

# NATO Needs Deterrence and Dialogue

Defining the New Balance in View of the Warsaw Summit

*Claudia Major and Jeffrey Rathke*

**Deterrence is back in Europe. As NATO approaches its July summit in Warsaw, Allies are adapting this concept to the new security settings in place in Europe since the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. Yet, deterrence is intrinsically connected to dialogue: these are the two pillars of NATO's strategy, as defined in the 1967 Harmel Report. Consequently, in a security environment in which Russia uses military force to coerce neighbours and violates international law by redrawing borders, NATO needs to find a new balance between deterrence and dialogue to safeguard security in Europe. NATO rightly is strengthening its deterrence measures as an urgent priority for Alliance security. These steps should be framed as part of a double-track strategy that, over time, will encourage Russia to abide by international norms – not through blandishments, but through transatlantic unity and strength. This will require sustained political commitment, backed up by military and diplomatic resources. Germany and the US should lead within NATO the development of a durable new balance of deterrence and dialogue that will sustain Alliance cohesion and establish conditions for lasting peace in Europe.**

Throughout its history, NATO has had two principal tools to achieve its goal of safeguarding the security of its Allies: military means to assure deterrence and defence, and political means to pursue détente and dialogue. Since the crisis in Ukraine, the dialogue track with Russia has been largely frozen. In April 2014, NATO stopped practical civilian and military cooperation in the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). Although an NRC meeting will take place soon, it is doubtful that this will reverse the situation quickly. Contacts outside NATO channels have focussed mainly on pressing global issues where there is some commonality of

interest, such as the Iran nuclear programme, or an overriding necessity for dialogue, as with the Syrian civil war.

As NATO implements the reassurance and adaptation measures decided at the 2014 Wales summit and prepares for the 2016 Warsaw summit, there are growing calls to also reactivate the dialogue dimension in order to redevelop the traditional twin approach of deterrence and détente. It is hence essential to understand how deterrence/defence and détente/dialogue reinforce each other, what lessons the past teaches, and what adaptations are appropriate for the current situation.

## **The Harmel Approach**

Security is the result of both deterrence and dialogue. The most robust defence, without political contact between adversaries, would risk misunderstood signals, unintentional provocation and escalation, greater instability, and, as a result, greater insecurity. Similarly, confronted with an adversary that is willing to move borders by force and that fundamentally rejects central elements of the post-Helsinki and post-Cold War *acquis* – especially the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 1990 Charter of Paris – dialogue without defence would be dangerous folly. The Alliance has struck such balances since its creation. The foundational understandings for that were articulated nearly 50 years ago in the Harmel Report, named after its author, Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel.

Harmel identifies two essential functions of the Alliance. The first is “to maintain adequate military strength and political solidarity to deter aggression [...] and to defend the territory of member countries.” This necessitates “a suitable military capability to assure the balance of forces, thereby creating a climate of stability, security and confidence.” The second follows from that: “In this climate the Alliance can carry out its second function, to pursue the search for progress towards a more stable relationship in which the underlying political issues can be solved.” Thus, deterrence/defence and détente/dialogue are complementary and intrinsically linked, but there is a clear sequence: dialogue can only be pursued if deterrence is assured.

Both key functions seek to avoid war, yet with different means. Deterrence is a military strategy: it refers to a military threat and uses military means. It consists in having a military capability, and the intent to use it, sufficient to convince a potential adversary that the risks of using force so clearly outweigh the potential gains that the other will choose peace over war.

Détente uses different means, such as tension reduction and partial cooperation, through things such as legal agreements, verbal de-escalation, dialogue, and routine

diplomacy. The aim is to improve predictability, responsiveness, and stability, thereby helping to avoid war. Yet, détente is not an end in itself. Harmel identified NATO’s “ultimate political purpose” as achieving “a just and lasting peaceful order [...] accompanied by appropriate security guarantees.” It is thus essential for all Allies to have a shared vision of how to achieve that goal. Otherwise, the dialogue to achieve it risks becoming a divisive issue and might even heighten some Allies’ perceptions of insecurity.

## **Harmel Applied: The Cold War**

The Harmel leitmotiv substantially marked NATO’s strategy during the Cold War. The December 1979 “dual-track” decision was grounded in the growing Soviet superiority in certain (nuclear) capabilities, whereas Western forces had remained static. This Soviet theatre superiority, it was feared, could undermine NATO’s deterrence strategy. The dual-track decision shifted the balance in favour of deterrence, building on the first pillar of Harmel (defence) by modernising NATO forces, while simultaneously expressing the ultimate aim of achieving a stable balance through mutual limitations on those very same systems on the basis of political agreements (dialogue).

The result was the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), which eliminated that entire category of nuclear weapons: the very outcome that was identified in the dual-track decision as the goal. There is thus a 20-year arc from Harmel through the dual-track decision to INF that achieved the West’s security goals – not through defence alone, but through deterrence and defence that enabled a dialogue, thereby producing greater security with fewer armaments.

## **Modernising Harmel**

If a combination of deterrence and dialogue is the prescription for security in Europe, a crucial question is how to adapt it to post-

2014 Europe. Allies have a clear interest in preventing military escalation by Russia, bolstering stability, and increasing predictability in the Euro-Atlantic area to re-establish a peaceful order. The task of the upcoming NATO summit in Warsaw is thus to assure that the deterrence and defence component of NATO's policy is sufficient to entice Russia to engage seriously in a dialogue that advances security on accepted principles.

