

# NATO's Readiness Action Plan

## Strategic Benefits and Outstanding Challenges

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### Abstract

In response to the reemergence of Russian military assertiveness and the rise of the Islamic State, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) unveiled a major initiative—the Readiness Action Plan (RAP)—at its September 2014 summit in Wales. With only a few months until the next NATO summit in Warsaw, Poland, now is an opportune time to evaluate the RAP and the steps taken to implement it so far. This article argues that, despite the limited scale of some of its measures, the RAP offers four major strategic benefits, which collectively outweigh its drawbacks. Even so, its effectiveness faces a series of significant challenges. To address them, there are nine policy recommendations NATO leaders should consider before they convene in Warsaw in July 2016. These recommendations are designed to allow the RAP to achieve the benefits it promises, thereby bolstering NATO's ability to protect its members from aggression and to allow the alliance to respond effectively to crises.

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Two major surprises confronted NATO members in 2014. First, through its aggression in Ukraine, Russia repudiated the idea that Europe's post-Cold War borders are settled and should not be adjusted through force. Russia's adherence to that norm was already questionable

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given its 2008 invasion of Georgia and subsequent recognition of independence for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But, the Kremlin's actions in 2014 went even further since it formally annexed Crimea rather than just recognizing its independence. Meanwhile, even beyond Ukraine, Russia dramatically increased its military assertiveness, showcasing its conventional power and rattling its nuclear saber.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) redrew a sizeable part of the Middle East's map. It captured vast tracts of territory in Syria and Iraq, before declaring the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in late June 2014.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the group has perpetrated extreme violence, beheaded numerous hostages, implemented harsh sharia law in territories under its control, and attracted thousands of recruits from across the world.<sup>3</sup>

In response to these two crises, at its September 2014 summit in Wales NATO unveiled a major effort—called the Readiness Action Plan (RAP)—to improve the alliance's capacity to deter and defend against aggression toward NATO members and to bolster the organization's ability to respond to fast-moving crises, regardless of their origin. The RAP comprises a series of initiatives, notably including the establishment of a new “spearhead” unit able to deploy swiftly, increased military presence along the alliance's eastern flank, and an enhanced schedule of exercises focused on collective defense.

Following the Wales meeting, some international security experts argued that NATO's RAP did not go far enough given the scale of the challenges the alliance witnessed in 2014. For example, Jakub Grygiel, a professor at Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies, stated that the Wales meeting “had more of a rhetorical than practical impact.”<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Gary Schmitt of the American Enterprise Institute bemoaned the limited scale of the alliance's new measures: “The upped presence has been marginal in terms of numbers; the high-readiness force being created is limited in size, and the training exercises still pale in comparison with the scale of the exercises that have been conducted by the Russian military.”<sup>5</sup>

These criticisms have some merit. It is true, for example, that the additional manpower NATO nations have sent to the alliance's eastern flank only numbered in the hundreds, much lower than the 10,000 troops the Polish government had requested prior to the Wales conference.<sup>6</sup> NATO's new spearhead force, the Very High Readiness Joint

Task Force (VJTF), only comprises 5,000 personnel, and its incredibly clunky name does little to connote nimbleness. Meanwhile, NATO's recent military exercises have indeed been much smaller than Russia's.

Nevertheless, NATO's RAP should not be dismissed as irrelevant. Though the initiative has its downsides, wide-ranging strategic benefits outweigh those disadvantages. Additionally, the decisions taken at Wales were the beginning, rather than the end, of a process. Now is a propitious time to assess the RAP's value. It has been a year and a half since the Wales summit, affording observers the opportunity to judge what the action plan offers and what it has achieved so far. There are only a few months until the next NATO summit, which convenes in Warsaw in July 2016. Thus, NATO leaders have time to prepare to make decisions in Poland and refine the RAP so it is as strategically beneficial as possible.

This article first reviews the contents of the RAP. Subsequently, it argues that the package has four major strategic benefits and identifies the major challenges associated with the RAP's various initiatives. The final section presents nine policy recommendations intended to meet those challenges and that NATO leaders should consider implementing between now and the Warsaw Summit.

## **NATO's Readiness Action Plan: The Wales Summit and Beyond**

Responding to concerted Russian aggression is a task many NATO leaders hoped they would never have to undertake. The alliance's 2010 *Strategic Concept* stated that, "we want to see a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia."<sup>7</sup> But, by the time leaders arrived in south Wales in September 2014, any hope of creating a true strategic partnership with Russia lay buried under the blood-soaked ground of Ukraine's Donbas region.<sup>8</sup>

Although Russia was the primary focus of the meeting, NATO leaders were acutely aware of the need to rethink how the alliance deals with a range of security challenges, including those that might affect NATO's southern region. Several days before the meeting, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen emphasized, "This is a time of multiple crises on several fronts. To the east, Russia is intervening overtly in Ukraine. To the south, we see growing instability, with fragile states,

the rise of extremism, and sectarian strife. These crises can erupt with little warning. Move at great speed. And they all affect our security in different ways.”<sup>9</sup>

The RAP was the most significant announcement made in Wales and aims to ensure that “NATO remains a strong, ready, robust, and responsive Alliance capable of meeting current and future challenges from wherever they may arise.”<sup>10</sup> It includes a series of major efforts:<sup>11</sup>

- **Establishment of the VJTF.** This will be the “spearhead” unit of the larger NATO Response Force (NRF) and is designed to be deployable within 48 hours of an order to do so.<sup>12</sup> The VJTF comprises 5,000 ground troops, which will be provided by NATO members on a rotational basis and will remain stationed in their home countries. The various components of the force will be brought together as needed following a deployment order.<sup>13</sup>
- **Continuous air, land, and maritime presence in the eastern part of the alliance on a rotational basis.** This initiative is designed to reassure allies on NATO’s eastern flank, while deterring any Russian threats against them. By deploying such forces on a rotational basis, NATO will continue to abide by the letter of the NATO–Russia Founding Act of 1997, in which the alliance agreed that it would refrain from the “additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.”<sup>14</sup>
- **Creation of command-and-control elements and prepositioned equipment for the VJTF in eastern allied nations.** To facilitate swift deployment of the VJTF, the alliance will create NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU), which are command-and-control and “force reception” facilities in member states in the eastern part of the alliance. NFIUs are currently being established in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania.<sup>15</sup> They will identify logistical networks and transportation infrastructure that the VJTF can use to deploy to a member state rapidly.<sup>16</sup>
- **An enhanced exercise program.** As well as an increase in the number of alliance exercises, leaders committed to ensuring a stronger focus on exercising collective defense.<sup>17</sup>
- **Agreement to reverse the trend of declining defense budgets within the alliance.** Allies already meeting NATO’s target to spend two percent of their gross domestic product on defense made a

commitment in Wales that they would continue to do so. Meanwhile, those allies failing to meet the guideline agreed to move toward the target within a decade.<sup>18</sup>

