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Strategic Insight

NATO Response Force: Political Deftness, Economic Efficiency, Military Power

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April 1, 2003

"An intellectual equivalent of a raid" is how a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) staffer described US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's proposal for a rapidly deployable response force during the September 2002 meeting of NATO Defense Ministers. With relatively little warning to Alliance colleagues, Mr. Rumsfeld proposed the establishment of a robust, NATO force capable of more than just "flag-waving." This force, often referred to as the NATO Response Force or NRF, is intended not only to have fairly sharp teeth but also to be the vehicle that brings other Alliance forces and concepts into the 21st century. Many observers believe that this US proposal, timed as it was just a few months before the Prague Summit, was offered to downplay the Summit's enlargement policies (thereby not offending the Russians) and to give NATO Allies one last clear chance of developing a credible war-fighting capability. A kinder view holds that the NRF is a bit of an olive branch designed to allay fears of increasing US isolationism, particularly based on American exclusion of NATO during major portions of Operation Enduring Freedom, and presents a tangible link between the United States, NATO and even the European Union (EU).^[1] Everyone recognizes that NATO's European members need to increase their military capabilities relative to their American counterpart. The NRF may offer a way to refocus national economic resources devoted to the Defense Capabilities Initiative (DCI) and to serve as the catalyst for NATO's military "transformation" efforts.

The NRF is generally described as a powerful military force designed to stand alone for up to 30 days with land, air, maritime and command elements. It will consist of a combined arms brigade including both heavy & light ground forces; it includes a composite air element capable of performing a wide range of offensive, defensive and logistic air operations; and its maritime component will likely contain a carrier battle group-sized surface force as well as amphibious, air and submarine forces. More importantly to the Europeans, this force is designed to have the joint intelligence, targeting, planning and command and control capabilities that are the true discriminator between US and European militaries.

If organized, trained and equipped properly, this joint and combined force will give NATO a significant crisis response capability, especially in the area where European Union efforts fall short: warfighting capability.

The End of History

50 years of NATO memory has a persistent influence on contemporary security structures and policies. To NATO's credit, its 1999 adaptation to the end of the Cold War was fundamental, monumental and appropriate; it finally and formally recognized that its traditional threat was gone; it moved from the static/active defense concepts of the prior decades toward a strategic concept that emphasized security missions outside of traditional NATO areas; and it stressed the importance of developing new capabilities to meet new threats. Furthermore, operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan have accelerated thinking that NATO's military relevancy lies, not in the ability to provide heavy land forces or tactical fighter planes in defense of NATO territory, but rather in the ability to act quickly to stabilize distant situations which, left untended, could break out into a larger conflict. Political, social and economic chaos is the new perceived enemy of The Western State. This changed environment requires new tools: better intelligence, quicker force generation, greater power projection, and more precise weaponry. Perhaps the most vexing challenge is developing the command and control mechanism to pull all those tools together and put them to work.

From DCI to PCC

The NRF concept should be understood within the context of the Defense Capability Initiative's (DCI) failure to close the gap between European and US military technologies and capabilities. DCI was launched in September 1999 during NATO's Washington Summit. DCI was, "designed to ensure that all Allies not only remain interoperable, but that they also improve and update their capabilities to face the new security challenges"[\[2\]](#) and was prompted by the experience over Kosovo's skies and US-European airbases. As the air war was underway, NATO leaders realized that, despite Europe's relatively large fleet of tactical aircraft, only a few Allies had the capability of participating in US-led air operations. Europe lagged behind the US in military capabilities. DCI set a course to close this gap by focusing European defense acquisition efforts and budgets on five key shortfalls[\[3\]](#) :

