

# NATO's "Spearhead Force"

## Other Publication

**Author(s):**

Zapfe, Martin

**Publication date:**

2015-05

**Permanent link:**

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-a-010681829>

**Rights / license:**

In Copyright - Non-Commercial Use Permitted

**Originally published in:**

CSS Analyses in Security Policy 174

# NATO's "Spearhead Force"

The most discussed element of NATO's military response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine is the alliance's "Spearhead Force" (VJTF). The concept has already been much criticized – but, being primarily a symbol of alliance solidarity, it should not be judged exclusively on its military merits. A look into NATO's history reveals the unit's possibilities and limitations.

By Martin Zapfe

More than a year after Moscow's annexation of Crimea, and concurrently with the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, NATO is struggling to develop a political and military response. Beyond the renewed emphasis on assurance and allied defense, clear differences of opinion are already emerging over the matter of how the indivisibility of security within the alliance can be credibly communicated, both to the exposed eastern member states – especially in the Baltic – and to an openly revanchist government in Moscow.

The result is a compromise that has so far avoided a decisive break with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act and refrained from the permanent deployment of NATO forces on the territory of the eastern alliance members. NATO's ambitious "Readiness Action Plan" (RAP) thus foresees a rotation of units as part of a greatly expanded maneuver program in Eastern Europe, together with an eastward expansion of the alliance's hitherto rather embryonic command-and-control structure. However, most of the attention has been devoted to its new so-called "Spearhead Force", the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), which is to give the alliance the ability to react quickly to threats. While this force, too, must be seen in the context of an "Enhanced NATO Response Force (NRF)", its underlying concept makes explicit the nature of NA-



Czech Soldiers board a CASA C-295 transport aircraft during the VJTF Exercise "Noble Jump" at Pardubice Airfield, Czech Republic, 9 April 2015. *Andrew Davis / NATO*

TO's politico-military response to the annexation of Crimea.

The VJTF, conceived as a brigade-equivalent force of around 5,000 troops, is to be deployable within two to five days, serving as the advance echelon of the "Enhanced NRF" in order to deploy allied troops to Eastern European hot spots as quickly as possible. To this end, NATO will position vehicles, weapons, and equipment in Esto-

nia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania and adapt its command structures for pairing with these items on location. Due to the tight schedule for raising the VJTF quickly by 2016, planners were forced to take recourse to the German-Dutch Army Corps in Münster, which had already been assigned to the NRF anyway, as the VJTF command element for 2015, together with other units originally allocated to the NRF.

Public attention has since focused on supposed shortcomings of these initial VJTF units, while strategic considerations are becoming secondary. However, it is important to analyze the actual political-military purpose served by the VJTF, and how this purpose shapes the unit – as much as it leads to conceptual weaknesses that are only too familiar to NATO from its own institutional past. The logic of the VJTF is very similar to that of its predecessors within NATO; the same holds true for its strengths and weaknesses.

### NATO Flank Protection

Since the annexation of Crimea, there has been much talk of “hybrid” warfare. This is not a helpful term, suggesting as it does a fundamentally new threat picture. Instead, in order to comprehend the challenge, one should focus not on an enumeration of all the “hybrid” elements in Russia’s actions, but on the underlying logic: the conscious negation of a clear distinction between a state of war and a state of peace. Actions that have traditionally been permitted in warfare, but not in peace, are thus to become legitimate instruments of foreign policy. As a result stands the creation of a structural grey area in inter-state relations, and a challenge to the core foundations of peace in Europe. Such a negation of peace or war, combined with the emphasis on a permanent state of confrontation, constitutes the main problem that the West has and will continue to have with Russia’s approach – all the more so since the diminished threat of a strategic nuclear conflict in Central Europe has produced the unwanted side effect of actually making limited armed confrontations along Europe’s borders a thinkable possibility – conflicts that would not have been conceivable in the Cold War, at least not as a permanent state of affairs.