Since the meeting, NATO has begun implementing these initiatives. Seven developments undertaken since Wales are especially significant. First, NATO has indeed bolstered its military presence in the alliance's eastern member states, as well as having increased the size and frequency of military exercises. The US Army has been deploying units of 150 soldiers to each of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia and announced that it would maintain a "persistent"—rather than permanent—presence along the alliance's eastern flank.<sup>19</sup> The United Kingdom has announced that it will also undertake a persistent presence mission in the Baltic States; the overall British contribution will be 100 military personnel.<sup>20</sup> In March 2015, 600 personnel and 120 vehicles from the United States' 2nd Cavalry Regiment completed a road march of 1,800 kilometers across Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Germany, vividly demonstrating the United States' ability to move armored forces across Eastern Europe.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, in September 2015 personnel from the US Marine Corps began a series of rotational deployments to Bulgaria; at least three deployments are planned over a period of 18 months.<sup>22</sup>

In May 2015, Estonia hosted an exercise that saw 13,500 troops deployed from across the alliance.<sup>23</sup> In June, NATO conducted the two-week Baltops exercise, which involved 49 vessels from 17 countries and a total of 5,900 personnel. It culminated with the staging of a practice amphibious landing at Ustka, Poland, only 100 miles west of Russia's strategic exclave of Kaliningrad.<sup>24</sup> In late October, NATO held Trident Juncture, the alliance's largest exercise in over a decade. It involved 36,000 personnel and took place in the Mediterranean region.<sup>25</sup> For its part, Russia has pointedly conducted even larger military exercises recently, including one in March 2015 that included the participation of 80,000 personnel.<sup>26</sup>

Second, the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR), Gen Philip Breedlove, USAF, declared NATO's VJTF to be operational in June 2015. That announcement was made at the completion of the Noble Jump exercise in Poland, which was the first time the spearhead force deployed and conducted maneuvers.<sup>27</sup>

Third, the United States is in the process of pre-positioning equipment, armored vehicles, and heavy weapons for up to 5,000 American troops in several Eastern European and Baltic countries. It is the first time that the United States has permanently stationed such equipment in NATO member states that were formerly part of the Soviet sphere.<sup>28</sup> Adm James Stavridis, US Navy, retired, a former SACEUR, described the decision as a “very meaningful shift in policy.”<sup>29</sup>

Fourth, the United States announced that it will contribute a slew of “enabling capabilities” to facilitate the VJTF’s operations, including strategic and intertheater lift; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets; special-operations capabilities; command and control; and logistical assets.<sup>30</sup> The announcement reflects an implicit intra-alliance division of labor. A group of European NATO members will provide the ground personnel for the VJTF, while the United States provides necessary supporting capabilities.

Fifth, to minimize the time needed to deploy the VJTF, in June 2015 NATO members granted the SACEUR authority to “alert, stage, and prepare” troops that are part of the force.<sup>31</sup> The SACEUR must still wait for a political decision by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) before actually deploying the taskforce, but the new powers allow the NATO commander to order that the component forces begin preparing for action so they are ready to move upon the NAC’s approval.<sup>32</sup>

Sixth, that same month, the alliance decided to increase the total size of the NRF to 40,000 personnel, up from a previous level of 13,000.<sup>33</sup> Announcing that change, the secretary-general stated, “We have just taken another step forward in adapting NATO to our changed and more challenging security environment.”<sup>34</sup> The NRF, originally created in 2002, provides capabilities for a variety of tasks, including collective defense, crisis management, peace support operations, and disaster relief.<sup>35</sup> As noted, the VJTF has been established as part of the larger NRF structure. The VJTF will be able to deploy before other components of the NRF, which can then reinforce the spearhead unit after it has begun operations.

Seventh, several NATO members have announced plans to maintain or increase the amount of resources they commit to defense. In July 2015, the British government confirmed that the United Kingdom would continue to reach the target for the rest of the decade, allaying fears that it would fall below the goal as a result of government spending

cuts.<sup>36</sup> Germany's government plans to increase defense spending by 6.2 percent over the next five years.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, Poland attained membership in the two-percent club during 2015.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the Czech Republic has announced that its defense spending will increase by 75 percent over the period between now and 2020.<sup>39</sup>

## **The Strategic Benefits of the Readiness Action Plan**

Critics of NATO's recent reform efforts have argued they do not go far enough.<sup>40</sup> For example, how could a spearhead force of 5,000 personnel, or the persistent deployment of 600 American troops to NATO's eastern flank, ever do much against Russia's military machine? After all, Russia has demonstrated its ability to mass large numbers of troops very quickly. In March 2015, Lt Gen Ben Hodges, the US Army's most senior officer in Europe, remarked, "I've been watching the Russian exercises . . . what I cared about is they can get 30,000 people and 1,000 tanks in a place really fast. Damn, that was impressive."<sup>41</sup>

However, the RAP offers at least four major strategic benefits, even though NATO officials have not explicitly stated them in these terms. Instead, these benefits emerge by thinking through the logic of the RAP's various components and considering the assumptions, sometimes left unspoken by Western leaders, which underpin its initiatives. By explicating the *potential* strategic effects offered by the RAP, one can assess how far its implementation has positioned the alliance to reap those benefits. Relatedly, we can identify the remaining challenges NATO faces in achieving the RAP's full potential.

### **Benefits of the RAP**

The four benefits offered by the RAP can be summed up as: deterrence, defense, depth, and deliverables. Each of these, in turn and together, each illustrates why the RAP should be taken seriously and not be hastily dismissed.

