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Conventional Military Power: A Discussion on its role as a tool of International Statecraft

Tom Morgan (University of Aberdeen)
ACUK Junior Research Analyst



With the dissolution of the USSR and the emergence of a unipolar world order dominated by the United States, maintaining the enormous conventional military forces of the Cold War became less of a priority around the world. NATO was, in terms of military technology, well ahead of any of its rivals or any other military power at the end of the Cold War, demonstrated during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Since then almost

all NATO and European states have cut their defence budgets by as much as fifty percent over the following twenty years, assuming that they would be unopposed in the new world order as there was no opposing conventional power capable of challenging them.

Over the last twenty-five years, events have changed considerably so, while NATO is still the most powerful bloc in the world, is no longer unchallenged. The global political system established in 1989 finds itself endangered by a variety of threats including cyber warfare, terrorism, environmental security, and WMD proliferation. The West finds itself confronting these threats at a time when its activities are constrained by economic difficulties, a lack of public resolve for military action and the slashing of equipment and capabilities. The West also suffers from diverging mind-sets between the United States and Europe when it comes to employing conventional military power, further hampering a cohesive response to threats. Given these difficulties, does conventional military power still have a role to play as a response to security challenges?

One of the challenges to the current world order is the emergence of other actors or poles. Some of these emerging powers have regularly voiced and demonstrated opposition to a Unipolar World Order, especially one that is dominated by the United States. States such as China and Russia are spending increasing sums on their own conventional militaries. While perhaps unwilling to challenge the US or NATO militarily, they do want to challenge the Western-led world order and clearly see conventional military power as a means to this end. The Russian occupation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine demonstrate that geopolitics and hard power remain as one of the best currencies in today's world.

Realists will argue that there are only two absolute deterrents to conventional military power, nuclear weapons or strong conventional power, (at the very least enough to make any offensive action taken by an aggressor extremely costly). Hard military power is something that every global and regional actor both understands and respects. Despite significant budget cuts, conventional military forces remain one of the most potent tools available to NATO. In the last two years NATO has undertaken some of the largest exercises since the end of the Cold War. Exercise Trident Juncture, for example, involved 36,000 personnel. For the moment



NATO's combined technological and military capabilities are still ahead of any other military power, although many analysts think this is gradually being eroded.

The conventional military strength of the West, and of the United States in particular, is perhaps partly responsible for the asymmetric tactics seen in some of the world's current hotspots. Russia's use of hybrid warfare is one example of this, as are the use of seaborne militias in the South China Sea or the Senkaku Islands disputes. Both of these examples highlight cases where an actor actively pursues its aims at the expense of another state while limiting the chances of escalation as far as possible. The use of local forces with limited Russian involvement in Eastern Ukraine along with Russian denials of involvement have helped to limit European and American measures against Russia and aid to Ukraine. Similarly, by using fishing vessels instead of naval or coastguard ships, China has been able to actively pursue its agenda while minimising the chances of escalation with another states military assets. Such tactics could be used against NATO while keeping hostilities below the threshold of armed conflict or war. Conrad Crane, a military historian and author of the Counter Insurgency manual for Iraq, has observed that "there are two types of warfare, asymmetric and stupid."

Another of the challenges that the West faces concerns 'failing' and 'failed' states. There are examples of these scattered around the world, some of which are right on Europe's doorstep such as Libya and Syria. State failure causes a number of problems for the West. First of all there are usually humanitarian concerns as state structures break down. As the authority of the central government wanes, other forces aim to fill the vacuum, often exacerbating the situation on the ground. These factions often include groups that are hostile to Western influence such as Islamic extremists. The emergence of Al Shabaab in Somalia and more recently Daesh in Syria and Iraq are both examples of this. A lack of a functioning government also provides a safe haven for existing groups. Afghanistan was used by Al Qaeda in this manner during the nineties. The question for Western states is often "to intervene or not to intervene".



