliance as a whole bolder in reaching out to Russia, NATO needs to reassure new allies that it is addressing their worries.

### **What needs to be done**

What should a NATO reassurance strategy look like? Much of the debate on this subject so far has focused on contingency plans – the plans that NATO drafts in peacetime to hone defences against the most probable threats. A number of allies have demanded that NATO prepare such a document for each member country that asks for one, and in early 2010 the rest of the allies agreed in principle to do so.

Contingency plans clearly need to be part of the package of reassurance measures (see 'The defence dimension', below). But a classified document in a safe at NATO's military headquarters will not in and of itself solve the problem. NATO faces a bigger task: to boost political solidarity and make visible military preparations to deter all potential conflicts, not just from Russia. The response – reassurance – should consist of political, economic and military measures. They should not be provocative nor catalyse destabilising countermeasures by neighbours, in particular Russia. And, importantly, they need to be carried out in a way that is consistent with NATO's aspirations for closer ties to Russia.

#### **\* *Crisis management***

NATO's new reassurance strategy should above all aim at correcting the alliance's own weaknesses. That is why one of the first steps should be an overhaul of NATO's current crisis management system. Countries in the alliance's north and south will benefit from this as much as the new members.

NATO should create a new mechanism to assess continuously the potential for crises beyond its

members' borders and their potential consequences for allies. To prepare credible response measures the allies should allow their top military commander, SACEUR, the flexibility to engage in prudent military planning and perhaps to undertake some initial steps towards possible intervention in the early phases of a crisis.

NATO should make crisis identification, assessment, response and precautionary preparations a routine part of its work. This is important: continuous monitoring and planning puts the allies in a position to respond early, and to stabilise future crises on terms favourable to the alliance. Regular planning also helps to avoid misunderstandings. If NATO only starts assessing and planning when a crisis breaks out, outsiders will assume that it wants to intervene. Sometimes it will. At other times, especially when there is no breach of allies' borders, it may choose not to act. In those cases it is important that the alliance's assessment and planning work is not mistaken for preparations for intervention, which would confuse and potentially aggravate the situation.

This new crisis management mechanism could be located close to the military commander or to the alliance's secretary-general. What really matters is that the new cell assesses risks coming from all directions, thus underscoring that NATO planning is not directed against any specific country. While this brief focuses on the Central and East Europeans' worries about Russia, allies in the north and south of Europe have security concerns of their own that a crisis management mechanism should be assessing and evaluating.

Intelligence gathering and distribution, including real time intelligence and early warning, are other crucial weaknesses that the alliance needs to address. Both the gathering and interpretation of intelligence have become objects of political wrangling in NATO; the political leadership rarely receives unfiltered advice that could provide the basis for effective and prudent planning. The intelligence system of the alliance needs a thorough overhaul, since it is a crucial precondition for any successful crisis management.

#### *\* Engaging the EU and national governments*

Reassurance also needs to involve actors other than NATO because the alliance can offer only limited help with some of the sources of insecurity that the allies worry about. The risks to Europe include not only military moves but also political intimidation, energy blackmail, the influence of foreign intelligence services and corruption. These are areas where the European Union has a bigger role to play, and the same is true for national governments: there are many things that the new (and old) allies can and should be doing themselves to reduce their potential vulnerability.

NATO could have the perfect defence plan or even put a military base in Central and Eastern Europe and it would still not stop outside powers from de facto penetrating governments, parliaments or the media to gain influence.

The EU could help to address the concerns of the governments in the region, for example by assessing the impact of Russian investments on their local economies and making sure that outside investors fully act in line with existing EU rules. It could strengthen its support for pipelines to bring non-Russian gas into those Central and East European countries currently over-dependent on Gazprom. And it should be thinking of ways to use the tools at its disposal to improve the member-states' ability to withstand cyber-attacks. Their frequency has been on the rise, with China often suspected.