#### **The Deterrence Benefit**

In the 1950s Glenn Snyder introduced a distinction between two types of deterrence: that achieved through the threat of punishment and that effected through denial.<sup>42</sup> Deterrence by threat of punishment seeks

to convince an adversary to refrain from a particular action by threatening to inflict costs on the adversary—should it nevertheless proceed—that outweigh the value the adversary attaches to the prospective gain.<sup>43</sup> The credible threat of nuclear retaliation in response to aggression is an example. Contrastingly, deterrence by denial is built upon military forces whose function is chiefly to contest the control of territory and population.<sup>44</sup> That is, deterrence by denial aims to convince an adversary to refrain from an action by credibly threatening to defeat, through one's own assets, an adversary's effort to pursue the action successfully. Following the Ukraine crisis, NATO has reexamined its ability to deter possible Russian aggression against its member states. The RAP primarily strengthens NATO's capacity for deterrence by punishment, with some small benefits offered to its capacity for deterrence by denial.

The enhanced military presence and greater frequency of exercises in NATO's eastern member states mean that personnel throughout the alliance will, for the foreseeable future, be on the ground in NATO states bordering Russia. The critics are quite correct: the numbers involved are small. But, so was the size of the American deployment in West Berlin during the Cold War, relative to the number of Warsaw Pact troops that could have overrun the city. As Thomas Schelling famously pointed out, "The garrison [of American troops] in Berlin is as fine a collection of soldiers as has ever been assembled, but excruciatingly small. What can 7,000 American troops do, or 12,000 Allied troops? Bluntly, they can die. They can die heroically, dramatically, and in a manner that guarantees that the action cannot stop there."<sup>45</sup>

The Berlin garrison provided the famous trip-wire deterrent.<sup>46</sup> If the Warsaw Pact had invaded West Berlin its advance would have led to the deaths of American personnel. In that scenario, no American president would be able to withstand—even if they had wanted to—the overwhelming domestic pressure to retaliate against the Soviet Union, including through the use of nuclear weapons. Since the Soviet Union, presumably, wanted to avoid such a war, the American garrison represented a strong contribution to deterrence by punishment.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, proving in any given situation that deterrence has worked or is working poses a tough methodological problem. We cannot conclude that an adversary has been deterred simply because it refrained from aggressive action. After all, it may have never actually had any intention of undertaking such action.<sup>48</sup> Notwithstanding that challenge, there is

a strategic logic for why the *increased* presence of alliance personnel in eastern NATO states makes it *more likely* that NATO's deterrence by punishment will work. It means that any Russian aggression against an eastern member of NATO would run the risk of killing personnel from countries across the alliance. Assuming that in such a scenario NATO members would be more likely to live up to their Article 5 commitments than would be the case if only Baltic citizens were killed through Russian actions, increased presence should act to enhance deterrence.<sup>49</sup>

The VJTF further bolsters NATO's deterrence-by-punishment capacities. The ability to move the unit quickly to any member of the alliance provides NATO with what Martin Zapfe terms a "mobile trip wire."<sup>50</sup> For example, if the NATO alliance believed Russia was readying itself to launch offensive operations—whether of the conventional or hybrid variety—against a NATO member state, the VJTF could deploy to the threatened country as a way of laying a trip wire.

Persistent presence and the mobile trip wire can only be credible instruments of deterrence by punishment if the alliance is actually willing and able to impose the associated punishments in the face of aggression. Understandably, NATO leaders will be reluctant to employ nuclear first use for purposes of either punishment or denial. But, deterrence by punishment does not necessarily have to rely upon nuclear punishments. Instead, it requires that the punishment imposes costs on an adversary that are greater than the adversary's valuation of the gains through action. Thus, conventional actions against high-value military targets or severe economic sanctions could provide means of deterrence through punishment provided the costs to the adversary outweigh the gains from aggression.

### **The Defense Benefit**

If NATO's deterrence against Russian aggression were to fail—for example if Russian president Vladimir Putin calculates that he can launch operations against a NATO member while avoiding killing members of NATO units rotating through that country—then the RAP also offers NATO additional abilities to defend against Russian aggression. It is correct that 5,000 members of the VJTF will not be able to defeat a large-scale conventional attack by tens of thousands of Russian troops against a NATO member. But, if Putin has designs on NATO members, he would likely look for ways to capture NATO territory without resort-

ing to such a flagrant attack. After all, he would likely calculate that the more outrageous a Russian breach of a NATO member's sovereignty is, the greater the risk Russia runs of an all-out confrontation with the alliance. Therefore, Putin would most likely be looking for ways to "salami slice" his way to gains against NATO, including the use of so-called "little green men" like those who were deployed to such considerable effect in Crimea.<sup>51</sup>

Against this type of operation, NATO's VJTF offers real capabilities. Five thousand well-trained NATO troops deployed rapidly could offer a member state meaningful advantages if it found itself combatting moderate numbers of Russian personnel operating below the threshold of conventional invasion. If the VJTF could do enough to stymie Russia's gains, then other components of the NRF could subsequently reinforce the spearhead unit, providing additional defensive capabilities. Furthermore, NATO's enhanced exercise program offers the alliance the opportunity to rehearse how it would defend against Russian hybrid operations and to think through the appropriate force composition of the VJTF to allow it to defend against unconventional warfare threats. In particular, exercises will allow NATO to develop plans for using the VJTF to augment the forces of eastern members in efforts to counter hybrid war scenarios.

Since the spearhead force offers some defensive capabilities against so-called Russian hybrid operations—thereby raising the costs of such actions to the Kremlin—it also contributes to deterrence by denial against *those* types of moves. That said, the scale of personnel deployments in the eastern alliance region—as well as the amount of pre-positioned equipment to be stored there—would be insufficient to counter any large-scale Russian conventional attack. In that sense, the RAP opts primarily to enhance deterrence by threat of punishment rather than deterrence by denial.

### **The Benefit of Depth**

The RAP also offers the possibility of increasing the alliance's strategic depth, allowing it to respond simultaneously to crises on its eastern and southern flanks. The coincidence of Russia's renewed assertiveness with the rise of ISIL underscored the benefits to NATO of having such a capability. Indeed, Russia could, in the future, attempt to exploit NATO's

preoccupation with a crisis on its southern flank by choosing that moment to undertake action against a NATO member in the east.