Even though circumstances are different, a glance at history may help understand NATO’s response to this Russian challenge. The current threat to the Baltic is in many ways a direct carry-over of the threat to NATO’s flanks since the 1960s; and the VJTF concept is a legacy of NATO concepts for defending these flanks: integrated multinationality and rapid deployability, complemented by the NRF’s rotation scheme.

Throughout the 40 years when Warsaw Pact and NATO forces squared off across the intra-German border, there was no doubt that any conflict would be decided in the heart of Europe. At the same time, there

was a high degree of certainty that, even under evolving allied strategies, any substantial border violation by Moscow in Central Europe would have led to nuclear escalation. This was ensured not just through the presence of allied forces near the border on West German territory, but also through NATO’s credible nuclear deterrence. Accordingly, it was clear that the Soviet Union could hardly hope to achieve any aims in Western Europe through limited measures without risking a full-blown war.

This was only partly true, however, for the alliance’s flanks. Especially along the extensive Norwegian coast as well as in Greece and Turkey, the alliance’s deterrence was notably weaker. Neither were multinational army groups stationed along their borders, nor was it credible that NATO would respond with nuclear arms to a border violation in the Arctic Ocean. NATO was thus concerned about two scenarios: *First*, the Soviet Union might un-

**The flank threat, which was previously regarded as a secondary matter, has become the main threat to today’s NATO.**

dermine individual alliance partners through societal subversion and thus, backed up by an impressive threat of military force, achieve a creeping destabilization of a member state without necessarily triggering an activation of NATO’s Article 5. *Secondly*, Moscow might also be inclined to seize a territory – for instance, a littoral island – essentially by *coup de main*, in order to present the alliance with a *fait accompli*. NATO would then have been faced with a choice between open warfare for the reconquest of that territory or acquiescing to the new status quo. It is not difficult to identify elements of both these scenarios in Moscow’s actions in Ukraine today.

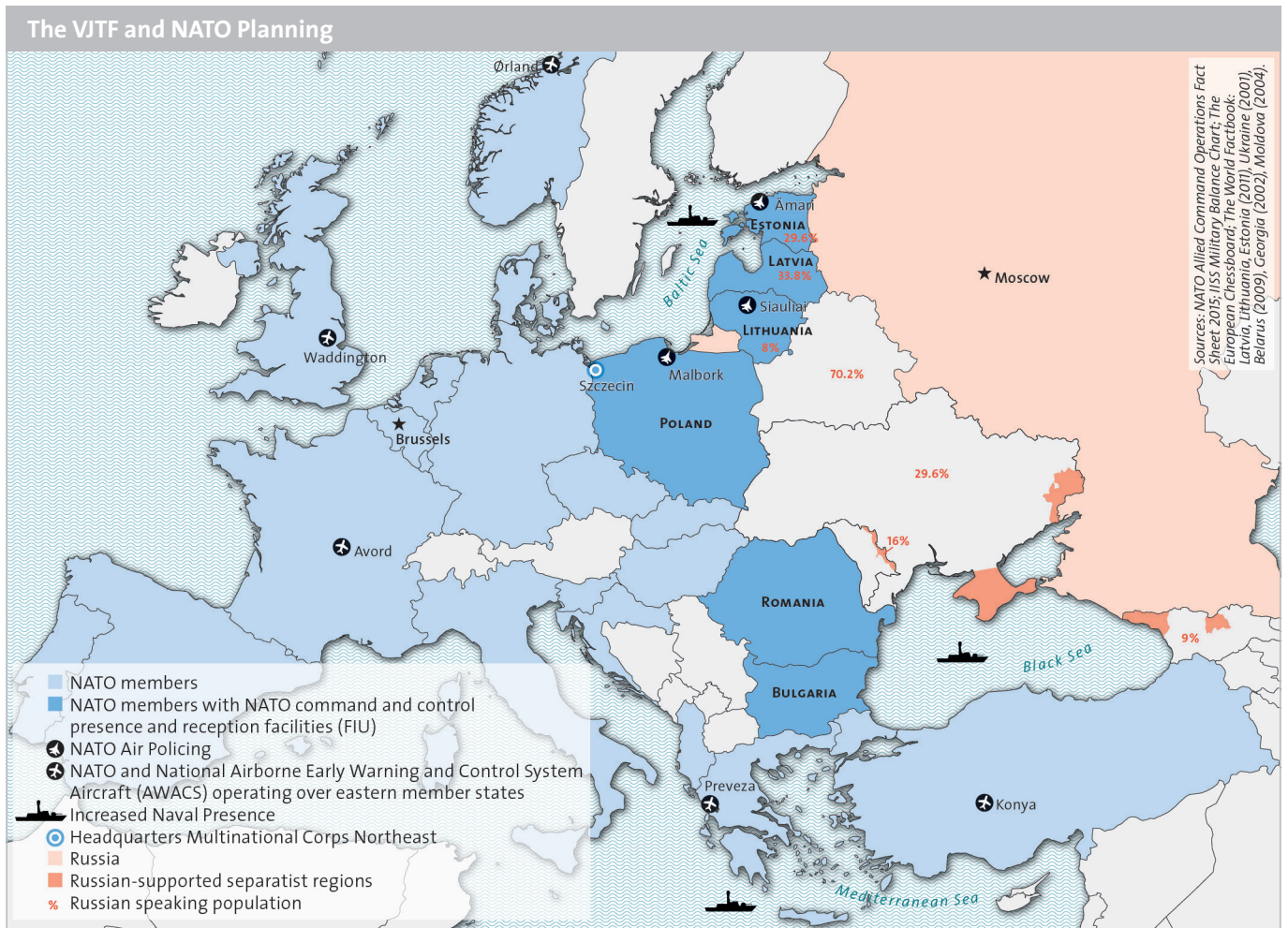
Thus, key elements of today’s “hybrid threat” are based on these two earlier threat scenarios: subversion and *coup de main*. Of course, the threat has evolved – the Kremlin’s strategic media work in Europe is now largely internet-based, while the fostering of Communist parties has given way to support for right-wing populist, pro-Russian and anti-EU parties. The focus on Russian-speaking minorities under the “Putin doctrine” of protecting Russian “citizens” abroad also introduces an inherently aggressive element into its foreign policy. What is new in particular is the total ab-