Reassurance requires the EU and NATO to think and to assess potential threats, military and non-military, as parts of a seamless continuum. They need to be able to evaluate attempts at intimidation that involve, for example, both the use of the 'energy weapon' and military means. The EU and NATO must be able to respond in a co-ordinated manner, with each institution deploying its unique resources on the basis of what works best in a particular situation. They should also be sharing a planning and command headquarters able to assemble and deploy an integrated civilian and military force in times of trouble, for few of today's threats can be resolved with military means alone. And the EU should be firmly embedded in the crisis management system discussed in the previous section. This will require very close relationship between the military staffs of the EU and NATO to ensure that the two institutions co-operate smoothly in operations and avoid duplication of effort.

Such close co-operation may need to wait until relations between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus improve; tensions between Ankara, on the one hand, and Athens and Nicosia, on the other, have kept the EU and NATO from intensifying co-operation.<sup>5</sup> In the intervening time, it should be possible to make incremental progress that would go some way towards reassuring the Central and East European countries. For example, the EU and NATO could organise informal away-days for those parts of their military staffs that are tasked with monitoring and analysing strategic risks, including (though not limited to) Russia. It should also be possible to establish a working relationship between the NATO-accredited 'centre of excellence' on cyber-defence and the EU's military staff, allowing for regular exchanges of lessons learned.

<sup>5</sup> For more see Tomas Valasek, 'France, NATO and European defence', CER policy brief, November 2008.

The member-states themselves can do a lot at the national level to reduce their vulnerabilities. The new NATO countries that are asking allies to provide reassurance will have a better negotiating position if their own military reform efforts are solid. They should do their best to insulate their defence budgets against the impact of recession and budgetary consolidation. Where cuts are inevitable, countries should pool their resources with others to get more bang for less money. If the new allies worry about the corrosive impact of foreign money on politics, they can enact and enforce better

<sup>6</sup> See Václav Bartuška, 'First responsibility, then solidarity', in: Katinka Barysch and others, 'Pipelines, politics and power: The future of EU-Russia energy relations', CER report, October 2008.

campaign financing laws. If they are concerned about energy blackmail, they can use their own as well as EU funds to integrate themselves more effectively into western gas markets and give themselves alternatives to Russian oil and gas.<sup>6</sup>

### \* *The defence dimension*

While many new (and some old) allies worry about the non-military threats mentioned above, the Baltic states and Poland also fear a possible military conflict. To discourage potential armed challenges to members' borders, NATO needs to maintain a basic level of military activity, including planning, reinforcement exercises and infrastructure investment.

Contingency plans are the basis for any defence-related reassurance. Such planning allows NATO to analyse the defence needs of a particular war scenario; it is also the test-case of solidarity among the allies in a particular contingency. The process of planning is thus as important as the plan itself.

In addition to a contingency plan, NATO should consider a number of other military measures to provide reassurance. These steps are meant, above all, to underscore solidarity with exposed allies while also guaranteeing the actual readiness of NATO to provide reinforcements, should they be necessary. The allies need to:

- ★ continue the air patrols over the Baltic countries that have been flying there since 2004. They are an important signal of NATO's commitment to the region;
- ★ hold limited exercises to test the command structure and readiness of forces and logistics, including strategic transport (which would be crucial in reinforcing the new NATO countries);
- ★ hold military exercises to rehearse contingency plans with regional commands such as the NATO headquarters at Brunssum and Naples, whose

expertise in Article V planning is at risk of diminishing. Similarly, NATO could use national headquarters subordinated directly to the alliance's military headquarters, SHAPE, to assist in developing defence plans or provide regional expertise;