NATO has a “level of ambition” of being able to provide command and control for two major joint operations and six smaller operations at any given time.<sup>52</sup> Although NATO officials have not explicitly stated that the RAP offers the alliance a path to building the capacity for responding to two crises simultaneously, the initiative’s implicit division of labor suggests that possibility. Specifically, with proper preparation, the VJTF could be used to respond to a challenge on one of NATO’s flanks, while the United States—using its forces in Germany and Italy—could respond to a challenge on the other flank. For example, in the event of simultaneous crises, the VJTF could be moved to one of the Baltic nations to fulfill its mobile trip-wire role, while American forces in Europe respond to a contingency in the Middle East that is deemed to threaten NATO members. Of course, realizing this theoretical possibility depends upon the United States being able to furnish supporting capabilities for the VJTF, while also having the capacity to support separate operations by its own ground personnel. That challenge will be discussed in greater detail below.

### **The Deliverables Benefit**

The final rationale underpinning the RAP is that it has given NATO members some clear deliverables for what they should be able to achieve with their defense spending. As John Deni has argued, the two-percent spending guideline is not adequate for conveying what defense investments NATO states should be making.<sup>53</sup> For example, he notes that Greece has routinely met the two-percent target, even though the country does not have a highly deployable military. By contrast, Denmark has regularly fallen short of the two-percent guideline, but its forces are much more deployable.<sup>54</sup>

Although the Wales summit saw member states renew their pledges to the two-percent target, the language used in the summit communiqué—which talked about moving toward the goal within a decade—did not inspire much confidence in swift progress. Understandably, many will have interpreted the promise as an artful way of saying the alliance has no real intention of meeting the target. Nevertheless, much more positively, the RAP gives NATO member states some concrete deliverables in the shorter-term, notably including the 48-hour target for the VJTF.

Therefore, even while member states should be held to their two-percent commitment over the long term, they also have nearer-term obligations to ensure their forces are sufficiently deployable and maintained at appropriate readiness to make the VJTF's promised capabilities a reality.

## **The Remaining RAP Challenges**

The decisions NATO leaders announced in Wales and have begun implementing are welcome since they potentially offer the strategic benefits set out above. But, notwithstanding the commendable progress made so far, there are numerous challenges associated with NATO's recent reforms. Cumulatively, these will serve to constrain the alliance's ability to respond quickly and effectively to future crises. Nine issues are especially significant and are elaborated below.

### **Enhanced Presence on the Eastern Flank Is Mainly Provided by the United States**

Although European ground troops have taken part in recent exercises on the alliance's eastern flank, the additional ground presence in the area is being provided primarily by the United States, alongside a persistent contribution from the United Kingdom.<sup>55</sup> After European ground personnel participated in recent exercises, they returned home. The boost to NATO's deterrence through punishment is less than would be the case if additional European nations joined the United States and the United Kingdom in the persistent presence mission. Steven Pifer of the Brookings Institution describes the challenge clearly: "Mr. Putin seems intent on challenging the alliance. The dearth of European boots on the ground might lead the Kremlin to a dangerous conclusion: that important allies might not be prepared to carry out their commitment under NATO's Article 5 to defend the Baltic states. The consequences could be disastrous."<sup>56</sup>

### **The Speed of NATO's Political Decision Making**

The ability of the VJTF to act as a mobile trip wire and as a defensive force relies upon its ability to move rapidly. If it cannot move soon enough to deter impending action, then it cannot be used as a trip wire. In that case, it can still serve a role as a defensive force, provided it can deploy quickly enough to blunt any Russian attack.

The authority to deploy the VJTF resides with the NAC, comprising representatives of all 28 NATO members.<sup>57</sup> NATO has developed a customary practice under which political decisions, including resort to the use of force, require consensus in the NAC.<sup>58</sup> That requirement does not mean NATO's decision making is fated to be slow in every instance. Most notably, it took less than 24 hours for alliance members to invoke Article 5 in the aftermath of 9/11.<sup>59</sup> But, faced with cases of less stark aggression, the need for consensus might slow the alliance response.

Senior NATO leaders are well aware of this problem. Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has pointed out that "it doesn't help to have a force which is ready to move within 48 hours if we need 48 days to take a decision to make it move."<sup>60</sup> NATO's decision to delegate to the SACEUR the authority to alert and stage the VJTF is a commendable step in shortening crisis response times, but it does nothing to address the potentially significant amount of time that might be needed for the NAC to reach consensus.

### **The Downsides of a Mobile Trip Wire**

While the lack of participation by European ground personnel in the new persistent presence mission weakens NATO's static trip wire, there are three other significant downsides associated with the mobile trip-wire deterrent offered by the VJTF.

First, when a crisis erupts, NATO allies' decision making might not only be slow, but also the ultimate decision might be to avoid moving the mobile trip wire into place at all. A major poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in spring 2015 found a distinct wariness among many NATO publics about using military force to defend a NATO ally that comes into conflict with Russia. Most alarmingly, 58 percent of German respondents said that Germany should not use military force to defend a NATO ally in such a situation, while the equivalent figures were 53 percent in France and 51 percent in Italy.<sup>61</sup> Given such sentiment, there is the risk that, even in the face of mounting evidence Russia was preparing to launch some type of military operations against a NATO member, there would be extreme wariness in certain parts of NATO about deploying the VJTF.

Second, and converse to the first downside, relying upon a mobile trip wire creates the potential for inadvertent escalation. Since the trip wire would have to be moved into place, there is the danger the alliance

could inadvertently create or escalate a crisis when none in fact existed. If NATO believes it is receiving warning signs of an impending crisis, then it might deploy the VJTF to a NATO state that appears to be under threat. But, if those warning signs are a false alarm, then the sudden movement of the VJTF could lead Russia to believe NATO has nefarious designs against it. Russia would, in such circumstances, presumably undertake defensive action in response. In that scenario, NATO would have inadvertently created a crisis that did not actually exist. The dangers of such an event occurring with a static trip wire are less acute, precisely because once it is in place it can serve its purpose without the need for further action. Admittedly, given the current wariness within Western societies about resort to military action, there is a greater danger that NATO would be unwilling to deploy the VJTF at all, than that it would move the force too hastily. Nevertheless, NATO's citizens and leaders should recognize the risks of inadvertent escalation associated with a mobile trip wire.

Third, as noted, a mobile trip wire can only be an effective means of deterrence by punishment if NATO is credibly able to threaten the associated punishment in the event the trip wire is crossed. NATO's leaders and citizens must, therefore, think about matters they had hoped were consigned to the dustbin of history. Namely, they must consider what punishments they would be willing and able to inflict upon an adversary who violated the sovereignty of a NATO member. Such punishments would not necessarily have to be nuclear. NATO leaders and citizens must begin to think about the full range of punishments—political, diplomatic, economic, and military—that could serve as credible means of deterrence.