- **Mobility and deployability:** i.e. the ability to deploy forces quickly to where they are needed, including areas outside Alliance territory
- **Sustainability:** i.e. the ability to maintain and supply forces far from their home bases and to ensure that sufficient fresh forces are available for long-duration operations
- **Effective engagement:** i.e. the ability to engage an adversary in all types of operations, from high to low intensity
- **Survivability:** i.e. the ability to protect forces and infrastructure against current and future threats
- **Interoperable communications:** i.e. command, control and information systems which are compatible with each other, to enable forces from different countries to work effectively together

Unfortunately, Europe's political appetite was bigger than its financial stomach, and in the subsequent years, NATO's European nations made little progress. In fact, most European defense budgets declined during the intervening years.[\[4\]](#)

To be fair, the current problem is not just lack of political will. NATO's cumbersome multi-year force planning apparatus makes it hard to focus on immediate requirements.

In the months leading up to the 2002 Prague Summit, it became clear that DCI was not moving ahead. Last minute efforts were undertaken to mitigate a perception of an outright failure and to repair sluggish efforts to improve NATO's military capabilities. The DCI was quietly retired and replaced by the Prague Capability Commitment (PCC). The name change had three general

purposes: to start a new clock and use Prague as the initiation point; to keep the focus on specific capabilities; and, to emphasize commitment to the Alliance.

US officials also proposed creating the NATO Response Force (NRF). As the "catalyst for the transformation of Alliance capabilities" the NRF replaced enlargement at center stage at the Prague summit and was wholeheartedly endorsed by the Heads of State. NATO nations will contribute formations to the NRF and these units will become recipients of national "high-tech" reform. Once these units receive these upgrades, they are rotated through the highest NRF readiness window and then spread their experience and institutional knowledge back to their national forces and ultimately into an Alliance-wide military culture of modernity.

Missions

Both EU and NATO language has focused heavily on a buzzword, "capability." Before putting the capabilities-cart in front of the mission-horse, however, a question needs answering: what load is the NRF being asked to carry? On one hand, it would be nice to have a modernized, conventional force capable of working with US units at high levels of interoperability. Outfitting combat aircraft with Link-16 communication equipment and precision-guided munitions (PGM), purchasing strategic lift assets, or simply upgrading the existing logistic units would all further the PCC goals, ESDI objectives, and help make the NRF a reality. On the other hand, having NATO forces ready to meet *future* challenges would be extremely useful to the United States. Creating, for example, NATO unmanned aerial vehicle, missile defense, nuclear-biological-chemical (NBC) detection and decontamination or even computer network attack/defense units would not only help lighten the US load in these areas, but would also indicate NATO sincerity in meeting new threats. NATO planners are aware that political leaders will look to the NRF as a one-size-fits-all force and demand from it more than is reasonable. NRF missions could include "traditional" military missions like deploying air, maritime or ground forces as a show of force, serving as an initial entry force, and conducting stand-alone offensive or defensive joint operations.^[5] Crisis response missions like non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) or humanitarian assistance/disaster relief also are expected. But giving the NRF "new" missions like theater missile defense and "consequence management" (including responding to a weapon of mass destruction event) are hot topics. The issue of using the NRF to undertake "pre-emptive" strikes is even more heated.

Structure

America's geo-strategic position over the last century has given it a rich experience with expeditionary warfare, rotational systems and graduated readiness. Consequently, Allies can obtain data that shows, for example, optimal rotation lengths, readiness windows and organization and structures. Unfortunately, this experience and data may not be applicable to NATO's collective understanding of an NRF concept. Differing ideas about NRF missions and structures are the crux of the current problem. National considerations based on recruitment, training, assignments, structures and most importantly budgets will require adjustments in the US proposal.

The structures needed to support an NRF concept, for example, may grow beyond that originally envisioned by the United States. Is there one NRF or two? Or three? Or, is a new NRF to be generated for every rotation, *ad infinitum*. One NRF could likely be created in a matter of days just by having nations come together to conduct a force generation conference. But to achieve the desired level of readiness and the lethality (and then maintain them indefinitely) NATO nations require enough forces and headquarters to maintain one NRF ready to go into action within days, one NRF undergoing training and certification, and another NRF being generated from forces not included in either of the first two "rotations" (or in a recovery or refit cycle). Considering that each rotation will involve about 20,000 personnel, the complete package could easily require 60,000 people. Given that the United States lacks a synchronized joint rotational

system or standing joint task force headquarters,^[6] it might be too much to expect that NATO's nations will collectively plan, train, equip, operate and command an effective NRF.

