

Taking Stock of NATO's Response Force

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“We are there”, then NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, gleefully told reporters at the Riga summit in November 2006.² Only four years after formally agreeing to the creation of a 25,000 strong deployable and technologically advanced allied force – the NATO Response Force (NRF) – the Atlantic Alliance thus declared its new military tool a “fully operational capability” (FOC). NATO, so it seemed, had created a potent instrument of power projection and a catalyst for transformation at record speed. However, the political enthusiasm surrounding the NRF was soon to evaporate – and for good reasons: as a result of depressingly low fill rates and political differences as to what operational role the force should actually play, the Alliance has been propelled to agree to no less than two major overhauls of the concept since late 2006. Not even a year subsequent to the FOC declaration – in October 2007 – NATO policy-makers approved the first major revision of the NRF, diminishing the size of the rapid response force significantly. In June 2009, NATO decided to revise the concept for the second time. What was intended to be the Alliance’s mailed fist and “a show-case of NATO resolve and collective commitment to military transformation”³ has thus become a force largely on paper. As pointed out by Hans Binnendijk, one of the NRF-concept’s intellectual fathers: “The NRF is a force that should be on steroids, and instead it’s on life support”.⁴

This report takes stock of the political and military issues that have hitherto shaped the debate about the NRF. It assesses the force’s operational and transformational accomplishments and provides an overview of the major policy-positions and fault lines characterising the current discussions. The report is informed by three main arguments. Firstly, it is argued, that the NRF has been a qualified failure: although the initiative has had an irrefutable transformational impact, lack of concrete troop commitments and disagreement as to the force’s operational role have largely eroded its effectiveness. So far, the force has thus had a mostly negative bearing on the Alliance’s credibility.

Secondly, it is argued that the NRF in many respects constitutes a microcosm of the wider debate about NATO’s purpose and future roles. The lack of a common sense of purpose that has bedevilled the Atlantic Alliance for the last two decades is clearly reflected in the discussions related to the response force. At the heart of the matter is the fact that NATO has become slightly different things to different nations: in a nutshell, the NRF has fallen victim to the same strategic confusion that is currently plaguing the Atlantic Alliance.

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² NATO, “Closing Press Conference by Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer”, 29 November 2006. <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2006/s061129d.htm>.

³ Sten Rynning, “A New Military Ethos? NATO’s Response Force”, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 3, no 1, Spring 2005, p. 5.

⁴ The Economist, “Have combat experience, will travel”, 26 March 2009.

A third and final argument concerns the future: although demanding out-of-area operations are likely to keep Western armed forces busy in the years to come, the newly revised NRF-construct might just be the scheme that saves the Alliance's transformational flagship from doom. In any event, the NRF is less likely to be perceived as a failure as criteria for success have been – somewhat creatively – redefined.

A Brief History of the NRF

The NRF-concept approved by NATO-leaders at the Prague Transformation Summit in November 2002 essentially entailed the making of the type of “strike force that could have deployed to Afghanistan and worked closely with US forces there” during Operation Enduring Freedom.⁵ In essence, the initiative was thus conceived to furnish NATO with an agile and robust military tool, while at the same time inducing an expeditionary mind-set among the European allies. NATO-Europe, so it was argued, needed to invest in an intrinsically American “way of war”. Hence, the 25,000 strong – dominantly European – “first generation NRF” was designed as a technologically advanced military tool, capable of engaging in high-intensity operations across the globe at short notice. As such, the NRF was not unlike a US Marine Expeditionary Brigade. If successful, it was expected that the force would help to shrink the so-called “transatlantic capability gap” and, in turn, alleviate the political fall-out of the military lopsidedness between the United States and its junior partners. Revitalizing the Alliance at a time of internal crisis was thus the concept's underlying political rationale.⁶

In this, the NRF-construct's first incarnation, the force comprised a reinforced brigade combat team, a combined naval task force and an air element capable of undertaking approximately 200 combat sorties per day. In addition to these core elements, the force was planned to include a number of smaller niche capabilities including a special forces component.⁷ By rotating both national troop commitments and NATO-assets assigned to the force every six months, the NRF was – and still is – structured to stimulate transformation. After an initial six months of national training, units designated to the NRF undergo another six-months NATO exercise programme and a final test before being certified as a NRF-force. Only then is the entire multinational force put on six months standby, as NRF-rotation number X.

It took a while and some tough discussions between Allied Command Operations (ACO) in Mons and NATO's International Military Staff in Brussels before the Alliance could announce the NRF's mission statement.⁸ But eventually NATO's military

authorities concluded that the new force should be prepared to undertake seven generic missions, ranging from deployment as an initial entry force in a hostile environment at the high end of the conflict spectrum to non-kinetic operations such as non-combatant evacuation and consequence management operations at the other end of the operational spectrum. At the Istanbul summit in 2004, the NATO family formally agreed to the proposed mission set.