Humanitarian operations are problematic. Military interventions in small countries, as in Sierra Leone in 2000, have often been successful but are less so in larger states, such as Sudan. Humanitarian forces seek to be impartial and tend to be smaller than those tasked with combat operations. However this may only succeed in prolonging the fighting as a small impartial force may only be effective when it takes sides. It could tip the balance decisively. If neutrality has to be maintained then a larger force would be required and it would likely have to be deployed for a lengthy period of time; never a popular option. This suggests that even in a humanitarian setting, there is a place for conventional military force. It is often not enough simply to keep two warring sides apart as various factions frequently terrorise the local population and often need to be forcibly disarmed and disbanded for true peace. Again this task is often beyond the capabilities of a small force. When it comes to deploying conventional military forces for humanitarian purposes, states have three main options; to send a large force for a long period of time and face the domestic repercussions at home, send a small force that may or may not be able to make a difference, or not send anything and essentially do nothing.

Of course, the costs of doing nothing can be extreme. No action was taken by the West in Rwanda in 1994. This came as a direct result of the Battle of Mogadishu during Operation Gothic Serpent in Somalia the previous year. What resulted was the worst genocide since the Second World War. The Rwandan Genocide along with the Srebrenica Massacre in Bosnia the following year, where peacekeepers failed to take action despite being present should have provided a lesson that non-intervention can often lead to catastrophic human and moral costs that far exceeds the price of taking meaningful action in the first place. Unfortunately it seems as though this lesson may have been forgotten. A lack of meaningful action directed towards halting the Syrian conflict has led to consequences that have reverberated throughout the region and beyond. The anarchy has created a humanitarian catastrophe contributing to a massive migration of people into Europe, with the EU struggling to find a solution. The lack of authority has also allowed groups such as ISIS to thrive. They now threaten to tear the entire state system in the region apart, while also threatening to export their terror further afield.



It must be remembered, of course, that conventional military forces are flexible and can accomplish more than the execution of combat operations. They are capable of carrying out a number of tasks such as stabilisation, reconstruction, investment and negotiation.



Since the end of the Cold War, one of the main security goals of Western states has been to prevent the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). Particular concern is that nuclear weapons may find their way to rogue states, and although they may be deterred through conventional means, non-state actors, who might be equally

interested in acquiring WMD, could be more difficult to deter due to their unconventional structures and presence as global players. Nuclear arsenals are effective at deterring some actions such as largescale conventional warfare but not others, especially the minor activities that are likely to trouble the NATO members on a day to day basis such as cyber-attacks, espionage and terrorist attacks threats against citizens. Rivals are capable of causing plenty of trouble while staying well below the nuclear threshold through the use of such tactics. For example, Estonia has been the victim of a major cyber-attack, had members of its intelligence service kidnapped and regularly faces Russian attempts to create tensions with its large Russian minority. While it is true that conventional forces from NATO allies deployed may not deter some of these methods, they will provide some assurance to the Estonian people and government and make them feel more secure. Powerful conventional capabilities may sometimes contain and control certain international conflicts. That is not to say that military force is the only answer to these issues, but it should always be taken into account.

Although a more in depth examination of the issues would be useful, it is clear from the above examples that conventional military forces are useful and provide Western governments with valuable tools and options when confronting security threats. They also serve as an unmistakable

marker of intent demonstrating a nation's will to act. Maintaining inadequate conventional military forces may have domestic and economic advantages but it creates limitations on what a state can achieve when defending or pursuing its interests both in its immediate neighbourhood and far from home.

Identity and Strategy in NATO: An Added Value or a Difficult Combination?

Chiara Cori

ACUK Junior Research Analyst



Rather than existing as self-evident institutions, the major international organisations of our time are actually expressions of specific sets of values and ideals. The continuance of these institutions in international affairs is based on their need to propagate and defend these beliefs. Founding

principles and circumstances then become enshrined in treaties or charters which pervade these organisations and become the foundations on which an organisations' strategic direction is built. As a multinational organization, this is especially important for NATO, for which identity and action are linked in a mutually reinforcing process.