sence of a standoff between two military blocs in Central Europe – therefore, the flank threat, which was previously regarded as a secondary matter, has become the main threat to today’s NATO. This is particularly true for the most vulnerable of NATO’s flanks, the exposed Baltic states.

From 1961 onwards, NATO’s answer to the threat to its flanks rested on a multinational unit often forgotten today, the Allied Mobile Force (AMF). While conceived as a joint force, it was constructed around a land component consisting of reinforced infantry battalions from several alliance members. The AMF was to be rapidly airlifted to Norway or Turkey in case of tensions or border violations, where it had been assigned clear areas of operation, with heavy material prepositioned on location by the contributing nations. Any deployment, of course, would have been mainly of a political nature, symbolizing alliance solidarity and ensuring that an attack on one state would necessarily have constituted an attack against all of the allied countries. While the AMF was indeed capable of a time-limited defense against minor military attacks, it was, first and foremost, designed as a politico-military symbol of alliance solidarity on secondary fronts of a potential war. By 2015, with the main front in Central Europe having disappeared, NATO’s flanks are now becoming the primary fronts of NATO’s defense planning. And in establishing the VJTF, NATO is now applying a modified concept of the AMF to counter the challenges in the East.

### The VJTF as a “Mobile Tripwire”

Thus, the VJTF, in the tradition of the AMF, is best described as a “mobile tripwire”, constituting a deployable guarantee of alliance solidarity that should make it more difficult for Moscow to attack an individual ally without striking all of the (major) allies at the same time. This purpose is, to a considerable degree, already served by its mere existence coupled with an assured rapid deployment capability. Not that its combat value is completely insignificant; unlike the already present NATO forces engaged in exercises on a rotational basis, the VJTF could offer sufficiently robust resistance against any foe to ensure the invocation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. But combat effectiveness is not the essence of the concept. Therefore, while criticism of the quality of equipment used by some of the first units assigned to it is justified, especially against



the background of familiar problems with equipment in the troop-contributing nations, these shortcomings have little bearing on the VJTF’s effectiveness in its primary mission. Far more important than those superficial problems are five inherent elements of the concept:

*First*, the decision against a permanent NATO troop presence in the Baltic means that considerable residual uncertainty remains among the Baltic states regarding alliance solidarity. Would NATO states really decide to deploy the VJTF to the border with Russia and thus risk an armed conflict? The importance of this question is even greater when considering the uncertain “threshold” for a potential activation: It is certainly possible that incremental subversion and destabilization by Russia, yet without the open presence of Russian armed forces, would prevent a NATO Council decision to deploy the VJTF. Only armed troops with a continuous presence would guarantee an allied intervention – it

is for this very reason that West Germany insisted on the presence of alliance forces on its territory throughout the Cold War. And for the same reason, the Federal Republic of Germany was highly skeptical towards US Cold War concepts to pre-position material on its territory for a “Return of Forces to Germany” (REFORGER) from the US in case of a conflict.

But *secondly*, even if the NATO allies should prove determined to deploy the VJTF, it would be hard pressed to meet its ambitious reaction time. For this very reason, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), US General Philip Breedlove, is pushing for the assignation of clear responsibilities regarding the activation of the force. At the very least, that would have to include the authority for an informal activation, in anticipation of a North Atlantic Council decision, if the extremely short mandated reaction time is to be fulfilled at all. Moreover, the deployment of units across what can be considered strategic dis-

tances, even without their heavy equipment, is always a strategic vulnerability; in the past, that was also a crucial weakness of the AMF – one that was never resolved. Finally, even for the VJTF’s advance elements, which are supposed to have the fastest deployment capability of two to three days, the available interval would not suffice to ensure that NATO’s “mobile tripwire” would be on location in time to prevent Moscow from occupying territory by *coup de main* under the second threat scenario. It is true that the alliance will nevertheless have a continuous troop presence on location: rotating forces visiting for exercises as well as the garrisons of the alliance’s forward depots. It remains to be seen, however, whether force rotation will really ensure an uninterrupted presence; and it is unclear whether troops on training, or mere command echelons without significant combat capability, would suffice as a “tripwires”.

*Third*, the question of follow-on forces arises: Which troops are to follow behind

the “Spearhead Force” if the situation were to escalate further? The NRF concept, which is the template for “second wave” planning at the moment, has not yet faced the test of live deployments, let alone real combat. Moreover, in this case, unlike with the VJTF, the combat-effectiveness of the follow-on units would be more important than their national composition or response time. The issue would no longer be political symbolism, but actual warfighting capability. The only possible solution points towards an increase in quality and readiness across the board, and of all NATO forces. This, however, would require significant resources and would certainly overtax the Wales Consensus. The Readiness Action Plan (RAP) is aimed at mitigating this very weakness; at least in public, however, the implications have not been discussed sufficiently because the VJTF attracts all of the attention.

The *fourth question* concerns actual operations on the ground once the VJTF would actually be deployed. Under the scenario of a “hybrid” threat to the Baltic, any military force on the ground would be operating in a grey area between internal and external threats. Detering Russian intervention from outside would not be contentious. However, were the operation to take place in the context of a “revolt” of Russian-speaking minorities organized, controlled, and supported from outside – as is the more likely scenario – significant problems would arise, including, but not limited to, problems related to international law. In addition, troop-contributing states that maintain a clear division between internal and external security, such as Germany, would face a political dilemma that may not have been thought through sufficiently. As long as this issue is unresolved, the deterrence value of the VJTF remains unsatisfactory.