From Prague to NATO's summit in Riga in November 2006, the force progressed swiftly. At least to a certain point. Beginning in June 2003, NATO's defence ministers approved the Detailed Implementation Plan; the first force generation conference was held in July 2003; in October 2003, NRF 1 was formally launched; and after a number of exercises in late 2003 and 2004, the Secretary General, and SACEUR, General James Jones, declared the force an Initial Operational Capability in October 2004. About a year later, in September and October 2005, a few NRF-elements were deployed for the first time in order to provide disaster relief in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. At about the same time and until February 2006, a more substantial part of the force was used in the disaster relief effort in Pakistan following the 8 October 2005 earthquake. Since then, the NRF has not been utilized in “real world operations”.

As we shall see below, the NRF was not declared FOC at the Riga summit in November 2006 without considerable difficulties. Until immediately before the summit, the force's manpower quotas – in NATO-speak: the Combined Joint Statement of Requirement (CJSOR) – were not adequately met and only with the use of somewhat creative, last-minute measures did NATO's military authorities manage to meet the objective, allowing the Secretary General to proclaim “mission accomplished”.⁹

However, as it became clear in the spring of 2007 that the capability offers for the following NRF rotations were critically low, NATO defence ministers agreed to a first revision of the force, in October 2007: following the suggestions made by SACEUR and the NATO chiefs of defence, the Alliance adopted the – still functioning – so-called “graduated approach”, i.e. the NRF's second incarnation. According to this formula, the actual NRF is slimmed significantly to about 12.500 troops organised as a core of command and control elements and a number of key enablers onto which further pre-designated elements can be bolted. These supplementary elements are in principle part of the NRF, but can be used by nations for other purposes even while they are formally on stand-by. Without additional force generation the “core NRF” is merely able to conduct the least demanding of the seven generic missions, i.e. consequence management.¹⁰

⁵ Richard Kugler, *The NATO Response Force 2002-2006: Innovation by the Atlantic Alliance* (Washington DC: Center for Technology and National Security Policy, National Defense University, 2007), p. 4.

⁶ Hans Binnendijk and Richard Kugler, “Transforming European Forces”, *Survival*, vol. 44, no. 3, Autumn 2002.

⁷ Nicholas Stringer, *Refining the NATO Response Force: Improved Utility from a Revised Construct*, (Alabama: Maxwell Air Force Base, April 2008), pp. 5-8; Nicholas Fiorenza, “Ready for action”, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 27 September 2006.

⁸ Interview, NATO Headquarters, October 2009.

⁹ Interview, SHAPE, October 2009.

¹⁰ Interview, Danish Ministry of Defence, August 2009; Interviews, NATO Headquarters, October 2009; Der Spiegel, “Eingreiftruppe am Ende”, 17 September, 2007; Judy Dempsey, “NATO retreats from establishment of rapid-reaction force”, *New York Times*, 20 September 2007; John Mark, “NATO to scale back reaction force”, *The Irish Times*, 26 October 2007.

Assessing the NRF's performance

To what extent has the NRF met the aspirations set out by policy-makers at the Prague Summit and in subsequent policy-papers? On the positive side, there is little doubt that the NRF has contributed to the modernisation of NATO's Force Structure. Although often ignored – because of the somewhat unmerited tendency to focus one-sidedly on the NRF's operational dimension – the force has generated genuine transformational benefits including a growing European acceptance of the need to invest in deployable and sustainable military capabilities. Significantly, senior NATO-officials in Brussels, Mons and Norfolk ascribe the NRF an important role in the rather successful implementation of the so-called Prague Capabilities Commitments. In some areas, such as defence against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons, quite remarkable progress has been made. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the force has been instrumental in instilling an increasingly expeditionary mind-set in several European capitals. Allegedly, the concept has facilitated the promotion of an embryonic expeditionary strategic culture within NATO-Europe.¹¹

The question, of course, is whether NATO's ongoing operations in the Hindu Kush and elsewhere have undermined the transformational *raison d'être* of the NRF. Has not Afghanistan become the main driver of reform within the Alliance, thereby diluting a key rationale behind an allied reaction force? There is little doubt that the Afghan-International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has served as an important catalyst for transformation and increased investments in expeditionary capabilities.¹² However, relying solely on current and recent operations as engines of transformation would leave the Alliance perilously ill-equipped for the future as it would focus training, organisation, and capability development exclusively on ISAF-type operations. In effect, NATO would generate armed forces configured entirely for military undertakings below the threshold of major combat operations. The high-intensity capabilities that the NRF is currently adding to the transformation agenda would be missing.