Since 1949 NATO's purpose has essentially been to keep its members safe from threat and to ensure the cohesion of the transatlantic relationship. However, Trine Flockhart, in his work "NATO and the (re)constitution of roles", points out that behind this relatively straightforward concept, NATO's identity is shaped by "complex "self", "we" and "other" definitions and perceptions of roles and



relevant functional tasks". This article will examine how certain values and ideals have become part of a narrative, "NATO'S story", and how this in turn affects the processes that define the organisations' identity and its resistance or ability to change.

Narratives: chain of events and their perceptions

The importance of narratives can be found in the way that they give meaning to specific events and behaviours, and by setting the aims and the context in which an organisation's "storyline" unfolds, they portray a meaning of action that fits with the previous elements. Within this process, the selected events reinforce one another's significance and confirm the coherence of the underlying strategic plot, including the consequences and expectations resulting from political and military action.

In this storyline, the sense, directions and perspective of interaction are given a purpose and logic, continuously adapted to the objectives, potentials and fortunes that shape the daily conduct of the actors involved. As a consequence, constructing a strong narrative is a selective process in which the focus is on the successes and strengths of an actor and its history. The perspective offered by role and social identity theories enables us to look at NATO as engaged in a dual process: developing and maintaining a coherent narrative around its founding values whilst adapting its own role to the material and ideational changes in the international system. The latter point became especially important with the disappearance of NATO's most significant "other", the Soviet Union, as the threats that have arisen since the end of the Cold War, including Russia's more proactive posture, do not measure up.



What this means for NATO is that its evolution is framed within a general logic of *being* a military alliance and *doing* security, as these parameters or constructs provide the direction and meaning for NATO's political engagements and strategic movements. The ultimate principle of NATO's actions, the strategic rationality underlying the organisations' purpose, is thus articulated against the background of this grand narrative, which is also strongly linked to the ultimate originating principle, the events (and their perception) surrounding NATO's creation. The continuity constituted by the grand narrative, is simultaneously one of change, both in the external environment and in the actions of the actors - the variations in the policies of NATO member states. Stability and change are thus mediated through constant presence and action against the background of the underlying grand narrative of European security, something that retains the ostensibly same form throughout external changes.

Understanding narrative as structure allows moving from a linear image of NATO's evolution in terms of identity and strategy to analyse the tensions and ambiguities carried by such practices. Perhaps the fundamental tension within these actions, reflected in academic accounts as well as in NATO's official documents, refers to the problematic transition between NATO's past and present, including the changes in the organisation's "other". The narrative that NATO attempted to construct during the 1990s was one of a successful and expanding organisation that had maintained its relevance by successfully undertaking the challenges of going out of area and pursuing a vigorous enlargement process. Preserving the positive aspects of this narrative has been something that NATO has strived to maintain ever since Kosovo.

Founding values: a competitive advantage or resistance to change?

The founding values and ideals that spark the creation of an organisation can represent a competitive advantage if the narrative that they generate is used as a compass to direct the progress and evolution of an organisation itself. Similarly for NATO, the events and the intended purposes surrounding the foundation of a new organisation have in fact a long-lasting effect on its development as they become the basis of its "core business". Nonetheless, just like the circumstances of an organisation's establishment play an important role in imprinting its initial form,





they can represent a source of resistance that limits later organisational change. In fact, stories are an integral part of an organisations' identity and values, like NATO's democratic umbrella, can help to unify a diverse set of members and constituents, providing a basis and lens for decision-making, actions and behaviours.

However, if the change processes are perceived to interfere with this very narrative, perhaps orienting NATO's efforts towards new scenarios, then it is not surprising if an upsurge in storytelling more in line with the "original" cause supports sense making and sense giving practises. Consequently, contrasted and competing narratives can arise especially when the change is contested and resistance comes to the fore through such processes.

