

From Wales to Warsaw: NATO's Readiness Action Plan

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At the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Summit in Wales on September 4-5, 2014, NATO leaders were clear about the security challenges on the Alliance's borders. In the East, Russia's actions threaten our vision of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace. On the Alliance's southeastern border, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's campaign of terror poses a threat to the stability of the Middle East and beyond. To the south, across the Mediterranean, Libya is becoming increasingly unstable.

In Wales, NATO leaders took decisive steps to address these challenges. First and foremost, Allies reaffirmed the central mission of the Alliance: the shared responsibility of collective defense. As Vice President Joe Biden said at the Munich Security Conference in February 2015, "The principle of collective defense enshrined in Article Five of the Washington Treaty represents a sacred commitment not just for now, but forever."

NATO leaders also recognized that the Alliance needs to adapt and be able to respond swiftly to threats to ensure the defense of all 28 Allies.

To undertake these key adaptations, NATO leaders agreed to a new Readiness Action Plan, commonly known as "RAP." As the most significant enhancement of NATO's collective defense since the end of the Cold War, RAP fundamentally changes the Alliance's posture along three interconnected and interdependent tracks.

First, Allies agreed to an increase of NATO's presence in Central and Eastern Europe "as long as necessary," with additional equipment, training, exercises, and troop rotations. These air, sea, and land exercises are already well underway. Increased NATO air patrols over the Baltics continue, as do the naval patrols in the Baltic and Black Seas. NATO land formations exercise persistently with our eastern-most Allies. In December 2014, NATO Foreign Ministers confirmed that all 28 Allies had pledged contributions to sustain these measures through 2015.

The United States is leading the NATO effort through US European Command's Operation Atlantic Resolve. The Second Cavalry Regiment is currently working alongside our Allies in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in tactical exercises, small arms live-fire drill, and winter warfare training. In addition, the European Reassurance Initiative, which the President announced last year, provides approximately \$1 billion for enhancing the presence, readiness, and responsiveness of not only the US military forces in Europe, but also our NATO Allies and partners. As former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said in February, "this initiative will enable us to continue providing a persistent presence of US air, land, and maritime forces along the Alliance's eastern flank."

Second, NATO is undertaking a series of adaptation measures so that it's better suited to deal with challenges in its own territory. The centerpiece is to generate an improved and restructured NATO Response Force (NRF) that—for the first time in NATO history—will respond in several days' notice, giving the Alliance a critical quick reaction capability with a high level of readiness.

As part of its enhanced NRF, NATO is developing a permanent, brigade-sized “spearhead” force—the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF)—which will enable NATO to respond more quickly to deter and defend against security threats arising along its borders. The VJTF is not a distant policy vision—it already exists on an interim basis, thanks to the leadership of Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway. At the NATO Defense Ministerial in February, Ministers decided that the “permanent” VJTF will consist of a land brigade of around 5,000 troops, which will be supported by air, sea, and special operations forces. The lead element of this land brigade will be ready to move within as little as two to three days, with the rest moving within a week. The VJTF will be backed up by two more brigades—a rapid reinforcement capability of approximately 15,000 troops in case of a major crisis. Six Allies have now stepped forward as “Framework Nations” for the new Spearhead Force: France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom have offered to take up this lead role, in rotation, in the coming years.

Third, NATO is shifting its posture to the east. NATO has agreed to set up six small command and control centers across the Alliance's eastern flank, in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. These centers could serve as reception bases for either exercising forces, or—in the event of a crisis—for facilitating the reinforcement of an eastern Ally, including the deployment of the VJTF. Overseeing these six centers, a corps-level headquarters in western Poland will serve as a regional hub, designed to focus on the defense of northeastern NATO territory. It will command and control exercises in that area, conduct defense planning, and—if NATO has to operate in that area—it could command and control NATO operations in the area, as well.

NATO is moving quickly, but let's be clear: these adaptations will not be easy. For the past two decades, NATO faced a very different challenge: to generate forces on a very deliberate, predictable basis for operations beyond NATO territory. Nations prepared troops for scheduled deployments with ample lead time. Today, however, the security challenges on NATO's periphery demand a different kind of force, one that remains at a heightened state of readiness to be deployed within days, not months. These measures require careful planning and rehearsal, and this is well underway: this year, the interim VJTF will be used as a “test bed” to assess command and control, logistics, and sustainment—all essential ingredients as the permanent VJTF takes shape.

The challenges ahead are formidable. To be successful, the Readiness Action Plan must be viable, affordable, and sustainable. As the Alliance confronts current and emerging threats, from the crisis in Ukraine to the spread of violent extremism, one thing is clear: NATO will adapt, just as it has throughout its 65-year history. The Readiness Action Plan is a commitment to the core values of this Alliance, and will be a tangible demonstration of Alliance solidarity.