This is certainly not a problem if – as some have argued – the effort to turn NATO-Europe's armed forces into something akin to the US military is intrinsically misguided; if the types of operations that NATO will have to conduct in the future "will require different capabilities and a different understanding of war from what has to date been advanced through NATO transformation"¹³, then NRF driven reform is, indeed, flawed

and superfluous. However, if one assumes, as does this author, that the Europeans – and the Atlantic Alliance – are better prepared for future challenges with capabilities tailored to conduct high-performance interventions and conventional war-fighting in their military inventory, then the NRF still serves an important transformational purpose. Whether that is enough to justify the continued existence of the force partly depends on its performance operational-wise. And this brings us to the more depressing side of the NRF.

Envisaged to be the Alliance's high-powered first response to an emerging crisis, the NRF soon proved to be a force in constant need of additional troops and capabilities. Since – at least – 2006, SHAPE's yearly force generation conferences have thus repeatedly failed to source the CJSOR leaving the NRF with substantial deficiencies in several areas. This became evident well before the declaration of FOC and the Riga Summit, in the spring of 2006, when NATO conceded that only 82 per cent of the force needed to conduct the full range of missions was available for NRF 7.¹⁴ Confronted with the spectre of a humiliating political defeat, Washington, at the request of the outgoing SACEUR, assigned the missing forces (in the shape of an Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) in a last-minute rescue effort.¹⁵ The US contribution, of course, had not participated in the NRF's half-year training and it was never clear exactly which ESG had been designated to the Alliance's new response force. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that NATO officials describe the declaration of FOC in Riga as "completely fictitious".¹⁶

The FOC announcement, however, was not signalling the end to the NRF's fill rate problems, but rather the beginning. Only eight months after Riga, in the summer of 2007, the new SACEUR, General Bantz Craddock, informed the Secretary General that the manpower quota for NRF 9 (1 July 2007 to 31 December 2007) was at an alarming 66 per cent. And as the Bush administration – disappointed with the Europeans' troop contributions – had recently made it known that there would be no more American gap-filling, there was little prospect of bringing the force to its planned strength in the short run. Moreover, the longer term force generation offers for the following four years had only produced an average fill rate of 47 per cent (see table 1 below for the actual fill rates for NRF 9 to NRF 14). Concluding that the Alliance had exhausted the willingness of the member states to provide sufficient capabilities to the NRF, Craddock deemed the force incapable of conducting even the least demanding of the seven generic missions without considerable risk. He therefore took the rather extraordinary step of rescinding

¹¹ Allied Command Transformation, *NATO Response Force: Transformational Benefits*; Interviews, NATO Headquarter, October 2009; Interview, Danish Ministry of Defence, August 2009; Correspondence with senior NATO official, Allied Command Transformation. At the Riga Summit in 2006, NATO claimed that all of the 460 or so commitments made by the allies at Prague would be fulfilled in 2009.

¹² See for instance House of Commons, Defence Committee, *The future of NATO and European Defence* (Ninth Report of Session 2007-08) (London: House of Commons, 2008), p. 50.

¹³ Berdal and Ukco, "NATO at 60", p. 65.

¹⁴ Joris Janssen Lok, "NATO Response Force falling short of target", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 17 May 2006, p. 5. See also, Robert Bell, 'Sisyphus and the NRF', *NATO Review*, Autumn 2006; John R. Schmidt, "Last Alliance Standing? NATO after 9/11", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 1, winter 2006-07.

¹⁵ The American decision to contribute the missing capabilities was made during the night between the first and the second day of the two-day Riga Summit. Interview, NATO Headquarters, October 2009.

¹⁶ Interview, SHAPE, October 2009.

Table 1: Force contributions for NRF 9 to NRF 14

Rotation	NRF 9 (2007/2)	NRF 10 (2008/1)	NRF 11 (2008/2)	NRF 12 (2009/1)	NRF 13 (2009/2)	NRF 14 (2010/1)	Average
Fill rate (in %)	70	74	71	65	61	74	69

Source: Correspondence with NATO-official, NATO-Headquarter, Brussels.

