

# Reanimating NATO's Warfighting Mindset

Eight Steps to Increase  
the Alliance's Political-  
Military Agility





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The GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative, led by **General (Retd) John R. Allen**, is GLOBSEC's foremost contribution to debates about the future of the Alliance. Given the substantial changes within the global security environment, GLOBSEC has undertaken a year-long project, following its annual Spring conference and the July NATO Summit in Warsaw, to explore challenges faced by the Alliance in adapting to a very different strategic environment than that of any time since the end of the Cold War. The Initiative envisages a series of policy papers which will address the nature of NATO adaptation and the challenges it must overcome if it is to remain a viable and credible alliance for the peace and stability in the transatlantic area. The policy papers published within the GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative are authored by the Initiative's Steering Committee members: **General (Retd) John R. Allen, Admiral (Retd) Giampaolo di Paola, General (Retd) Wolf Langheld, Professor Julian Lindley-French, Ambassador Tomáš Valášek, Ambassador Alexander Vershbow** and other acclaimed authorities from the field of global security and strategy. The aim of the involvement of such a wide array of experts is to reinforce the unique partnership between policy-makers, military leaders and leading academics and commentators. These policy papers will prelude and result with the publication of the Initiative's Steering Committee Recommendation Two Pager and the Main Report to be launched in October 2017. The Interim Report will be released during the GLOBSEC 2017 Bratislava Forum.

These outputs will be augmented by shorter policy papers (on cybersecurity, A2/AD capability, intelligence, and threats emanating from the South) prepared by the GLOBSEC Policy Institute between January and October 2017.

[www.cepolicy.org/projects/globsec-nato-adaptation-initiative](http://www.cepolicy.org/projects/globsec-nato-adaptation-initiative)

# **LOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative: Supporting Paper**

## **ONE NATO**

### **Reanimating NATO's Warfighting Mindset: Eight Steps to Increase the Alliance's Political-Military Agility**

**By**

**Ian J. Brzezinski and Tomáš Valášek**

The accelerating pace of events stands among the most challenging security dynamics confronting the NATO Alliance. Often called the “speed of war,” it is a product and driver of a threat environment that today features a complex mix of great power confrontation, failed states, violent extremist groups, and the profusion of new technologies leveraged by adversaries, great and small.

NATO's relevance has never been solely defined by the tanks, ships, and aircraft it can field. It has also been determined by the speed with which this consensus based organization can make decisions necessary to leverage its political and military potential. This “speed of decision” is often as critical as firepower when it comes to controlling the flow of events in a crisis, deterring adversaries, and, when necessary, defeating them.

During the Cold War, NATO's political decision making structures operated with a warfighting mindset that enabled the Alliance to effectively navigate crises with the Soviet Union so that they would not spin out of control into a nuclear Armageddon. Ultimately, that mindset contributed to the West's historic victory, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet empire.

In the decades that followed, NATO's warfighting mindset shifted from one of deterrence and defense into one of engagement. This reflected the Alliance's adoption of peace-keeping and peace-enforcement missions in the Balkans, its capacity building tasks in Europe and the Middle East, and its distant (and nonetheless difficult) counterinsurgency mission in Afghanistan.

Today, NATO faces a new set of challenges that directly threaten its territory and populations. Russia's military build-up, invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, and provocative military actions against NATO Allies and partners are a direct attack on the post-War order. The proliferation of missiles and weapons-of-mass destruction are extending the reach of Iran and North Korea. Terrorists have repeatedly demonstrated the capacity to suddenly and savagely strike targets in Europe and North America. The domains of cyber and information warfare are providing all these adversaries a wider set of near instantaneous options to do harm. These many contingencies underscore the new speed of war and consequently the need for rapid NATO decision-making capacities.

## **The speed of war...and peace**

U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, Jr., recently described how technological change has “accelerated the speed of war, making conflict faster and more complex than any point in history.”<sup>1</sup> Add to this the aforementioned geopolitical challenges, and it is only clearer that NATO faces a world where the pace at which peacetime can evolve to confrontation to crisis to conflict has accelerated significantly.

