

**Summary:** This brief discusses the characteristics of the hybrid threats that are faced by NATO today, and their implication for the transatlantic security partnership. The author analyzes the way NATO should adjust its mindset and decision-making process in order to respond to the new security environment, and advocates for better cooperation between military forces and civil defense capacity.

## Local Capacity is the First Line of Defense Against the Hybrid Threat

by *Janine Davidson*

### Introduction

The March 18, 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation was not something that could happen in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe — until it did. Through the strategy of hybrid war, alternately called “non-linear war” or “war in the gray zone,” Russian leaders have found an effective means of attack that also frustrates conventional response. Through the combined use of military, economic, diplomatic, and criminal instruments, sheathed in a layer of fierce denial and political obfuscation, Russia has sustained an effective, year-long offensive against Ukraine. These operations have led to the contestation and seizure of roughly 35,500 square kilometers of territory across Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

In response, NATO planners have taken significant measures to improve European defenses in the East and bolster the alliance’s crisis response. While these are positive steps intended to deter Russia by demonstrating NATO’s continuing military superiority, the focus has been on conventional military capabilities and concepts of operations, which are not optimized for the types of hybrid threats Russia is presenting. NATO countries must adapt to face this threat. But adapting does not mean

simply trading conventional capacity for a new force structure optimized for hybrid war. That Russia has been forced to adopt these unconventional, or hybrid methods, is testament to the power of NATO’s conventional deterrent. To remain effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world’s premier military alliance must maintain this strong conventional deterrent while simultaneously developing competence and capacity for non-traditional threats.

### Understanding the Threat

That a full-scale military invasion of a NATO country is practically inconceivable is evidence of the clear over-match of NATO’s conventional military forces, which, along with the United States’ nuclear arsenal and sustained forward posture have provided the teeth of the alliance’s Article Five guarantee. Maintaining this deterrent via the pledged 2 percent of GDP military investment by all members should not be considered an option. A modern, interoperable conventional NATO force structure will remain essential, but will also drive adversaries toward other strategies to achieve their objectives. Events from Georgia and Ukraine, combined with lessons learned from NATO’s decade in Afghanistan, provide the foundation

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for scenario-based planning to address these emerging threats.

Early stages of Russian hybrid war have seen clandestine infiltration by Russian special forces hiding among the population to foment violence by fanning the flames of existing political grievances. Early Russian actions in Crimea focused on “bottling up” Ukrainian security in the port city of Sevastopol while simultaneously overwhelming them with anti-Euromaidan protests. The creeping invasion of eastern Ukraine, like Georgia in 2008 and Estonia in 2007, also included cyber-attacks<sup>1</sup> on government and private sector networks. When Russia began its operations in Crimea, a region with 2.5 million residents and considerable Ukrainian garrisons, some analysts predicted a “second Chechnya.”<sup>2</sup> The result was instead a swift, relatively bloodless victory, aided by the swift erosion of Ukrainian civil defenses and full annexation of the territory. While Russia enjoyed unique advantages in the Crimean operation (majority ethnic Russian population; proximity of Russian military forces; Ukrainian unpreparedness), this same stratagem could be easily employed against other countries. Baltic states such as Estonia and Latvia, where discontented Russian minorities and weak police and civil defense institutions could be exploited to achieve rapid infiltration, are particularly at risk.

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1 David J. Smith, “Russian Cyberstrategy and the War Against Georgia,” in *Focus Quarterly*, Winter 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/russian-cyber-policy-and-the-war-against-georgia>.

2 Shaun Walker, Harriet Salem, and Ewen MacAskill, “Russian ‘invasion’ of Crimea fuels fear of Ukraine conflict,” *The Guardian*, March 1, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/28/russia-crimea-white-house>.

NATO has initiated a number of improvements to force structure and authorities in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, including the establishment of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, or “Spearhead Force” (VJTF), and creation of NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU) in six at-risk nations. While these initiatives demonstrate resolve and unity, they will only come into play once NATO leadership has made the crucial decision to respond to a crisis militarily. Given the creeping, hard-to-attribute nature of these types of infiltrations, by the time a crisis is declared and a decision is made to deploy the NATO VJTF, the political situation and the facts on the ground will have shifted considerably. The first line of defense against such “little green men” hybrid infiltrations will likely not be traditional military forces, but rather local police, paramilitary forces, and potentially information technology workers in the targeted nation’s private sector.

## **NATO’s Role in Strengthening Front Line Capacity**

The first task for NATO is to deter by denial. This means having credible conventional forces physically postured forward and in enough quantity to present a very tough fight. This is in contrast to forces stationed or garrisoned in the West, where logistical challenges ensure much longer response times — especially when combined with NATO’s decision-making process. This might have been sufficient during the Cold War, but given how today’s first battles are likely to unfold, such a force laydown ensures NATO forces will be too late to the fight. Posturing forward to defend territory, and ideally deterring attack, is preferable to having to retake lost ground, or ceding it to the enemy.