FOC of the NRF. This, of course, was never made public, but in principle – and despite the fact that NATO declared the NRF “a credible force” at about the same time¹⁷ – the force has not been a fully operational capability since July 2007.¹⁸

As noted in the above, the inability to properly resource the CJSOR led to the first revision of the NRF-construct in October 2007 and the adoption of the “graduated approach”. Already by mid-2008, however, NATO policy-makers determined that the graduated approach was an unsustainable solution. Again, inadequate fill rates were identified as the key problem. After a fundamental discussion of the concept at their informal meeting in Budapest in September 2008, the ministers of defence, therefore, tasked the Military Committee and SHAPE with the development of additional options for ensuring the success of the force – i.e., the second revision of the NRF within two years of the declaration of FOC. Various background interviews conducted in the autumn of 2009 suggest that SACEUR was in favour of sacrificing the NRF at that time. Faced with recurring force shortfalls and the unenviable task of producing gloomy NRF-Operational Capability Assessments for the North Atlantic Council every half year, Craddock simply considered it reasonable to put the force to rest. The increasing call for Western troops in Afghanistan only added to the feeling that the NRF was becoming a liability rather than a strategic asset.

At that point, however, too much political capital had obviously been invested in the concept to abandon it. Exhibited as a symbol of commitment and solidarity, the renouncement of the force would have signalled the disarray of a feeble alliance unable to find the capabilities to man a fairly small force. Surely, the low fill rates spawned awful press reports, but the liquidation of the high-profiled NRF-program would have been a public diplomacy disaster. Thus, what appeared sound from a purely military viewpoint was simply a political impossibility.

In the spring of 2009 ACO developed three possible solutions to the NRF’s predicaments: Option Alpha entailed only command and control elements, therefore – for all practical purposes – abolishing the entire concept; Option Bravo

included a further refinement of the graduated approach, that is, Option Alpha plus a limited number of additional troops; and Option Charlie – as we shall see below – held a more fundamental restructuring of the force. In the late spring, the Military Committee endorsed Option Charlie and at their meeting in June 2009, defence ministers approved this option as well. Implementation has already begun and is scheduled to be fulfilled by mid-2010, when NRF 15 goes on stand-by.

Why has it been so difficult for NATO to generate the required forces for the NRF? There are several probable answers to this question, but most importantly the NRF came to life just as the Alliance’s level of operational activity began to increase drastically as a consequence of NATO taking responsibility of ISAF in the summer of 2003. Missions in Iraq, Kosovo, Lebanon, Chad and elsewhere – although not to the same extent as ISAF – have also taking their toll on the force pool of NATO member states. True, at the time of writing, NATO-allies have “only” deployed some 100,000 troops to Afghanistan. However, just as a functioning NRF requires the equivalent of three NRFs at any given time, so the ISAF-mission involve – at least – three times the number of forces actually deployed at any moment.

On a more fundamental level, however, NATO’s inability to man both the NRF and ongoing operations simultaneously reflects the Alliance’s critical lack of deployable forces. Despite years of transformational efforts, several European member states are still far from meeting NATO’s so-called usability goals, stating that 50 percent of national land forces must be “structured, prepared and equipped for deployed operations” and 10 percent must be “undertaking or planned for sustained operations”.¹⁹ Some allies – like for instance Turkey, Greece, and Belgium – have only restructured their military half-heartedly and partly on the cheap. Given the current economic situation in most NATO nations there is little prospect of rectifying the imbalance between operational demands and the number of usable forces in the short run.

Another – but less influential – reason for the shortage of commitments to the NRF has been the allies’ failure to clearly agree on when and where to deploy the force. We shall return

¹⁷ NATO, “Questions and answers: the NATO Response Force”, 21 September 2007, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-42E2C9C3-8722613F/natolive/opinions_8494.htm?selectedLocale=en.

¹⁸ Interviews, NATO Headquarters and SHAPE, October 2009; *Der Spiegel*, “Schruppfkur: NATO verkleinert schnelle Eingreiftruppe”, 25 October, 2007; Tom Kington, “NATO May Relaunch Response Force in June”, *Defense News*, 11 May 2009, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4083046>; *Der Spiegel*, “Transformation reversed: NATO Rapid Reaction Force to be Eliminated”, 20 September 2007.

¹⁹ The usability goals were agreed to at the Istanbul Summit in June 2004 and embraced in the Comprehensive Political Guidance (approved at the Riga Summit in November 2006). In June 2009, NATO ministers of defence agreed to enhance the goals from 40-8 to 50-10. For an assessment of most NATO members’ numbers of deployable and sustainable forces, see the European Defence Agency, *Defence Data of EDA Participating Members in 2007* (Brussels: European Defence Agency, 2007).

to this issue below, but the conflicting views on how to utilize the NRF were already apparent in 2005 and have remained so to this day. According to NATO officials interviewed in Brussels and Mons, a number of member states are reluctant to assign manpower and equipment at a time of substantial operational demands because they anticipate that the NRF will never be used. From this point of view, the idle force is little but a drain on resources. Allegedly, the United Kingdom and Norway are prominent members of this category.