General Dunford, the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, also identified a second consequence of this double barreled change: Compared to the past, the costs of failure at the initial stages of

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<sup>1</sup>General Joseph Dunford, Jr. “[From the Chairman: The Pace of Change.](#)” Joint Force Quarterly (1<sup>st</sup> Quarter, January 2017)

conflict are potentially much higher. It has become more difficult to recover from setbacks or defeats in the early phases of war. The ability of adversaries to strike with missiles, cyber-attacks, and forces that can mobilize and deploy tens of thousands of troops within days if not hours presents a far more volatile and unforgiving threat environment.<sup>2</sup>

Compared to NATO's past, this is a far more challenging environment in which to deter, and if necessary, to defend against and to defeat adversaries. For the Alliance to remain effective, it must not only have the necessary force structure, its political authorities must also have the ability to fully leverage intelligence (including sorting through intentionally disseminated misinformation) and to develop, promulgate and exercise the full spectrum of necessary strategies and plans. Above all, NATO's political authorities must demonstrate the capacity for rapid decision-making to launch real-time responses amidst fast breaking crises and conflict.

Today, the Alliance continues to lag in these capacities. During the Cold War, NATO outmatched its adversaries in these realms. NATO war plans were regularly updated and reviewed. Forces were massed forward and robustly exercised. Reinforcement drills were regularly conducted, including the annual REFORGER exercise that sent a division or more of US forces across the Atlantic to West Germany. NATO commanders were delegated authorities that enabled them to respond in kind to, if not preempt, provocative conduct by Soviet forces.

After the Cold War, these skill sets atrophied. This, in part, reflected NATO's successful and rapid adaptation to new challenges. Operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan focused on peace-enforcement, peace-keeping, and counter-insurgency tasks that few had predicted would become NATO's central preoccupation. But training for fast breaking, high-intensity conflict withered to near non-existence. Military exercises and contingency planning were curtailed by the desire to avoid diplomatic inconvenience – including the possible appearance of being provocative or threatening to Russia -- and reduce costs. Cold War authorities to deploy and engage NATO forces – even for training -- were withdrawn from the Alliance's commanders. Today, NATO commanders only beginning to have those authorities returned, including for example the authority to mobilize vice deploy small elements of the NRF.

As a result, the Alliance's Cold War mindset shifted from that of warfighting to one of engagement, a devolution in part driven by the optimism that flowed after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. An engagement mindset focuses on cooperation with current and potential adversaries and capacity building of partners rather than the preparations and actions necessary to deter and respond to fast-breaking conflict, including that which has the potential for rapid and dangerous escalation.

Peacekeeping and peace enforcement – especially the management of conflict between and within states – is a demanding and complex undertaking, but its requirements are different from that of warfighting. In the former, one intervenes at one's own leisure and can discontinue such operations at will, as was NATO's case in Libya.

A warfighting mindset is much more challenging to develop and sustain. It fundamentally reflects true determination to decisively defeat an adversary and do so with immediacy by leveraging all available capacities. It is a mindset necessary to prevail at the initial stage of conflict. It is a fundamentally different ballgame than engagement.

If NATO is to remain relevant in this age of speed and complexity, the Alliance and its member states must meet General Dunford's challenge. NATO has to reacquire a warfighting mindset and the requisite skills that leverage the full potential of member state political, economic and military capacities. This is necessary if the Alliance is to effectively manage crises, to deter aggression at all levels, and to decisively defeat those committing aggression.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. General Dunford writes: "While the cost of failure at the outset of conflict has always been high, in past conflicts there were opportunities to recover if something went wrong. In World War I and II, despite slow starts by the Allies, we adapted throughout both wars and emerged victorious. The same was true in Korea. Today, the ability to recover from early missteps is greatly reduced. The speed of war has changed, and the nature of these changes makes the global security environment even more unpredictable, dangerous, and unforgiving. Decision space has collapsed and so our processes must adapt to keep pace with the speed of war."

## NATO's initial adaptations to the new security environment

Today's circumstances do not require a return to the 1980s, but some of the skills that facilitated success then and that have been lost since need to be reinvigorated.

USAREUR Commander General Ben Hodges has written about the need to increase the speed with which the Alliance can respond to, if not shape and preclude, fast-breaking crises. He cites three requirements:

- The “speed of recognition”: The sharing and coordination of information that provide indicators of a pending or breaking crisis.
- The “speed of decision”: The ability for an organization to leverage “the decision space” to prevent a crisis.
- The “speed of assembly”: The ability to rapidly, if not in real time, deploy the military assets necessary to demonstrate capability and, if necessary, employ force.

NATO's leaders have begun to respond to the challenges presented by the new security environment. European defense budgets have finally ended their two decade long downward spiral and have begun, albeit slowly, to increase. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reported that spending by European allies in 2016 was 3.8% higher than it was the year prior, a roughly \$10bn increase.<sup>3</sup> (At the urging of U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, the allies are readying national action plans to be presented at the May NATO Summit that will map their progress toward the 2% goal.)