*Fifth*, it is more than doubtful whether the planned annual rotation of the VJTF, matched with the complex pre-positioning of equipment, will be sustainable. The challenge becomes even clearer when one considers potential future theaters of operations in the south of the alliance territory; member states such as Italy, France, and

Spain are urging that plans be drawn up to meet security threats in those regions, too. Because of sound military principles, and in order to minimize the inherent friction of multinational mission command, the AMF was not composed of rotating national contingents, but rested on permanent contributing states and nationally defined areas of operation. Only through designating those areas could the immense logistical challenges of pre-positioned supplies and material possibly be overcome. The notion of rotation, today too often considered as essential in multinational units, was only introduced after 2002 with the creation of the NRF. Back then, however, it was mainly intended to serve the crosscutting modernization of the national armed forces. Yet for the NRF itself, rotation was more detrimental than helpful. In addition, the NRF did not depend on pre-positioned equipment. The combination of multinationality, rapid reaction capability, and annual changes in the composition of the VJTF is now creating considerable logistical problems. After all, this means that for the same areas of operation, NATO will have to synchronize an annual rotation of diverse units from various alliance members that will inevitably also have varying levels of equipment and configuration – or else decide to drop the façade of rapid reaction and reduce its expectations in terms of the VJTF’s deployability and reaction time. In the absence of further, politically difficult steps – potentially entailing measures such as the delineation of national areas of operation in border regions, analogous to the NATO defense plans for West Germany – or a fundamental standardization of equipment and training of NATO militaries, which seems even less likely in the short term, the concept of the VJTF will thus quickly meet with practical limitations.

### Open Questions for Warsaw 2016

Overall, it becomes clear that the military response of the alliance to Moscow’s aggression is a legacy of the flank threat, and that NATO is confronted with broadly similar problems as in the Cold War. Like its predecessor, the AMF, the VJTF is in principle a suitable instrument for demonstrating alliance solidarity and rapidly de-

ploying a force of limited combat value to threatened border regions. Were Moscow to embark upon direct intervention once the VJTF is in position, a conflict would be unavoidable. However, at this point, both the significance of the VJTF and the viability of the concept reach their limits. When considering the possibility of further escalation in the east as well as an expansion of the VJTF’s role in the south – for instance with an eye to Libya – or in Turkey, the perspective should be sufficiently broad to encompass the alliance’s general combat-readiness. If the VJTF, and with it the “Enhanced NRF”, become the instrument of choice, it will be necessary either to do away with the annual rotation and the pre-positioning of material, or to define national areas of operation and thus to designate, for example, Italian units for Romania, German units for Estonia, and US units for Lithuania. However, resolving these questions would go beyond the political consensus of Wales and can only be achieved at Warsaw in 2016 at the earliest.

Despite the alliance’s ostentatious demonstration of solidarity, the eastern members will continue, like West Germany during the Cold War, to urge that their territories be defended by present and ready allied forces, and with a “forward strategy”. Only this defense posture would credibly protect against a Russian *coup de main*; and as long as that does not happen, any deterrence of Russian aggression is not ultimately credible, as it relies on a promise by the alliance that is not backed up permanently with boots on the ground. NATO thereby retains some latitude for escalation in the run-up to the Warsaw 2016 summit, and thus some leverage in negotiations with Russia. Should no fundamental détente emerge by then, as currently seems likely, NATO faces difficult politico-military decisions ranging far beyond the VJTF.

**Dr. Martin Zapfe** directs the team “Global Security” at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich. He is, inter alia, the co-author of “*NATO after Wales*” (2014)

CSS Analyses is edited by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich. Each month, two analyses are published in German, French, and English. The CSS is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy.

Editors: Christian Nünlist and Matthias Bieri  
Translation and lectorship: Christopher Findlay  
Layout and graphics: Miriam Dahinden  
ISSN: 2296-0244

Feedback and comments: [analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch](mailto:analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch)  
More issues and free online subscription:  
<http://www.css.ethz.ch/cssanalysen>

Most recent issues:

**Global Disaster Politics Post Sendai** No. 173  
**Putin’s Russia and European Security** No. 172  
**Space: The New Frontier of Security Policy** No. 171  
**The Western Balkans Between Europe and Russia** No. 170  
**Entrenched Positions on Nuclear Non-Proliferation** No. 169  
**Sinai Peninsula – from Buffer Zone to Battlefield** No. 168