Allies closest to Russia in particular fear that the current deterrence measures are not sufficient. They see an increased vulnerability of NATO as a result of the conventional imbalance in north-east Europe, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its military modernisation, and the massive "snap" exercises that put upwards of 100,000 troops near NATO borders. Allies likewise are worried by Russia's nuclear modernisation, its public nuclear sabre-rattling, exercises that practice the escalation from conventional to nuclear conflict, alleged violations of the INF treaty, and its growing ability to deny access in the Baltic and Black seas as well as the Arctic. The Warsaw summit will seek to remedy that perceived imbalance and be a "deterrence" summit.

Yet, NATO should not depend only on deterrence. Although it is certainly essential for ensuring peace in circumstances marked by confrontation, peace by deterrence alone carries significant risks of miscalculation, escalation, and unintentional conflict. Thus, the Warsaw summit should be one that improves the prospect of dialogue on the basis of improved deterrence.

Alliance unity is the precondition for successful deterrence and exploring dialogue. Yet, it is perhaps more complicated to achieve now than it was during the Cold War. NATO is larger and contains a greater diversity of views, be it on threat perceptions, defence spending, or the nature of the Russian regime itself. Allies disagree, for example, whether the instability in the south or the east is the most immediate threat. The presence of NATO troops across the Alliance varies as a result of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which ex-

pressed an intent not to deploy substantial combat forces permanently on the territory of new members. This created a division between old and new members that persists until today. In an Alliance based on consensus, such divisions could endanger NATO's capacity to act and to agree on a new dual-track approach. Indeed, although general support for a revamped dual-track approach is likely, divisions will probably surface on three main points: 1) how strong and how permanent additional deterrence measures should be, with Allies such as Poland and the Baltics being more demanding, whereas others, such as Germany, might accept higher numbers but insist on the rotational character of the deployments; 2) in particular, Allies bordering Russia do not see NATO's deterrence being sufficiently bolstered to enable dialogue; support for the dialogue track is likely to come from countries such as Germany and the US; 3) there is disagreement about how eastwards-looking NATO's military adaptation should be – whereas some, such as Poland and Romania, see a priority here, Allies from the southern flank, such as Italy, fear a one-sided approach and are calling for NATO to better prepare for challenges in the south.

### **Warsaw: A Deterrence Summit That Sets the Stage for Dialogue**

Redressing the corrosive deterrence disequilibrium is a prerequisite for NATO's security, as well as for the Allies' political cohesion in bringing about an eventual successful dialogue. In view of ensuring a new balance, Allies should focus on:

**1) Improving deterrence:** Russia's military build-up and the circumvention of the Vienna Document creates clear security risks that NATO can mitigate most directly through the enhanced forward presence of rotations of NATO forces. NATO's strengthened deterrence measures at Warsaw should be adequate for the Alliance's defence in their own right; they can make a further positive contribution if they are also sufficient in encouraging Russia to

engage in dialogue and contribute to shoring up the security system in Europe. It should also be stressed that they are a result of the current and foreseeable security environment, and that without a change in that environment, they will continue. This does not mean abandoning the NATO-Russia Founding Act – although Russia has violated it, it is still useful, for it launched structures that could be used for dialogue. At the same time, NATO could express – as it did in the 1979 dual-track decision – an openness to discussions with Russia that could include transparency, inspections, and verifiable mutual limitations. This would preserve the viability of NATO’s strategy if Russia does not take up the offer, while setting the terms of a potential dialogue.

As key players in current reassurance measures, Germany and the US should support the adoption, in Warsaw, of further deterrence measures – which could be of rotational nature – and be prepared to expand their current contributions, such as troop numbers. They should also seek to convince other Allies to increase their contributions.

## 2) Defining the potential for dialogue:

Dialogue requires a partner. Yet, there are serious doubts about Russia’s credibility, given its flagrant violations of international law and the principles of European security. Moscow has shown little interest in discussing transparency or arms control and has not made substantial propositions. Rather, its sabre-rattling attitude and military build-up seem to point in the opposite direction. This should not impede Allies from coupling a strengthened force posture with an openness to dialogue; yet, it demonstrates how difficult the task ahead will be. Any dialogue should thus take place without illusions and acknowledge that Russia may seek to use dialogue to sow dissension and divide NATO members rather than to promote security and stability. Therefore, Allies should agree on a set of principles that would undergird future bilateral and multilateral engagements

with Russia, otherwise the impetus to restart a dialogue in the hope of managing tensions will outpace NATO’s ability internally to rationalise it and maintain unity.

In the near term, this suggests a pragmatic engagement with Moscow with modest expectations; not a partnership with shared values. It can reduce the likelihood of military escalation and increase reliability. The network of contacts with Russia is not going to be reactivated in the foreseeable future – but precisely in times of crisis, dialogue must be maintained in order to keep possibilities of de-escalation open. In the short term, informal channels should be used, such as the meetings between NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. This could be backed up by track-two initiatives to explore room for further discussions. Practical technical steps can be agreed to avoid unintentional military escalation, such as the military-level crisis contact mechanism proposed by German Foreign Minister Steinmeier. NATO should also highlight the contribution that transparency measures such as the Vienna Document have made, and support its modernisation under Germany’s OSCE chairmanship in areas such as lower thresholds for exercise notifications, expanded quotas for inspections, and provisions to address “snap” exercises. Beyond those immediate goals, the achievement of mutually agreed limits on force levels – backed up by detailed data exchange and inspections – would make a significant contribution to security and stability. All of these measures would reinforce the existing principles of European security rather than revise them.

Dialogue plays an essential role in managing what has become an adversarial relationship. The West’s prospects for an acceptable outcome are greatest when NATO’s force presence and posture, signalling, dialogue, and declaratory policy are aligned into a coherent whole.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2016  
All rights reserved

These Comments reflect the authors’ views.

**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
www.swp-berlin.org  
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761