### **The Downsides of Defense in Depth**

Even in the event NATO expedites its decision making significantly, the VJTF and the broader NRF would still have to mobilize and deploy to their area of operations before they could serve either a deterrent or defensive purpose. Jakub Grygiel emphasizes that even the new unit may not be swift enough: “The problem is that 48 hours or three days—the time necessary to organize and send a rapid reaction force—is too long for the type of potential action that Russia might engage in. In 2 days the Baltics are gone, were Russia to engage in a limited war there.”<sup>62</sup>

Of course, whether the Baltics would truly be lost in two days depends upon the level of aggression Russia is willing to perpetrate. The Baltics could be gone within that timeframe in the event of a mass conventional attack by Russian forces. But, if the Kremlin chooses to attempt limited gains through hybrid warfare then it is not necessarily the case that all would be lost within 48 hours. Rather, some NATO territory close to the Russian border might be seized in that time. Assuming Russia's ability to make rapid gains, Grygiel and Wess Mitchell call for NATO to abandon its "defense in depth" strategy, whereby response forces are located away from NATO's flank.<sup>63</sup> Instead, they argue for "preclusive defense," which would entail strengthening the ability of NATO members along the eastern flank to defend themselves against Russian operations. For example, Grygiel and Mitchell argued that eastern members could be provided with antiarmor weapons and precision-guided rockets.<sup>64</sup> Doing so would raise the costs incurred by Russia in any operations against NATO members, thereby bolstering the alliance's ability to deter through denial. Grygiel offers another way to shift NATO's strategy away from defense in depth: "The Baltic states, Poland, Rumania [sic] are the frontline states now, and U.S. bases ought to be located there in order to enhance NATO's credibility and capability to deter any military attempt to revise the existing political order."<sup>65</sup>

Grygiel and Mitchell persuasively enumerate the downsides of defense in depth. Even so, adopting a posture of preclusive defense would also have drawbacks. Most notably, doing so could lead Russia to believe NATO is embracing a highly aggressive stance. Even though that view would be unjustified, in this case objective reality is not all that counts. NATO must also consider Putin's *perception* of reality. Given the tense state of NATO–Russia relations at the moment, boldly moving to a preclusive defense posture risks fueling Russia's assertiveness and a Russian military response if Putin perceives the move as aggressive. In addition, Russia would argue that NATO's adoption of a full-blown strategy of preclusive defense violates the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act. It would likely use that claim as a pretext not only for an assertive military response but also for limiting diplomatic cooperation with the United States and other NATO countries on other issues.

Whether alliance leaders believe it wise to move further—and truly embrace a strategy of preclusive defense—should be based upon an assessment of Putin's likely reaction. Would adopting a preclusive defen-

sive posture in the near future do more to deter Putin or do more to fuel his assertiveness given his assessment of NATO's purpose in shifting its posture? To answer that question, alliance leaders will need to draw upon the best assessments available of Putin's thinking.

### **Insufficient Consideration of Appropriate Political Control Mechanisms for the VJTF after Deployment**

In addition to the challenge posed by slow political decision making regarding the VJTF's deployment, a distinct challenge pertains to decision making in the period after the task force is deployed. So far there has been little public discussion about how political control over the VJTF's combat operations will be exercised. Strictly, the NAC will retain political control. But, the challenges of having a 28-nation body that relies upon consensus running a war are obvious. Indeed, during the Kosovo conflict, some in the media dubbed NATO's military campaign an example of "war by committee."<sup>66</sup>

There are, of course, strengths and weaknesses to undertaking action as an alliance. As Patricia Weitsman pointed out, the very institutionalization of NATO that increases transparency and facilitates cooperation in peacetime may undermine fighting effectiveness during wartime.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, those costs are offset by the enhanced political legitimacy conferred through multilateral action.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, although NATO decision making ultimately requires consensus, the alliance has found ways to respect that requirement while also maximizing efficiency. During NATO's operations in Kosovo, to avoid a divisive internal debate while the alliance was at war, a compromise was struck whereby Secretary-General Javier Solana was delegated the authority to approve politically-sensitive target categories for NATO air strikes.<sup>69</sup> As a condition of the compromise, NATO members requested that Solana informally consult with those allies that had particular concerns before making his decisions.<sup>70</sup>

In a future crisis, even after a decision has been made to deploy the VJTF, that force could be inserted into a fast-changing conflict environment. For the VJTF to be effective, it will likely require further political guidance as it seeks to react to the actions of an adversary. To ensure operational effectiveness, NATO members could decide to delegate such decisions to a subset of officials or member states. But, in public announcements so far, there has been no indication that official planning

has taken place yet regarding whether such delegation is necessary and, if so, who exactly should be authorized to make decisions after the VJTF has been deployed.

### **Will NATO Have the Will and Military Capacity to Respond to Two Crises Simultaneously?**

The third rationale for the RAP is its potential contribution in giving NATO a capacity to respond to two crises simultaneously. The VJTF would have to be used to deal with one, and American ground forces in Europe would be used to deal with the other. For that to happen, three things must hold: (1) there must be consensus among alliance members that the alliance should respond to multiple crises; (2) since the United States would need to play a pivotal role in responding to both crises, it would have to be willing to do so; and (3) the military capacity for simultaneous deployment must exist. Summoning public support for deploying the alliance's forces for a single contingency—let alone winning support for two deployments at once—is likely to remain a difficult task. Exacerbating the challenge is the reality that, as Martin Michelot points out, different members of NATO have different threat perceptions, with eastern members most concerned about Russia and some other members most worried by instability to NATO's south.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, if we witnessed the outbreak of simultaneous crises, alliance members could find themselves debating which is the more pressing priority rather than responding to both.