The NRF's air component will provide a rapid deployment capability, as part of a joint and combined force, to conduct the full range of air tasks using advanced air-to-air and precision guided air-to-surface munitions. The C2 system should be able to control several hundred sorties per day and conduct the functions of air defense, air reconnaissance, close air support, air interdiction, combat search and rescue, target acquisition, airborne early warning, and tactical airlift. In addition, the air component should have air-to-air refueling capability and some national officials suggest that it should include a dedicated strategic airlift necessary to deploy, sustain and redeploy the NRF.^[8] Getting NATO's European Allies to modernize their 4,500 combat aircraft (a number larger than the aviation assets available to the United States) so all of them are all-weather capable and fitted with PGMs will be a crucial step forward for the NRF.

The land component for the NRF will call for the deployment of a brigade-size formation, with support assets to allow it to operate over the full range of land tasks and terrain. The tricky part of establishing this ground component will be to create an appropriate mix of heavy, light and airborne forces, as well as to provide combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS). NATO defines combat arms to include only infantry or armor units. It considers CS and CSS elements to include, air defense, artillery, aviation, engineer, special forces as well as military police, communication, NBC defense, logistics, medical, psychological operations, civil military, and public affairs personnel/units. Convincing NATO nations to reorient their forces toward lighter, more deployable forces with some of these specific CS/CSS capabilities will be an important part of NRF success.

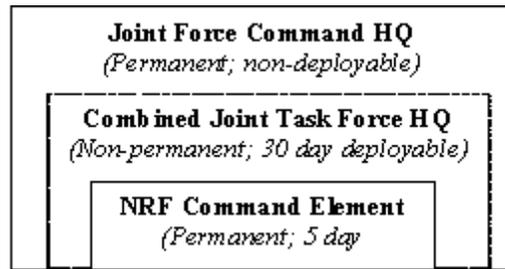
The NRF maritime component currently has the greatest interoperability but also suffers from the largest gap between current and planned capabilities. The NRF's maritime component will consist of a force of up to a NATO task force size including a carrier battle group with associated surface and subsurface combatant units, amphibious forces, and naval mine counter-measure units and support vessels. Such a force should be able to conduct the full range of maritime tasks, including interdiction, air defense, amphibious operations, freedom of navigation, anti-submarine warfare, naval mine counter-measure warfare, naval air strike missions and necessary dedicated strategic sea lift. Determining the new relations with NATO's most successful multinational and interoperable formations, like the Standing Naval Forces Atlantic and Mediterranean will help make the NRF a reality but the creation of more carrier battle groups poses a significant challenge to European defense budgets.

Perhaps the principle controversy surrounding the NRF is whether it is a real "unit" that comes into existence (or three units that come on and off cycle) or is it a consortium of loosely coordinated forces that simultaneously rotates through readiness windows? The best solution also is the most costly. Ideally, NATO could create three equal force packages that rotate through the calendar four months at a time. This simple cycle would also rely on identification of a small pool of specific low density/high demand capabilities that may be "permanently" on call. Rotation of forces will be required if the NRF is to be sustained.

Command & Control

Although there are many issues to be resolved, participants tend to agree that the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) is the primary tool to command and control (C2) the NRF. The NATO CJTF, modeled on the US JTF concept, has been under discussion and development since 1994 and has evolved toward either a static Joint Force Command HQ generating a deployable CJTF HQ or one using a sea-based CJTF HQ capability.^[11] The command element for the NRF will most likely require a standing structure with dedicated staffing to meet the 5 day crisis response timeline. Table 1 shows a possible configuration for NRF command and control structure and the

associated deployability time line for each HQ or command element. Any of the three HQ elements listed could command the NRF.