Conclusion

Narratives are not only processes that describe experiences and events but also shape the very processes they are defining. In addition, the shared plot is set in a context characterised by prior relations and power dynamics, and this serves to influence which perspective gains more traction over others which then lose out.

Within this framework the author argues that NATO should revisit its core values and determine whether they are still relevant for the purposes that the organisation has set for itself, or if they need to be aligned to the strategic posture desired for the 21st century. Whatever might be the case, the values of the organization always need to be explicitly agreed upon and embraced by all members in order to sustain the core purposes that will enable NATO to not only stay in business, but to thrive. In order to thrive NATO needs to adapt and find new strategies for an ever changing security environment, while remaining aligned to its mission and identity.

NATO Reassurance Operations: Dispelling Doubts

Brin Najzer

ACUK Junior Research Analyst



Europe is in the midst of a security crisis and NATO, as the premier guarantor of that security, now faces a serious threat to its integrity. With a resurgent Russia on its doorstep it must contend, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, with an opponent capable of challenging its continental and collective security in

Europe. To remedy the situation NATO has to demonstrate internal unity and external resolve, which requires not only intergovernmental agreement but also support from the general public. To achieve this it has carried out a number of reassurance operations aimed at communicating with both domestic publics and external opponents.

The uncertainty stemming from the crisis in Ukraine has caused a number of NATO member states to seek additional assurances that their territorial integrity and sovereignty are still guaranteed by the collective security provisions. Lithuania for example, has even taken the extraordinary step of re-introducing conscription, which was abolished in 2008. Other Baltic and Eastern European NATO members are probably right to feel less secure than their treaty agreements would lead them to believe. Treaty obligations mean little in the real world particularly for a small Baltic republic that can be rapidly overrun if they are not backed up by concrete assurances and shows of continued commitment by their more powerful allies. Complicating matters further, budgetary restraints in the US have resulted in an overall downsizing of its armed forces which, coupled with a strategic reorientation to Asia, has led to the removal of much of the heavy US equipment from forward bases in Europe, including a reduction in the number of attack helicopters. Such a lighter footprint

gives pause for concern. Russian armed forces rely much more on heavy armoured units than their NATO counterparts, and light troops are not suited to deal with such a threat.

Alliance diplomacy is based on trust. Therefore, in light of the increased Russian military activities reminiscent of the Cold War, NATO has gone to great lengths to reassure its more vulnerable members. This show of support serves both a domestic and a foreign policy purpose. By shoring up domestic support in these states NATO is alleviating doubts about its continued relevance and strengthening its own internal resolve. At the same time, such actions demonstrate to foreign opponents, chiefly Russia, that it remains united and that no single member state will simply be left to fend for itself. In light of NATO's somewhat lacklustre response to the Ukraine crisis, a more active reassurance policy is a welcome change. In addition to larger participation in NATO's regularly scheduled exercises, the Alliance and individual member states have carried out a number of operations in the last two years which had reassurance and continued commitment as the stated objective.

Operation Atlantic Resolve is arguably one of the most important assurance operations. It is part of the US response to the crisis in Ukraine and is designed to reassure European NATO members of the continued commitment of the US to European security. It comprises troop deployments, cooperation missions as well as increased participation in pre-scheduled NATO exercises. Additionally the US has also halted its troop reductions in Europe for at least two years. Since the US is a vital NATO member, such actions not only serve to reinforce the domestic security of member states but also send a clear message to Russia that despite the US "pivot to Asia" Europe is still vital to US national interests and security. An interesting part of Atlantic Resolve has been Operation Dragoon Ride which saw an armoured infantry column of 500 US military personnel



in 120 vehicles cross 5 states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Czech Republic) on a long-haul logistical and public relations exercise. It was the longest military convoy in Europe since 1944 and demonstrated not only US commitment but also showcased the mobility and rapid deployment of NATO forces in Europe. This is an important factor because Alliance members have not had to undertake a continental deployment since the Yugoslav crisis in the 90's. Operations like this provide an opportunity to re-learn the intricacies of continental deployments. The convoy's reception in the countries it passed through was generally reported as positive, showing that the populations were glad of the assurance it was illustrating. It did however also encounter protestors who saw it as US sabre rattling and were worried that such actions could in fact provoke further Russian escalation.