Additionally, the rosy picture painted above assumes the United States would be willing and able to provide a host of enabling capabilities for the VJTF, as it has announced it will do, while also using its own forces to respond to another contingency. It is an open question as to whether the United States has the capabilities to do that at present, given the various demands on its military resources and the impact of defense spending constraints on the overall level of resources available to the American military.<sup>72</sup>

### **Is NATO's Defense Spending Sufficient to Achieve the RAP's Strategic Benefits?**

Reaping the strategic benefits promised will be expensive for NATO members. To take just one example, they will need to maintain personnel in a state of readiness sufficient to make the VJTF's deployment

objectives a reality. They will have to devote resources to training and exercising those forces and create and maintain the infrastructure to deploy the forces rapidly.<sup>73</sup> In theory, the public announcement of the VJTF's intended capabilities could act as a spur to investment since NATO members now have some concrete deliverables. But, thus far the trajectory of overall alliance defense spending remains worrisome. Notwithstanding the several bits of welcome news described above, NATO's overall spending on defense was estimated to have declined by 1.5 percent in real terms in 2015 compared to 2014.<sup>74</sup>

### **Problems in Improving Strategic Warning**

As Richard Betts pointed out in the 1980s, when assessing one's vulnerability to surprise, it is useful to make a distinction between strategic warning and policy response.<sup>75</sup> That is, governments and alliances can be caught by surprise either because they failed to receive warning of a dramatic change in the security environment or because, even though they received warning, they failed to respond adequately to it.

The most significant reforms NATO has undertaken since the Wales summit are intended to improve the alliance's ability to deter future crises and to respond to them should they occur. After all, the VJTF is a worthy attempt to enhance policy response. There is less evidence that the alliance has made major reforms to improve its receipt of strategic warning regarding security challenges. The VJTF's ability to move within 48 hours will count for little if NATO leaders do not receive adequate warning of mounting crises.

The Wales summit declaration stated that "we will enhance our intelligence and strategic awareness and we will place renewed emphasis on advance planning."<sup>76</sup> But, there is reason for concern about the alliance's current capabilities related to strategic intelligence and the provision of warning about impending crises. In April 2015, the SACEUR told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "Russian military operations in Ukraine and the region more broadly have underscored that there are critical gaps in our collection and analysis. Some Russian military exercises have caught us by surprise, and our textured feel for Russia's involvement on the ground in Ukraine has been quite limited."<sup>77</sup>

During the hearing, General Breedlove said that his command's pool of Russia experts had "shrunk considerably" since the end of the Cold

War, as analysts and assets were shifted to other priorities, notably including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>78</sup>

### **Possible Links between NATO's Changing Conventional Posture and Russia's Nuclear Threats**

Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, Russia's overall military tempo has increased appreciably. For example, Russian heavy bomber aircraft have recently flown more patrols outside of Russian airspace than in any year since the Cold War.<sup>79</sup> Among all the manifestations of Russia's increased military activity, perhaps the most concerning is the manner in which Russia has made nuclear threats. In March 2015, during a television documentary, President Putin said he had been ready to put his nuclear forces on alert during the country's forcible seizure of Crimea.<sup>80</sup> Later the same month, the Russian ambassador to Denmark threatened that his country would target its nuclear missiles at Danish warships if Denmark went through with its plans to contribute radar capabilities to NATO's missile defense shield.<sup>81</sup> In November 2015, a Russian television broadcast of a meeting between Putin and senior military officers revealed a proposal for the development of a Russian torpedo designed to deliver a nuclear weapon against foreign ports.<sup>82</sup> Although the Russian government later claimed that public revelation of the project was an accident, it is more likely that the Kremlin wanted the world to believe that it is committed to developing such a weapon.<sup>83</sup>

What is driving the increased frequency with which Putin and other Russian officials are making both veiled and explicit nuclear threats? Putin could be deliberately cultivating a reputation for being willing to escalate quickly to the nuclear level and use that reputation as a means of coercion. As Schelling said, "Sometimes we can get a little credit for not having everything quite under control, for being a little impulsive or unreliable."<sup>84</sup> Putin may believe that if he can convince NATO leaders that he is willing to escalate rapidly to the nuclear level, then in any future crisis—say over the Baltic countries—he will hold an advantage.

There is an alternative—but not mutually exclusive—reason for why Russia might have decided to stress its nuclear capabilities over the past months. As Pifer explains, "Although Russia is modernizing its conventional forces, NATO maintains qualitative and quantitative edges, while China has greatly increased its conventional capabilities. Nuclear weapons offer an offset for conventional force disadvantages."<sup>85</sup>

Although Russia might hold advantages in the sheer number of troops it has deployed close to NATO's eastern flank, the alliance is regarded as having a qualitative edge. Today, NATO leaders should be alert to the possibility that their moves to bolster the alliance's conventional power in Eastern Europe will drive Putin to rely increasingly upon nuclear weapons as part of Russia's military strategy. Even though NATO leaders do not intend their increasing conventional power to be a means to take offensive action against Russia, what matters, once again, is Putin's *perception* of why NATO is bolstering its conventional forces in the alliance's east. If Putin believes the moves are an offensive threat to Russia, he may respond by placing greater emphasis on nuclear weapons in Russia's military strategy. Nuclear weapons could, in his mind, be Russia's trump card. That does not mean NATO should desist from the moves already afoot to augment its conventional power. Nevertheless, NATO officials should remain keenly aware of the possibility that doing so could have unwelcome consequences.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Before the NATO summit in July 2016, the alliance's leaders should work to address the above challenges so as to fulfill the strategic rationales of the RAP. As a starting point, NATO ministers should consider nine policy recommendations.

### **Bolster NATO's Persistent Deployments in the East**

Given the downsides of defense in depth, a moderate increase in the military presence along the alliance's eastern flank—which would enhance the trigger for punishment—should be considered immediately. The alliance should consider bolstering the persistent deployments already underway in the east in two ways: increasing their overall size and ensuring that additional NATO members join the United States and United Kingdom in contributing ground forces. Pifer has recommended that paired US and European units form joint trip wires in each of the following countries: Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.<sup>86</sup> Establishing such units would not require the United States to deploy any more forces since it has already committed 150 personnel to each of those nations on a persistent basis. The United Kingdom has committed to provide 100 personnel in total. Therefore, creating four paired US–

European units—each comprising 300 personnel—would only require that NATO’s remaining 25 European nations agree to contribute 500 troops from among them for persistent deployments. After that step is taken, NATO could increase the size of each of the units, if needed, as a response to future increases in Russian assertiveness.

Undertaking this step will bolster the alliance’s static trip wire, while avoiding an announcement that the alliance is stationing a large number of troops in the east permanently. That is, it will strengthen the trigger for deterrence by punishment without moving to a full-blown strategy of preclusive defense—and deterrence by denial—that risks contributing to Russia’s military assertiveness and potentially increasing its reliance on nuclear weapons as a military strategy.