Finally, the NRF's operational viability has in all likelihood been hampered by NATO's long-standing principle of "letting the costs lie where they fall". According to this formula – that has been applied to the NRF since its inception – the expenses of deployment and exercises fall to the nations who have forces on stand-by for a given rotation. As Spain was painfully taught during the NRF-deployment to Pakistan in the autumn of 2005, signing up for the rapid reaction force can be a very costly experience. Thus, the "reverse lottery" creates strong disincentives for member states to make CJSOR commitments.²⁰

Option Charlie

Will the Alliance's embrace of the revised NRF-construct – that is, Option Charlie – provide for a more credible force? That is, in fact, the likely outcome of this, the most recent, restructuring of the force that has been designed with the explicit intent to offer maximal opportunities for nations to participate. What the allies have agreed to is essentially a twofold structure consisting of a 13,000 strong Immediate Response Force (IRF), similar to – but more flexible than – the "core" of the extant graduated approach, and a residual Response Force Pool (RFP). The latter is open ended and the size of it will depend upon the number of forces that nations are willing to make available. Significantly, nations can contribute forces to the RFP under "flexible terms and conditions", meaning that actual operational commitments to future NRF missions can be made on an ad-hoc basis. The IRF will be comprised of pre-designated operational and tactical level command and control assets as well as maritime, land, air and joint response forces. It is not scaled to be a stand-alone force for all but the smallest operations, and in most cases, the IRF will therefore have to be supplemented by national capability commitments made to the RFP. In order to reduce the pressure on NATO's overall pool of deployable force, a twelve-month NRF stand-by period has been adopted.²¹

Crucially, the NRF's mission statement has been altered to a more generalized description of the construct's fundamental purpose. According to this new mission statement, the force is destined to endow the Alliance with a more flexible tool that can provide "immediate military response to an emerging crisis as part of the Alliance's comprehensive crisis

management system for both Article 5 and Crisis Response Operations". The revision is significant because it allows the NRF to move away from the previously used rigid CJSORs and the Operational Capability Assessments that has served as little more than a mechanism for reporting failure. In the future, SACEUR will no longer be required to assess and report to policy-makers whether the force is able to conduct the full range of predefined missions or not. In effect – as one senior NATO-official described it – "NATO's self-inflicted fiasco reporting on the NRF will be a thing of the past". Although somewhat creatively, the image of the force is therefore likely to improve as the low fill rates – and the associated negative press reports – will disappear almost by definition. In the words of another NATO-official: "The perceived capability shortfall will be 'defined away'".²²

To sum up: the NRF has hitherto been a qualified failure. While the initiative has added valuable impetus to NATO's transformational agenda, it has failed to provide the Alliance with a credible operational tool. This, in turn, has done little to enhance NATO's public reputation. Although the main reasons for the NRF's lack of success are unlikely to disappear in the near future, the latest revision of the concept might just be the scheme that will make the force a real – and perceived – success.

NRF issues

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the discussions about the NRF have closely mirrored the wider debate about the overall purpose of NATO in a security environment devoid of a major unifying threat. Thus, in many ways, the NRF represents a microcosm of the broader discussions characterising the Alliance: the strategic confusion currently plaguing NATO has also afflicted the Alliance's quick response force.²³ As some member states perceive Russia as the main threat to their security while others are focused on sub-state actors, failing states and global terrorism, the NRF becomes a potential instrument for competing security visions. These competing visions are observable in the intra-alliance exchanges about three key issues: Article 5; the issue of when and where to make use of the force; and common funding.

The NRF and Article 5

Although the NRF was formally designed to be an instrument for both global operations and collective defence, the differences over how to balance the two types of missions did not begin to emerge in earnest until the Russian-Georgian conflict of August 2008. President Putin's somewhat belligerent speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 did spur concern, but prior to Moscow's assertive show of force in the Caucasus the year after, it was almost instinctively understood that the NRF was intended for

²⁰ Interviews, NATO Headquarters and SHAPE, October 2009; Lok, "NATO Response Force falling short of target"; Fiorenza, "Ready for Action".

²¹ Allied Command Operations Blog, "The NATO Response Force – The Way Forward" <http://acositrep.com/2009/08/04/the-nato-response-force-the-way-forward/>; Interview, Danish Ministry of Defence, August 2009; Correspondence with NATO official, International Military Staff, NATO Headquarters, October 2009.

²² Interviews, NATO Headquarters, October 2009.