Exercise Black Eagle was a joint UK/Polish NATO exercise conducted in November 2014. While joint exercises are normally nothing out of the ordinary this one saw the first deployment of UK armoured units in Eastern Europe in over a decade. With 1300 troops and 100 armoured vehicles (including Challenger 2 MBT's and Warrior IFV's) it was not only a useful refresher course for British tank units but also a clear demonstration of the UK's commitment to European security and its ability to deploy armoured units across the continent as a rapid deployment force. Coming at a time when the tensions with Russia were very high, it was no doubt a strong message to send.



Noble Jump was a landmark exercise conducted in June 2015 in Poland. It was the first time that the newly established Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) was deployed. Composed of air mobile, mechanised infantry, artillery, and Special Forces units from nine different NATO countries it served as an illustration of the rapid deployment

capabilities of NATO. The VJTF was created in the aftermath of the 2014 Wales Summit and has been specifically designed to respond rapidly to threats on the Eastern and Southern peripheries of NATO. It was designed to be a spearhead, first response force within the reformed NATO Response Force. NATO leaders have deemed the exercise to have been successful, with valuable lessons learned

which should, at least for the time being, alleviate some worries regarding NATO's capability to respond quickly to an attack.

Trident Juncture 15 is an upcoming joint NATO exercise that will take place in October and November 2015. Involving 36,000 troops from over 30 allied and partner nations and taking place across most of Western Europe, North Atlantic and North America it will be NATO's largest exercise in more than a decade. Designed to simulate complex multilevel joint operations it will also be one of the most demanding. The main aims are for NATO forces to improve cooperation and operational readiness but it is also clearly designed to demonstrate to any opponent the level of NATO's thoroughly modern approach to warfare and its technological and logistical prowess.

While by no means exhaustive, this list shows that reassurance operations are an important part of NATO's response to a new crisis on its Eastern periphery. Having been largely without an opponent for the last two decades NATO must once again re-adjust to "in area" operations and re-familiarise itself with continental rather than expeditionary warfare and deterrence. The extent of success of these operations is difficult to measure. Continued US presence and greater commitment by the more powerful member states have alleviated many fears and the domestic publics have been somewhat reassured. Cooperation through NATO exercises is also on the rise improving Alliance cohesion. Foreign deterrence effects however, are more elusive. Russia has not stopped its provocative actions on NATO's borders but the recent intervention in Syria might indicate a shift away from threatening Europe directly. While any further escalations between NATO and Russia are improbable, they remain possible and NATO, as military alliances have done throughout history, must prepare for such a possibility.





Event: NATO And The Resurgence Of Ideology

Date: Tuesday, 10th November 2015, 09:00-17:00

Luncheon and evening drinks reception (dress: lounge suits/ladies' equivalent)

Venue: The Honourable Artillery Company, Armoury House, City Road, London, EC1Y 2BQ

Speakers:

- Prof Brian Holden Reid, Dept. of War Studies, King's College London
- Prof John Louth, Director: Defence, Industries & Societies, RUSI
- Stephen Covington, Strategic Intl. Affairs Adviser to SACEUR
- H. E. Sir Adam Thompson KCMG, UK Perm. Rep. to NATO
- The Rt. Hon. James Gray MP, House of Commons Defence Committee

Website: www.atlanticcounciluk.org

Contact: andreas.stradis@atlanticcounciluk.org

Conference Director: Dr Andreas Stradis, Senior Research Fellow, ACUK

Cost: Please note that the registration fee for the event is £50 (£30 for students) which includes luncheon and drinks and is Payable via Paypal, Cheque or Bank Transfer

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