### **Provide Eastern Members of NATO with Enhanced Defensive Capabilities**

NATO should not move to a full-blown strategy of preclusive defense at the moment. Nevertheless, Grygiel and Mitchell make a strong case that by relying almost exclusively upon defense in depth, NATO risks succumbing to limited war operations by Russia in eastern member states. Therefore, the alliance should consider adopting Grygiel’s and Mitchell’s recommendation for bolstering the military capabilities of eastern allies by providing them with defensive capabilities. For example, the alliance could consider the construction of hardened aircraft shelters at air bases in the Baltic States, so alliance air assets deployed to the region would be less vulnerable to the threat of cruise missiles or short-range ballistic missiles. Additionally, frontline states—especially Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland—should receive enhanced defensive capabilities, such as light antiarmor weapons, to raise the potential costs Russia would incur in any limited war operations against them.

By raising those costs, this step would offer NATO a capacity for deterrence by denial against Russia. In addition, by providing defensive weapons, NATO can allay some of Putin’s concerns regarding the motivation behind the policy, thereby reducing the potential for the move to fuel an aggressive reaction on Russia’s part. Of course, as Robert Jervis once pointed out, “whether a weapon is offensive or defensive often depends on the particular situation.”<sup>87</sup> After all, one can use an antiarmor weapon defensively if one’s territory is being invaded, but the same weapon could also be used during offensive operations.

Therefore, if NATO leaders decide to supply eastern allies with additional weapons for defensive purposes, they should signal that that is indeed the purpose. For example, by providing such weapon systems to the Baltic members without moving large numbers of NATO troops into those countries on a permanent basis, the alliance can signal that the weapons are to be used for defensive purposes, rather than for supporting offensive operations by NATO against Russia. By considering this recommendation, the alliance could attain some of the benefits associated with preclusive defense, without all of the risks a full-blown version of the strategy would entail.

Even so, NATO should not rule out preclusive defense as a potential approach at some point in the future if Russia continues to flex its military muscles. But, before doing so, NATO leaders and officials would have to weigh carefully the risks and benefits of taking that step.

### **Delegate Power over VJTF Deployment**

To ensure the VJTF can be a truly rapid reaction force, alliance members should consider how they can facilitate swifter political decisions regarding force deployment, while still allowing all 28 democracies a voice in determining when NATO resorts to using the unit. As Leo Michel points out, consensus decision making in NATO embodies a very important principle: “It reflects the NATO structure as an alliance of independent and sovereign countries, as opposed to a supranational body, and exemplifies for many the ‘one for all, all for one’ ethos of the organization’s collective defense commitment.”<sup>88</sup>

For reasons of democratic accountability, NATO should not dispense with the principle that the alliance acts through consensus. But, at the same time, alliance leaders must consider the costs incurred in terms of reaction time. Some security experts have already recommended the alliance undertake discussions regarding how much power over the VJTF should be devolved to the SACEUR.<sup>89</sup> NATO could establish a procedure whereby, in times of rising tensions, the NAC—acting through consensus—could delegate to the alliance’s secretary-general and the SACEUR the ability to deploy the VJTF. This would represent a variation of the precedent set during the Kosovo campaign when the secretary-general was delegated the authority to expand the target set for NATO air strikes. Under this mechanism, the NAC could reach a unanimous agreement that for a period of, for instance, 90 days, the

secretary-general and the SACEUR could jointly agree to deploy the VJTF to an area of crisis. After 90 days, the delegated authority could be renewed or might be allowed to lapse if there no longer appeared to be a sufficient threat to justify continuation.

Before the Warsaw Summit, NATO leaders should consider whether this procedure, or a similar one, offers substantial advantages in terms of swifter political decision making, while continuing to respect NATO's tradition of consensus sufficiently. Furthermore, NATO leaders must carefully consider whether such a proposal contains adequate checks against the dangers of inadvertent escalation that might result from inopportune deployment of the VJTF in a time of apparent crisis.

### **Delegate Political Control over the VJTF after Deployment**

In a similar vein, NATO leaders should also consider potential mechanisms for delegating political control over the VJTF's subsequent operations after it has been deployed. Under current alliance arrangements, the NAC would make a policy decision to respond to a crisis and would issue strategic planning guidance to the SACEUR.<sup>90</sup> Since such guidance might need to be refined to take account of an evolving crisis situation following VJTF deployment, an important question is whether it would be beneficial for the NAC to delegate control over subsequent updates to planning guidance to a subset of NATO officials and members? If so, what is the appropriate group? For example, if NATO follows the recommendation above and decides to delegate VJTF deployment decisions to the secretary-general and SACEUR, should those two officials also have the authority to direct subsequent changes in the VJTF's operations, or should a wider group have control over postdeployment actions?

### **Undertake Political Decision-Making Exercises as a Complement to Military Exercises**

As an additional means of increasing the speed of political decision making, as well as allowing officials to think through the potentially escalatory implications of deploying the VJTF, NATO should familiarize civilian officials from member states with the types of decisions they might be called upon to make during a crisis. Commendably, NATO has increased the size and frequency of its military exercises since the

Wales summit. It should now complement those exercises with similar initiatives related to political decision making.

Holding such crisis simulation exercises among senior civilian officials would help them to identify, ahead of time, when the alliance would be prepared to deploy the VJTF and how it might be used. By doing so, civilian officials will be more prepared, when the crunch actually comes, to take the necessary political decisions to use the spearhead force, rather than having to think through the modalities of doing so from scratch. Furthermore, for at least some future NATO military exercises, the alliance could integrate civilian crisis simulations into the military activities, thereby helping the organization to prepare itself to integrate rapid political decision making with rapid military deployment.

Such exercises should be used as an opportunity to think through how decisions to deploy the VJTF might contribute to crisis escalation. For example, as part of the simulations, NATO experts on Russia could give their assessment of likely Russian responses to decisions taken by NATO civilian leaders during the exercise. By considering such responses, alliance leaders will be able to develop a better understanding of how Putin might react to their use of the VJTF.