²³ Bialos and Koehl, *The NATO Response Force*, p. 2.

operations beyond the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO's expeditionary capabilities – including the NRF – were more or less implicitly linked to non-Article 5 missions. However, Russia's aggressive behaviour in its “near abroad” changed the strategic and diplomatic dynamics within the Alliance markedly as some allies came increasingly to see their self-confident eastern neighbour as a principal threat to their national security. A majority of the East European member states – as well as Norway and Italy – therefore began to question the trajectory of globalized engagement embarked on by the Alliance after the terrorist attack on the US in 2001. NATO should, so the argument runs, re-orient its focus on Europe and defence against conventional threats to the region. Accordingly, the Alliance is currently split in – at least – two factions: “the globalizers”, who hold that NATO should basically transform itself into a hub of global security relationships, and the “Article 5ers”.²⁴

It was within this context that the United Kingdom proposed the creation of a so-called Allied Solidarity Force (ASF) in February 2009. Envisioned as a 1,500 strong multinational force, the ASF would be a smaller version of NATO's now-disbanded Allied Command Europe Mobile Force-land (AMF-L), designed to demonstrate Alliance solidarity by acting as a tripwire during the Cold War. The unstated – but obvious – intention behind the AMF-L was to have as many flags as possible on the coffins at the start of a conflict thereby ensuring that NATO's musketeer clause – i.e., Article 5 – would be activated. The British-proposed ASF, so it seems, was projected to serve a similar purpose. Created within the framework of the NRF, the separate solidarity force would thus reassure “those countries that are concerned about being on the border and feel that Article 4 or 5 is important to them”.²⁵ Just as the AMF-L, the ASF would be a purely political initiative with very little or no military value.

The British proposal has received a mixed reception clearly reflecting the wider debate within the Alliance. The Article 5ers – for obvious reasons – have warmly welcomed the idea, while a majority of the older allies have been mostly sceptical about the benefits of such a force. Some nations, including the US, Canada, and the Netherlands, have argued that NATO can not afford to develop capabilities for collective defence missions only; others, including France and Germany, have been opposed to the initiative on the grounds that it would further – and unnecessarily – aggravate NATO's already difficult relations with Moscow. Moreover, neither Washington nor Paris or Berlin see Russia as a genuine threat to allied security. In fact, not even the proposer – the British government – perceives Russia as a

real danger to the Alliance. Background interviews at NATO Headquarters thus suggest that the scheme was ultimately aimed at freeing up more East European troops for ISAF. As indicated by then British Defence Secretary John Hutton “such a force would make it easier for the alliance's new member countries to increase their troop contingents in Afghanistan without fearing [Russian] provocations against them at home”.²⁶

Without the support of the US, Germany, and France, the original ASF-initiative gained little traction and it was soon abandoned. However, unwilling to let the concept die completely, most of the newer member states and Norway have insisted that the revised NRF should include elements of the ASF-scheme and be given a more visible role in collective defence. And, indeed, so it will. As part of a compromise between the globalizers and the Article 5ers, the “third generation NRF” will give increased emphasis to its responsibilities in relation to Article 4 and 5, effectively subsuming the tasks of the ASF into the new construct. In addition to its previous functions, the NRF will be used to “provide visible assurance of the Alliance's cohesion and commitment to deterrence and collective defence”, through – among other things – planning, training, and regularly exercising elements of the NRF on Alliance territory.²⁷ Whether the force will actually conduct exercises in the member states bordering Russia remains to be seen. However, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have already expressed their desire to have the force training on their home territory.²⁸

When to use the NRF?

The absence of a clear and common sense of NATO's fundamental purpose has also fuelled the debate over when and where to actually make use of NATO's contested response force. Differing threat perceptions and diverging understandings of what should be the Atlantic Alliance's core role have thus contaminated and – to some extent – paralyzed the NRF. One group of allies, including the United Kingdom, the US, the Netherlands, Canada, and Denmark, has repeatedly called for the employment of the force in Afghanistan.²⁹ Based on a “use-it-or-lose-it” philosophy, these member states – that are all heavily engaged in the southern part of the Afghan theatre – have argued forcefully that if the NRF is not used in real operations it will lose its credibility and eventually pass away.

While their readiness to use the NRF is partly explained by the deep commitment to the ISAF-mission and the disquieting situation in Southern Afghanistan, these allies are also motivated by an underlying global view of the Alliance's future.

²⁴ See for instance Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning, “Come Home, NATO? The Atlantic Alliance's New Strategic Concept”, *DIIS Report 2009:4*, (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2009).

²⁵ House of Commons, Defence Committee, *Russia: A new confrontation?* (Tenth Report of Session 2008-09) (London: House of Commons), p. 57. See also James Blitz & Alex Barker, “UK pushes for NATO standing defence force”, *Financial Times*, 18 February 2009.