NATO exercises are slowly reanimating a focus on large scale high intensity warfare, as evidenced, for example, by TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2015 that involved 36,000 personnel. But this exercise is dwarfed by numerous Russian exercises involving the deployment of over 100,000 troops and the simulated use of nuclear weapons.

The Alliance's decision made at the July 2016 Warsaw summit to deploy a multinational battalion in each of the Baltic States and Poland to deter Russian aggression also reflects the reanimation of a deterrence and defense mindset. As part of this effort, Allies have begun to reduce and simplify national regulations governing the movement and deployment of forces across their national territories.

## Further steps toward a war fighting mindset

But these actions and changes in policy will have limited effect without a change in the institutional culture and processes at NATO's political level:

- First, if the Allies were to be presented with the need to decide – within hours – on whether or not to use force, the representatives in Brussels and their capitals would struggle unless they already had a rough idea of the actors involved, their motivations, their likely counter-responses, and of the stakes involved. Without these ingredients, NATO countries could waste valuable time simply establishing who did what to whom.
- Second, a timely response also presupposes that NATO receives a notice of unfolding crisis as early as possible. The Alliance's early warning system has already been updated since Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and works well in some regards but can and should be improved further.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/nato-reports-allied-defence-spending-10-billion-556817>

- Third, the internal rules that govern how NATO manages a crisis need to be further simplified. They still remain so complicated that in practice NATO countries tend to spend too much time simply trying to understand their own internal procedures. This could impede a quick response under even the least trying of crises.
- Below, we offer ways to improve NATO's procedures and mind-set on each of the above three points.

## 1. More Systematic Contingency Planning

To prepare themselves to make informed decisions with speed, NATO's national delegations and their relevant crisis management bodies at home (in the ministries and parliaments) need to take a systematic interest in the likely flashpoints. They need to study in advance those most likely to produce future crises, the main actors, their respective capabilities, and the potential consequences of the various policy responses at their disposal. While each situation is unique and no conflict is fully predictable in its complexity, violence never simply springs out of a vacuum. For example, while few foresaw the annexation of Crimea, the subsequent Russian aggression in Donbas was predictable – and indeed predicted.

This curiosity about the next potential spark – and the quest to understand its nature and what may set it off – should be hard-wired into the thinking of NATO nations and officials. To this end, NATO will need:

**Regular NAC Intelligence Briefings on The Most Urgent/Likely Scenarios:** This is where the Allies have made the most progress since 2014. Contingency briefings now are fairly routine and substantive. However, they are still limited in geographical scope (mainly confined to regions where NATO is already involved) and too tightly regulated by the agreed annual work-plan. To give Allies a foretaste of the most likely crises –irrespective of whether NATO expects to step in – the Alliance's intelligence briefers should be given more autonomy to select briefing topics, and more opportunities to present their findings to the permanent representatives. A good list of potential crisis points should at least include the following: continued Russian aggression in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria, and Moscow's growing interventions in the Balkans and Libya. Other areas to be briefed should be fragile or failing states the collapse of which could significantly impact NATO security interests.

The notion that NATO needs to expand the geographical scope of briefings will be unpopular among some Allies who will assert that to study a problem means to prejudge an involvement. But there is no automaticity between the two: at NATO, nothing happens unless all 28 nations agree, and a country can veto action at any point. Besides, Allies frequently hear out ideas and proposals that do not materialize. But by not studying a potential crisis, NATO puts itself at a deliberate disadvantage: if and when it chooses to be involved, and if events on the ground move fast, the Allies' policy decision making risks not being able to keep up.

To better educate themselves on possible futures, the Alliance should also make an expanded use of the Strategic Assessment Cell (SAC) – its in-house team specifically tasked with peering into the future. All of their excellent papers should be distributed to the Allies (at present, some only go to the Secretary General). The papers do not always make for a comfortable reading nor, by definition, are SAC forecasts – like any forecasts – always right. But this should not lead to their distribution being curtailed. With appropriate 'health warning' the papers can be very useful in stretching the Allies' imagination and preparing them for difficult possibilities.