### **Develop the Ability to Respond to Two Crises Simultaneously**

The major obstacles to using the RAP structures as a means of responding to two crises simultaneously are political will and military capacity. A way to overcome those obstacles would be, first, to conduct an assessment of whether the United States already has the military capacity to provide combat enablers for a VJTF deployment while, at the same time, deploying a VJTF-sized force composed of American personnel in Germany and Italy to deal with a second crisis. If so, NATO should, with appropriate notifications to Russia and other countries, conduct military exercises to showcase its capacity to respond to two crises simultaneously.

If the alliance currently lacks the military capacity to do so, then it should prioritize developing the ability to deploy two 5,000-personnel units rapidly and concurrently. Doing so would likely necessitate developing additional combat enablers for the VJTF, and European nations would have to develop such capacities themselves so US assets could be used to support its own operations in such a scenario. Once NATO has

developed such capability, then it should, as above, showcase it through suitable exercises.

While far from a panacea for the lack of political will to undertake multiple military operations, such exercises could help to mitigate that reluctance within Western societies. After all, if NATO has a demonstrated capability to respond to two crises, political leaders within the alliance would likely feel somewhat more comfortable about doing so should the need ever arise. Additionally, by showcasing its ability to handle two operations concurrently, the alliance can seek to deter an adversary from trying to use Western states' preoccupation with a security crisis, or distraction, in one region as an opportune moment to spark another crisis.

### **Appoint an Independent Commission to Hold NATO States Accountable for the Operational Deliverables Contained in the RAP**

Developing and then maintaining the operational capabilities contained within the RAP will only occur if the alliance finds a way to incentivize member states to devote the necessary resources to the task. Publicly stating NATO's objectives will not be enough, since there is already a tradition of US secretaries of defense chiding European members of NATO for not spending enough on defense.<sup>91</sup> In spite of such exhortations, the problem of inadequate spending persists.

Until now, the SACEUR has been responsible for declaring whether the alliance has met the operational targets of the RAP, as he did when he certified that the VJTF was operational last year. But, another useful means of incentivizing members to meet their RAP commitments would be the appointment of an independent commission to evaluate whether NATO is delivering on its objectives. By establishing a second entity tasked with assessing whether its readiness goals are being met, NATO would increase the incentives members have to meet their stated commitments since they would not wish to risk a negative report from the independent body.

The commission would be comprised of former senior military officials from across the alliance. On a periodic basis, NATO would test the VJTF and NRF capacities in exercises similar to last year's Noble Jump. The independent commission would produce a public report evaluating the alliance's performance and reaching an assessment of whether NATO is meeting the RAP's deliverables. The report would address the

performance of specific allies, evaluating whether their forces have been maintained at sufficient levels of readiness and have achieved the deployability necessary to meet RAP objectives. The report would act as a form of public pressure to ensure the alliance commits the necessary resources to making the RAP a reality.

Of course, a public report comes with an obvious downside, namely that it would alert potential adversaries to weaknesses in the alliance's operational performance. Yet, that is also a virtue. Since member states would want to prevent a situation in which they failed to meet their RAP commitments and that fact was then advertised to the world, they would have an incentive to ensure they are in fact delivering on those goals. It would serve as a strong commitment device to the welcome objectives set out in Wales.

### **Review the Role of the NATO Intelligence Fusion Center**

As noted, thus far NATO's reforms have focused on enhancing policy response, whereas there appears to have been less attention given to increasing the alliance's ability to provide policy makers with strategic warning. NATO already has a multinational intelligence unit—the NATO Intelligence Fusion Center (NIFC)—located in the United Kingdom. The NIFC falls under the operational command of the SACEUR, and its mission is to provide intelligence to warn of potential crises and to support the planning and execution of NATO operations.<sup>92</sup> As part of an effort to enhance the alliance's strategic warning capacities, NATO should review the NIFC's operations and look for ways to bolster its capacities. The review should evaluate the performance of the NIFC since its establishment in 2007, including an assessment of how effectively it has contributed to intra-alliance intelligence sharing.

Different members of the alliance are likely to have comparative advantages in the collection and analysis of intelligence on particular threats and potential crises. For instance, when it comes to assessing Russian activities, eastern members of the alliance likely possess particular assets—notably including a cadre of intelligence officers with Russian language skills—that can contribute significantly to alliance-wide efforts. A thorough review of NIFC's activities would help ensure that best use is being made of all members' intelligence capabilities for purposes of strategic warning. In addition, the review would consider ways to improve such warning. For example, it could consider what warning

indicators might precede the onset of Russian hybrid war operations in NATO members in the east or whether there are particular indicators that would give the alliance better warning of political instability in Middle Eastern countries.

### **Seek a Better Understanding of Russia's Nuclear Doctrine and Thinking**

As NATO continues to augment its capacity for conventional military action to defend the eastern flank of the alliance, its leaders should seek to develop a better understanding of Russia's nuclear doctrine and how NATO's conventional reforms might affect it. NATO should not refrain from improving its conventional capabilities since those improvements will enhance the alliance's deterrent, defense, and crisis response abilities. Still, as NATO does so, it should also seek a deeper understanding about how Russia might adapt its nuclear strategy in response. NATO can thereby better prepare itself to counter Russian nuclear doctrine in future crises.

Developing a better grasp of Russian thinking regarding nuclear weapons is an incredibly difficult task. Notwithstanding that, Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists has proposed engagement in serious dialogues with Russian nuclear experts.<sup>93</sup> Through such discussions, conducted at both the official and the track-two levels, NATO officials could strive to obtain a clearer understanding of Russia's nuclear thinking. While the potential to change such thinking might be limited, deeper understanding of how Russia's current leaders conceptualize the utility of nuclear weapons could be incredibly beneficial in helping NATO leaders to avoid sudden and unwanted escalation of future crises with Russia. If NATO simply proceeds to enhance its own conventional capacities without understanding how that process might be influencing Russian thinking—whether that thinking is justified or not—the alliance will be travelling down a dangerous path with its eyes closed.

### **Conclusion**

The reemergence of Russian military assertiveness, coincident with the rise of the ISIL, was a rude awakening for NATO members. In unveiling the RAP, alliance leaders demonstrated that they could put for-

ward a coherent response. The RAP, if implemented fully, offers four major strategic benefits. Nevertheless, considerable challenges remain. Between now and the Warsaw summit, NATO leaders should tackle those challenges by considering the policy recommendations set out above. If they do so, NATO will find itself better prepared to respond to the next major crisis, whether it emanates from close to its borders or from an out of area location. **SSQ**

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