²⁶ Vladimir Socor, “NATO's Response Force, other Planned Capabilities Stillborn”.

²⁷ Correspondence with NATO official, September 2009.

²⁸ The Economist, “NATO and Russia: War games”, 31 October 2009.

²⁹ See for instance Lok, “NRF on track for full capability but its purpose remains a matter of debate”; Mark Joyce, “NATO must decide how to use its response force”, *Financial Times*, 21 April 2005; Der Spiegel, “USA loben Deutsche und fordern mehr Einsatz”, 8 February 2007; Defense and Security News, “NATO Response Force Depends on Allies Support, Gates Says”, 29 October 2007.

They all subscribe – although to different degrees – to the vision of an Atlantic Alliance intervening and integrating globally. As the viability of the idea of NATO as a global security exporter is highly depended on whether the Alliance is perceived as being successful in Afghanistan, the globalizers are prepared to make use of the force if required – even if the mission is not clearly within in the NRF mission set.

Another group of countries, led by France and Germany, has been profoundly opposed to the use of the NRF in Afghanistan.³⁰ They have been so, however, for slightly different reasons: while France has stressed that the NRF should be a force only for “in extremis” situations and has generally given priority to the transformational benefits of the concept, Berlin has allegedly been reluctant on the grounds that German troops assigned to the force could find themselves involved in high-intensity combat – something that could cause tremendous domestic problems for any German government given the countries’ constitution and troubled past. Both allies, however, have argued that using the NRF as an operational reserve would dilute the force’s transformational value and its originally intended ability to do hard-hitting first-in, first out operations. As observed by a German senior NATO official: “If we use the force as a reserve it will eat up the NRF”.³¹ The risk of weakening the force’s high-performance capacity by using it as a reserve is also acknowledged by allies belonging to the “use-it-or-lose-it” camp.³²

Behind these arguments, however, lies a deep seated aversion to the vision of a more globally engaged NATO. This was already obvious when Washington launched the NRF initiative back in 2002. Thus, in the autumn of that year, French minister of defence, Michele Aillot-Marie, commented on the US proposal that “NATO has to keep its original geographical limitation”.³³ Although France was in favour of the concept on the whole, Aillot-Marie made it clear that “the force should not operate outside Europe”. Peter Struck, German Defence Minister at the time, echoed his French colleague, remarking that it “would be wrong to assume that the United States could simply use the Response Force in any corner of the world”.³⁴ Since then, both France and Germany have become more sympathetic to a globally engaged NATO. Hitherto, the acceptance of a less constrained role for the Alliance in terms of geography has not, however, translated into deeds.

Common funding

As touched upon above, the development of the NRF has in all likelihood been hampered by NATO’s “costs-lie-where-they-fall”-principle. According to this analysis, allies have

been reluctant to make CJSOR commitments because of the potential high costs of an unanticipated deployment. This hindrance to adequate fill rates was already identified by then Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the Munich Security Conference in February 2006 (shortly after the NRF deployment to Pakistan), where he warned that under the existing funding arrangements “participating in the NRF is something like a reverse lottery: If your numbers come up you actually lose money... This can be a disincentive to countries to commit to participation in the NRF”.³⁵

Partly as a result of this line of reasoning, the allies decided to make the strategic lift portions of unanticipated NRF deployments eligible for NATO common funding for a two year “trial” period at the Riga Summit (the “experiment” was later extended for another year). If successful – that is, removing disincentives to NRF pledges without undermining the nations’ willingness to invest in modern, efficient equipment – it was expected that the time-limited common funding-scheme would be widened to cover other costs associated with participation in the NRF. As of November 2009, however, the effect of the experiment has been somewhat inconclusive.³⁶ And the sharp disagreements between advocates of increased NRF common funding and supporters of the “costs-lie-where-they-fall” principle have therefore yet to be settled.

On the one hand, a number of member states, headed by the US, have been strongly in favour of increasing the use of common funding. Seen from Washington, collective action problems – and the related free-riding policies – create considerable obstacles to the international deployment of NATO troops and to the development of an effective and usable NRF. Given the staunch US support for NATO taking on an active operational role beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, it is therefore hardly surprising that successive American governments have argued consistently that extending the criteria for NATO common funding would alleviate the NRF’s growing pains. Besides the US, particularly smaller nations – fearing the unpredictable but potentially significant financial burdens of an unexpected NRF-deployment – are said to belong to this category of allies. Others, like for instance the Netherlands, have called for enhanced employment of common funding for the NRF on the principle grounds that the Alliance’s operational activities should be given first priority. At a time of high operational tempo, increasing common costs in Afghanistan and the most devastating economic crisis in decades, this also entails cutting expenses related to the Alliance’s static infrastructure (predictably, Turkey – a net recipient of NATO budget funds and a warm

³⁰ This group of countries also includes a number of the East European member states. These nations, however, have hidden quietly behind Germany and France. Interview, NATO official, August 2009.