Deterring by denial means Western NATO European members and the United States need to commit fully to repositioning equipment and forces, or at a minimum to continuously rotating forces in order to shorten the time required to respond to attack in the East. The U.S. European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), which authorized \$1 billion to enhance U.S. military presence in Europe, is a positive step, but the program is funded through the temporary one-year overseas contingency operations budget, not the “base” budget. While this seems like a small bureaucratic issue, such political red tape reflects a mindset about the threat that must be overcome in all NATO capitals in order to adequately deter worst-case scenarios.

While deterring conventional attack is necessary, it also shifts a determined adversary toward a sneaky, hybrid

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approach. Addressing the hybrid threat requires adjustment to NATO's capability portfolio, including an emphasis on special operations forces, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), information fusion, urban warfare, and cyber competencies. But perhaps even more critical will be the adjustments required to NATO's mindset, its paradigms about its proper role, and its coordinating processes and policies. Given the way in which the hybrid threat evolves, starting with civil unrest and infiltration, the gap between civil police and traditional military forces must be bridged. This requires coordination, planning, and training by all sides to better integrate the civil-military missions.

NATO's comparative advantage in such scenarios is in its conventional military edge, which can keep the conflict from escalating into a "hot" conventional war. Tactically, this is important, but from a strategic and political perspective, it may not be good enough. If adversaries are allowed — as Russia has been in Georgia, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine — to foment unrest, sustain deniability, and change the facts on the ground by overwhelming civil security units while remaining below the line where the NATO alliance becomes activated, then NATO must contemplate how to move this line.

Moving this line means not only addressing NATO's frustrating decision-making processes and response timelines, but also focusing on the gap between law enforcement and the military. Traditional police institutions are even less trained and ready for this threat than are our militaries. Western democracies, in response to the threat of terrorism, have chosen to enhance the tactical capabilities of their police, as the United States seems to be doing,<sup>3</sup> or to use military forces when law enforcement is overwhelmed, as the French did after the Charlie Hebdo attacks.<sup>4</sup> Unique among the NATO allies, Lithuania established a combined arms Domestic Support Force (DSF) in 2009, intended to "conduct domestic support operations in the territory of the Lithuanian Republic and to react to...

3 Johnny Simon, "Photos from the Manhunt in Boston," Slate.com, April 19, 2013, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/photography/2013/04/boston\\_maraathon\\_bombing\\_standoff\\_photos\\_of\\_dzhokhar\\_tsarnaev\\_from\\_watertown.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/photography/2013/04/boston_maraathon_bombing_standoff_photos_of_dzhokhar_tsarnaev_from_watertown.html).

4 Chris Pleasance, "Soldiers on the streets: Military is brought in to protect Eiffel Tower, media offices, places of worship, and public transport links as France responds to terror attack," The Daily Mail, January 7, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2900755/Soldiers-streets-Military-brought-protect-Eiffel-Tower-media-offices-places-worship-public-transport-links-France-responds-terror-attack.html>.

possible threats and provocations."<sup>5</sup> The roughly 950-strong DSF is modeled on the NATO Response Force (NRF) and in light of the Ukrainian crisis seems quite prescient. Still, the gap between law enforcement and the military in Western societies, which is the gap that hybrid warfare exploits, is not easily closed without accepting various civil-military and democratic tradeoffs.

At a minimum, NATO should take steps now to complement its large-scale conventional preparedness with a new focus on enhancing and integrating police capability and building local security capacity. Much of this can be accomplished by pairing NATO forces with paramilitary and police units cross-nationally. This training and information exchange should focus on continuity of communications (especially under cyber-attack), information sharing across different components of civil defense, urban operations, and scenario-based planning and exercises. The integration of cheap, unmanned aerial surveillance should be explored for local policing, as should proper procedures for use of elements of the military in times of domestic crisis. Large, conventional military exercises should be intermixed with small, quick-tempo policing drills that much more accurately reflect the real threat environment and, importantly, that help develop common operating practices among various civil security institutions for responding to these threats and integrating with military forces.

## Civil defense and police capacity have not traditionally been a focus of NATO...yet times have changed.

Civil defense and police capacity have not traditionally been a focus of NATO, a military alliance formed nearly 70 years ago to provide a strong conventional counterweight to the Soviet Union. Yet times have changed. Hybrid threats and unconventional actors are now the principle challenges to transatlantic security, and such threats manifest in ways that circumvent traditional military advantages. Even Russia has largely ceded conventional superiority to NATO in order to invest in sophisticated hybrid capabilities.

5 Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence, "Domestic support forces," [http://kari-uomene.kam.lt/en/structure\\_1469/land\\_force/domestic\\_support\\_forces.html](http://kari-uomene.kam.lt/en/structure_1469/land_force/domestic_support_forces.html).

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Paradoxically, because civil defense institutions provide the strongest bulwark against hybrid attack, strengthening them and integrating their practices into NATO response plans is the best way to preserve a strong deterrent and prevent escalation into conventional military confrontation.

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## About the Author

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