**Deeper Discussions at NATO of the Likely Policy Responses:** Intelligence briefings and SAC papers should prompt informal – but (loosely) instructed and informed – debates of what NATO would actually *do* if the situation on hand were to escalate. This would allow the Alliance's senior civilian and military leadership to gauge the appetite for involvement among the nations, and, in case of crises, to tailor their recommendations accordingly. The debates on likely policy responses should involve experts from SHAPE; so that they can explain available military options in a given scenario. And they

should take place off-the-record, to allow for a free discussion that does not commit the countries to a particular course of action. But the talks should be informed by – and seek to reflect the views of – the capitals. The key to success is attaining as accurate a picture as possible of what the nations, not just the delegations, might do in a given crisis.

**Improved Simulations and Exercises:** NATO Headquarters, including the North Atlantic Council, have increased the use of simulations to help refine contingency planning to prepare for crisis management. They, including the annual crisis management exercise, have become much more realistic since the Ukraine crisis. But these fall short of sufficient realism. The scenarios are classified and thus cannot be discussed here in more detail but suffice it to say that some elements do not reflect the gravity and complexity of likely real-life crisis. There are situations that the Alliance chooses not to exercise because some countries see them as falling outside NATO’s purview. But that makes little sense: future crises will not conform to NATO’s pre-agreed procedures. NATO exercises should follow real life, not expect the reverse to happen. Exercises and simulations also offer an invaluable chance to test the interaction between the political level – the North Atlantic Council – and the Alliance’s operations command at SHAPE. In a real world crisis, the two must share a common understanding of the options before them and their consequences. This commonality should not be assumed; it must be repeatedly exercised and tested.

**Closer Involvement of the Capitals:** Too many NATO countries have delegated too much Alliance business to their permanent representatives. Ministerial meetings are regular, but infrequent. There is a tendency in some capitals to assume that, having approved policies at ministerial meetings, issues can be safely left to national delegations at NATO until the next ministerial meeting in six months or so. As a result, the staff in some capitals do not always keep up with the briefings given to their ambassadors at NATO. This risks slowing down the Alliance at times of crises, because decisions on the potential use of force far exceed the authority of the delegations based at NATO, and would be forwarded to capitals for their approval.

National authorities need to be as well-versed in the ins and outs of likely flashpoints as their representations in Brussels lest the capitals – and thus the Alliance as a whole -- lose valuable time catching up on the particulars of the choices before them.

To this end, NATO should hold more regular crisis simulation exercises at the ministerial level, and make them more realistic. Those NATO countries that do not involve sufficiently senior staff from the capitals in the annual crisis management exercise should start doing so. This will be up to each delegation to decide; NATO’s leadership cannot dictate the level of participation – but it can and should clearly define the expectations.

The Alliance should also consider making available to Allied capitals a ‘red team’ capacity for their national crisis simulations. Their role would be to stress-test national responses by introducing new elements into national crisis simulations, thus making them less predictable – and more like real life. This could be a role for SHAPE. By plugging its experts into national exercises, SHAPE gains an additional important benefit – a better understanding of the national decision-making processes.

## **2. The starting gun**

Ideas above are meant to streamline the decision-making process *after* Allies receive a warning of a crisis and start deliberating. But they will be of little benefit if NATO countries miss the starting gun – if they receive a notice of a crisis too late and lose valuable time.

The Alliance long ago recognized the importance of acting promptly, and to this end it has put in place an early warning system. It has been updated since the 2014 events in Ukraine to give the secretary-general better access to early indications of trouble – which he can use, if he deems the information serious enough, to convene the North Atlantic Council. But the underlying technology, and the warning indicators the Allies scan, have changed too little over the years, and need to be brought more fully in line with the demands and opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In particular, ease of

access and ability to discern hybrid threats stick out as challenges. To improve the system, the Allies should consider:

**Putting the Information in the Hands of the Recipient:** Like most other professionals, diplomats spend more and more time away from the desk and in meetings or on the road. So, an indication that a warning has been sent should reach them on their personal digital devices too. The content of warnings themselves are naturally classified and probably too sensitive to be entrusted to mobile phones (at least with the current state of technology). But an indication that a warning is available (and the recipient should therefore check the dedicated classified system) could and should be pushed out to wherever the recipient is. The secretary-general should have recourse to similar technology to convene crisis meetings of the North Atlantic Council. This action alone can enhance the speed with which the decision making process can begin.

**Casting a Closer Look at Hybrid Challenges:** NATO's early warning system needs to devote as much attention to non-military trends as to military ones. The nature of challenges before NATO has changed. Some adversaries (like ISIL) are not states and use terrorism along more conventional military tools. And state actors, like Russia, have grown adept at using hybrid tactics to disguise their intentions and confuse opponents.