³¹ Interview, NATO Headquarters, October 2009.

³² Interview, NATO Headquarters and Danish Ministry of Defence, August and October 2009; Der Spiegel, “USA Loben Deutsche und fordern mehr Einsatz”.

³³ Ronja Kempin, “The New NATO Response Force”, p. 10.

³⁴ Mihalka, “NATO Response Force”.

³⁵ Speech by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the 42nd “Munich Conference on Security Policy”, <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2006/s060204a.htm>.

³⁶ Interviews and correspondence with NATO officials, October and November 2009.

supporter of common funding in general – has been a particularly firm opponent of a more operationally focused common funding system). In addition to this group of member states, NATO's Strategic Commanders – that is, SACEUR and SACT – have been solidly behind plans to increase the use of common funding. SHAPE is even reported to “have some sympathy for a more UN-like funding-arrangement”.³⁷

On the other hand, France has forcefully led the opposition to a more comprehensive NRF common funding scheme. Seen from Paris – and to some extent from Berlin, London, and Madrid – expanding the common funding mechanisms to other portions of agreed NRF deployments and exercises would mean that countries – like France – that are shouldering a fair share of the common burden would pay twice. As noted by the British government: “having paid for their own capabilities nations should not then have to subsidise those that contribute less than their expected share”.³⁸ The current British stance is, however, likely to change with the advent of a new conservative government.³⁹

Although the opponents of further common funding usually argue against the funding system due to its unfairness in terms of financial burden sharing, there is some evidence to suggest that – at least – France's stance has been partly fuelled by political motives as well. In the words of a senior NATO diplomat: “France's standpoint on common funding must also be understood in the light of Paris' appetite for security cooperation in an EU-environment”.⁴⁰ This view is corroborated by the French government's apparent willingness to use common funding for the EU Battle Groups. Thus, during the French EU presidency, Paris “specifically called for the ‘costs lie where they fall’ concept to be abandoned in the name of so-called financial solidarity”.⁴¹ To the French – it appears – common funding is after all not objectionable in principle.

Conclusion

When the NRF-initiative was launched in late 2002 it was projected to provide the Transatlantic Alliance with a vehicle for modernisation as well as an agile war-fighting capability with real teeth: transformation, operational capacity, interoperability, and burden sharing were thus at the heart of the scheme. Hitherto, however, the force has been rather unsuccessful in meeting the ambitious objectives. While the NRF has had a genuine transformational impact, inability to meet the requirements of the CJSORs and failure to agree on a concrete operational role for the force have turned it into a net liability. Most importantly, the ongoing operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere have stretched the available pool of deployable NATO troops to the extent that nations have been reluctant to make sufficient NRF-commitments. Although this basic condition is unlikely to change in the near future, there are reasons to believe that the latest revision of the construct will improve the image of the NRF considerably.

The analysis has also revealed that the debates and disagreements about the NRF are closely mirroring the wider discussions about the future of the Atlantic Alliance: overall political inclinations are clearly reflected in the positions taken by the allies in deliberations about the response force. On the one hand, this means that the NRF is just as infected by strategic schizophrenia as the Alliance in general. As NATO writ large, the NRF has become different things to different nations. On the other hand, while NATO is evidently suffering from disagreements as to what should be its core function all allies seem to agree that the Alliance do in fact serve important – if different – purposes. Interestingly, no allies are considering leaving NATO. Similarly with the NRF: even if countries disagree about the basic purpose of the force, all agree that the NRF has a *raison d'être*. And so, one and the same politico-military instrument becomes a vehicle for several differing strategic visions. The NRF, so it seems, cannot be clearer than NATO in general.

³⁷ Interview and correspondence with NATO officials, October and November 2009; Bell, “Sisyphus and the NRF”. Herman Shaper, “Informal suggestions on innovative funding of NATO operations”, *Europe's World*, 27 February 2009.

³⁸ House of Commons Defence Committee, *The future of NATO and European defence: Government response to the Committee's Ninth Report of 2007-08*, p. 12.

³⁹ Liam Fox, “The case for financial reform of both NATO and ESDP”, *Europe's World*, Spring 2009.

⁴⁰ Interview, senior NATO official, NATO Headquarters, November 2009.

⁴¹ Fox, “The case for financial reform of both NATO and ESDP”.