- ★ place some additional military hardware on the territory of new members in Central and Eastern Europe and reinforce NATO's network of airfields and ports in the region. This will create the foundation for reinforcement of the area should the need arise;
- ★ improve NATO's communication strategy: a common line on, for example, Russian military exercises in Belarus, would reinforce political solidarity. Sometimes the allies will disagree but even when they have a common view, they make too little effort to send out a unified message;
- ★ improve intelligence and surveillance: the Central and East Europeans do not always fully know what is happening on the other side of their eastern border;
- ★ develop a NATO air defence system – including against missile threats – that covers all of Central and Eastern Europe and also involves several bases in the region (whose presence itself deters potential aggressors);
- ★ boost the NATO 'response force'. The NRF was established in 2002 to, among other things, respond in case of Article V situations and as an instrument of reinforcement and reassurance. However, the NRF has never achieved full strength. Allies need to commit the forces required for the NRF to fulfil its objectives.

### Conclusion

Many allies have accepted the need for reassurance in recent months. For them, the question is no longer whether NATO should act but how. Reassurance has become a key part of debates on the new NATO strategic concept and the alliance has already put in place limited reassurance measures. However, it needs to develop a more comprehensive policy to be effective in reducing the member-states' concerns. Above all, NATO should construct a new mechanism for crisis identification, assessment and response. Reassurance needs to become an integral part of NATO's broader military strategy and its political outreach.

Some allies will be concerned about the financial implications of such measures. Defence budgets across

Europe are under tremendous pressure in the aftermath of the economic crisis so defence ministries are naturally reluctant to adopt new commitments. Nevertheless, NATO needs to find a way to upgrade gradually the military infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe to guarantee a successful reinforcement in case of crisis; mutual defence is NATO's core task. However, reassurance primarily emphasises political measures – like a new crisis management capability – which can be created relatively quickly and with little additional cost.

NATO also needs to think through how others may view such reassurance measures and how they might react. What if Moscow responds to what NATO believes is a prudent defensive measure with a show of strength? Russian officials have argued that any upgrades of airbases or ports in the new NATO countries would fall foul of the 1997 NATO-Russia 'founding act'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *'Founding act on mutual relations, co-operation and security between NATO and the Russian Federation'* Paris, France, May 27<sup>th</sup> 1997.

However, that document restricts the stationing of "permanent substantial combat forces"; not upgrades to ports or airbases. The founding act consciously created the space for NATO to defend the new members through "necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement". NATO has not used the document's provisions to their fullest. The alliance should have done so years ago, when relations with Russia were better. But this is not a reason for allies to shirk from responsibility today. Solidarity within NATO requires that all allies be extended the same level of security.

Many will argue that reassurance is incompatible with NATO's recent attempts to repair its relationship with Russia – a key priority of NATO's secretary-general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen. The opposite is true: reset and reassurance are intrinsically linked. NATO wants the closest possible co-operative relationship with Russia because allies will not be secure until all of Europe feels safe and confident. But because Russia's

future remains unpredictable, NATO needs to pursue that goal while guarding against the risk of Russian policy developing in a more adversarial fashion.

A similar situation occurred in the 1960s, when the allies disagreed over whether defence or *détente* should be the priority. In the end NATO combined what appeared to be contradictory elements into a grand 'dual-track' strategy that served the alliance well and helped set the stage for the fall of the Iron Curtain two decades later. Today, NATO is divided over whether reassurance or reset should take priority. Again, it is a false dilemma: it should have a dual track strategy that accomplishes both.

*Ronald Asmus is executive director of the German Marshall Fund's Transatlantic Centre in Brussels and former US deputy assistant secretary of state.*

*Brigadier general Stefan Czumur is former deputy military representative of Poland to NATO.*

*Chris Donnelly is director of Institute for Statecraft and Governments; he was special adviser on Central and Eastern Europe to four NATO secretaries general.*

*Aivis Ronis is former permanent representative of Latvia to NATO and member of the group of experts for the new NATO strategic concept.*

*Tomas Valasek is director of foreign policy and defence at the Centre for European Reform and former policy director (acting) at the Slovak ministry of defence.*

*Brigadier general (ret) Klaus Wittmann is former director of academic planning and policy at the NATO Defence College in Rome.*

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