NRF C2 Configuration

Linked to this short deployment timeline, is the need for a coordinated political/military approach to crisis response. Though NATO has continually worked to improve its crisis management procedures, having a force capable of moving so quickly may outstrip lengthy political debates and cumbersome parliamentary approval procedures.

Historically, NATO's strength has always been found in its ability to reach a consensus; the unanimity of member nations signal determination to protect individual and collective interests. Reaching consensus, however, is not without its drawbacks. Political decision making can proceed at a snails pace. The NRF, with its limited military aims but faster response time, will require predelegated authority to strategic and operational commanders to conduct military planning in advance of political decisions.

Will It Work?

The answer to the "will it work" is a resounding "maybe." The key challenge for NATO over the past decade has been reinventing its structures, capabilities, and decision making processes so that it can meet the security needs of its member states. The cold war mechanisms that produced multiple corps geared toward a conventional war in Europe, have proved to be resilient to change. Initiatives to revitalize and restructure the Alliance toward a more responsive and deployable military force are consistently dulled. With the failure of DCI, many observers look to the NATO Response Force as a last chance for NATO to transform itself into the relevant organization that keeps both sides of the Atlantic interested in the Alliance. Its success or failure will be determined by the nations that ultimately provide not only the funding for such a force, but also the personnel needed to make the NRF a reality.

For more topical analysis from the CCC, see our [Strategic Insights](#) section.

For related links, see our [Europe Resources](#)

References

1. One view *against* NATO-EU harmony with respect to the NRF is described in "[The New NATO Response Force: Challenges for and Reactions from Europe](#)," by Ronja Kempin and found online at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute website. The author even proposes that a successful NRF means the end to any meaningful ESDP.
2. [NATO Fact Sheet](#), April 2000
3. Ibid
4. The three year (2000,2001,2002) defense expenditure trend for European NATO nations was 2.1%, 2.0%, and 2.0%, respectively. For the US during the same three year period: 3.1%, 3.1%,

and 3.3%. From [NATO Press Release \(2002\)139](#)

5. One point of debate appears to be the Allies' reluctance to give this NRF a forced entry mission. Some nations consider that a force of such limited size would not be capable of conducting forcible entry against stiff opposition. This issue is a matter of perspective: Allied forced entry into Normandy on 6 Jun 1944 required more than NRF-envisioned 20,000 people; "forced entry" into Panama, Grenada, and Somalia required forces near that magnitude.

6. Each service has its rotational system for rapid response: Army brigades rotate through as the DRB (division ready brigade) , the Marines rotate their Marine Expeditionary Units (MEU) and most recently the Air Force joined in with their Air Expeditionary Force (AEF) concept. Those force often have some regional focus and frequently exercise with sister-services under the unified/combatant commands, but there is not a coherent national plan to rotate forces through the same readiness windows and under a specific commander on a habitual basis. US Joint Forces Command tested the Standing Joint Force HQ model during Millennium Challenge 2002 and each combatant commander is exploring their own options or adaptations. But the regular use of a SJF HQ is years off.

7. Air-to-air refueling missions are organized and executed in different ways within the US services; it's not clear what the US envisions for NATO in this regard.

8. The US centrally manages strategic lift assets and does not release this authority down to the tactical level. It is unclear at which level an NRF commander would "own" strategic lift assets. This capability may be another "bridge too far" with respect to NRF capabilities.

9. One issue that needs further work is the level of capability envisioned: amphibious landing is widely accepted though amphibious assaults (forced entry) are more debated.

10. See footnote 6 above.

11. e.g. the current Allied Forces South (AFSOUTH) or AFNORTH. Commander, Striking Fleet Atlantic (CSFL) is currently the basis of the sea-based CJTF HQ and relies on the US Second Fleet.