Today, early signs of trouble may not come in the form of movements of armored columns but chatter on social media (or, just as tellingly, blackout of social media in a particular region). Utterances by regime insiders on TV may contain important clues. An unusual up-tick in cyber activities meant to test the resilience of NATO and Allies' networks important for self-defense could signify looming trouble. And so could signals that outsiders are trying to agitate ethnic or social groups in NATO countries via disinformation. As well, key developments in strategically relevant states outside NATO, the failure of which could have consequences for NATO and its member states, should similarly be highlighted.

The Alliance's early warning system needs to adapt accordingly, by expanding its focus beyond traditional tell tales. It should seek to make fuller sense of publicly available data from social media, better understand the role of disinformation campaigns in seeking to paralyze national decision-making, and incorporate this knowledge in forecasting crises. The ebb and flow of enemy cyber activities needs to play a more important role in trying to spot trouble. All this requires that the *sources* that feed the early warning system may need to be expanded and NATO may need to consider means of collecting open source material, analysing the structured and unstructured data, and disseminating trends in a manner similar to the news alerts.

### **3. Toward More Effective Crisis Management**

Crisis management is a rolling process, not a one-off. It is possible to respond on time and start off prepared and yet still fall behind the pace of events if the speed of decision-making *during* the crisis proves too lumbering and cumbersome. To avoid such an outcome, the Allies should consider:

**Simplifying NATO's Crisis Management Handbook:** This set of procedures has grown too detailed, a consequence of Allies trying to retain or reassert tight political control over each step of a crisis. This is an understandable instinct but if taken too far it can undermine the manual's core purpose: ensuring *successful* management of crises. If NATO countries spend too much of their time simply trying to understand the manual's provisions, they are guaranteed to miss important decision-points. This would limit the options before the Alliance, drive up the cost of any countermeasures and decrease the chances of a successful resolution.

There is no quick and easy way to improve the manual. Allies will always seek to strike a balance between efficiency on the one hand, and, on the other, the ability to retain a political control. But unless the manual is streamlined and simplified it will be at best ignored during a real crisis or, worse, it could become an impediment to a successful crisis resolution.

**Delegating Authorities to NATO Commanders:** During the Cold War, NATO military commanders were entrusted with authority to respond with force against provocation and aggression, including

the most extreme – a massive invasion by Soviet forces. If we are going to expect NATO to marshal - in real time - military assets in the event of a provocation or worse, the Alliance must entrust its military commanders with the authority to posture assigned forces and engage opponents in specified contingencies. This requirement has only become more urgent as the Alliance stands up its Enhanced Forward Presence to deter Russian aggression against the Baltic States and Poland.

Toward these ends, NATO should grant its Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) the authority to mobilize, deploy, and posture elements of the NATO Response Force (NRF) anytime and anywhere within Alliance territory. The movement of a battalion or brigade level force (between 1000 and 4000 personnel), selected special operations assets, and/or a limited number of ships and aircraft poses no significant threat to any nation state along NATO's frontiers – and certainly not Russia. Indeed, as long as Russia continues its efforts to intimidate its neighbors with its no notice snap military exercises, NATO commanders should do the same with elements of the NRF, if only to demonstrate readiness to reinforce the Enhanced Forward Presence battalions in real time.

Such delegated authority could be used to both test and underscore NRF capabilities. It would enhance the Alliance capacity to counter provocations, if not pre-empt them. This authority could be shared with the NATO Secretary General to further ensure that military actions are consistent with political guidance. Such joint authority governed the approval of targets during the air campaign of the Kosovo War. Approval of target lists by the North Atlantic Council proved to be too unwieldy and slow as proposed targets too often disappeared during the Council's deliberations.

## Reinforcing trust among NATO allies

In a world featuring an ever accelerating “speed of war,” the above steps taken at the political level would enhance NATO's speeds of recognition, decision and assembly. NATO may never be able to match the pace of decision-making of a single actor, be it Russia or a non-state actor, but these steps would help reduce the risk of latency in a world of fast-breaking events, including failure at the outset of conflict. NATO's opponents must be convinced the political decision making process and apparatus is tied irrevocably to NATO's integrated nuclear and conventional deterrence structure, and that in a crisis, NATO has the capacity to operate across the political/military spectrum of the crisis at, or ahead of, the speed at which it is unfolding. This capacity would substantially increase the deterrent effect of NATO's military deployments and improve the Alliance's capacities for crisis control.

Above all, these steps would reinforce trust and confidence among Allies by increasing NATO preparedness against both foreseeable contingencies and those that cannot be predicted.

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