

NATO's Strategic Defence in the new "hybrid cold war"

The new "hybrid cold war" is not at an end even though it has never been declared, but instead, dictated by Russia. On the contrary, the conflict is escalating and becoming multidimensional.^[i] The new cold war is no longer limited to spectacular phenomena such as hybrid and other threats below the threshold of war (cyber interventions and cyber defence, and information operations in social media). Today, the clash between Russia and the West bears a strong resemblance to the Cold War in the second half of the 20th century with its indirect military confrontation: an arms race, large-scale military exercises, provocative military incidents, proxy wars, nuclear and conventional deterrence, extortion etc.

The new cold war between NATO and Russia requires the Alliance not only to conduct operations as a response to the existing threats and challenges but also to create a new strategic concept that would fit the current security environment. Such a concept ought to be based on a doctrine of conventional strategic defence to deter any potential aggression against NATO member states.

The collapse of the INF Treaty and an increasing risk of another nuclear arms race at strategic and non-strategic levels are the latest examples of the tension between the two sides.^[ii]

Need for conventional deterrence

The aforementioned circumstances gave new meaning to Europe's conventional deterrence and defence. The entire NATO – and especially its Eastern member states such as Poland – has made efforts to counter Russia-related threats and challenges. These issues were addressed during the last NATO summits in Newport (2014), Warsaw (2016), and Brussels (2017), which in turn led to systematically extended presence of NATO troops on the Alliance's Eastern flank where Poland, Baltic States and Romania also strive to improve their national defensive capabilities.^[iii]

All these decisions and actions are rather reactive and can be perceived as a response to the existing threats. NATO should acquire a more comprehensive, long-term strategic perspective. Furthermore, the North-Atlantic Alliance needs a new strategic concept that would fit the current security environment.^[iv] Such a strategy ought to respond to both contemporary and future threats and challenges by increasing deterrence capabilities of the Alliance or by repelling hostile operations on NATO's territory should deterrence fail.^[v]

Currently, there are two potential conflict scenarios related to Russia's aggression against European members of NATO.^[vi] The first is the 'non-territorial' aggression which can be depicted as a military campaign that does not involve occupation of conquered territories. This type of military operations is based on the so-called 'non-contact' warfare; moreover, some Russian analysts consider it as a potential new type of warfare that could be used in the future.^[vii] The principle objective of such an operation would be destruction and disruption of an enemy who would have no other option than to accept conditions imposed by Russia. Therefore, it would be no longer necessary to occupy enemy's territory in the long run which could have severe political and strategic implications. The aforementioned type of warfare comprises:

- Hybrid operations below the threshold of war (information warfare, provocative demonstrations organised by 'useful idiots', secret operations conducted by special forces similar to 'the little green men' in Ukraine etc.).^[viii]
- Cyber operations intended to cripple the political decision-making process as well as the military command.
- Precision strikes on selected targets using missiles, air force, and artillery.
- Air assaults against targets of strategic importance.

The second scenario involves typical territorial aggression based on either a limited military campaign (involving limited targets, forces, time and location) or full-scale war. Russia does not rule out an option of sudden limited aggression under the umbrella of the so-called 'doctrine of nuclear de-escalation' that dictates the use of tactical nuclear warheads.^[ix] A full-scale war, however, is very unlikely given its devastating impact on belligerent countries^[x]. Nevertheless, such a conflict could eventually take place as a result of a) a military miscalculation regarding the efficiency of the doctrine if the intentionally limited

conflict gets out of hand; b) an unexpected circumstance (e.g. a malfunction of the command and control systems of the nuclear forces); or c) cyber sabotage conducted by a third party.

Defensive concepts

Given the aforementioned conditions, it is worth considering what concept of defensive operation could be planned and organised in advance by defenders. In theory, there are three general concepts of strategic defence. Each of them puts an emphasis on one of the three principle dimensions of warfare, which are forces, space (territory) and a period of time. These concepts are as follows:

- A pre-emptive strike launched to impair forces of an anticipated enemy;
- Area defence (linear and permanent position defence intended to deny enemy's access to designated territory);
- Defence in depth (a defence in space using operational depth and military manoeuvres intended to slow down an enemy and buy time for defenders).

Undoubtedly, a pre-emptive strike is a tempting strategic option against both non-territorial and territorial aggression; however, such a strategy is very risky and extremely difficult to implement. First and foremost, it requires the development of capabilities to counteract unexpected threats (e.g. intelligence, military surveillance, counterintelligence and military deception, electronic warfare etc.), offensive long-range precision weapons (missiles, combat aircraft, and 'smart' artillery supported by reconnaissance satellites), as well as a rapid reaction force (special forces, air assault units).

Therefore, only modern and well-equipped armed forces that have an extensive offensive potential are able to effectively disrupt an anticipated operation of an enemy or even make it completely impossible. Israel has proven that such a concept can be successfully implemented. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Israeli armed forces fought against enemies that were regarded as technologically inferior. In conclusion, a pre-emptive strike, which can also play a role of conventional deterrence, is an option only for global powers or countries whose military potential is comparable to their adversary.

The concept of linear area defence is related to territorial aggression which means that the first wave of troops is concentrated on the anticipated direction of the enemy attack in order to keep the enemy as close to the border as possible and prevent the adversary from

controlling the defended territory. The reserve formations are supposed to support defence on the major attack axis. This strategy, however, is completely inefficient against non-territorial aggression.

Given the uncertainty over the most critical attack directions, the defensive front ought to be stretched. Therefore, the significant capabilities to counteract unexpected threats are absolutely crucial to concentrate the main forces on the anticipated direction of the enemy attack. Lack of such capabilities would force the defending side to use linear defences stretched along the border. Practically all military theoreticians, including Clausewitz and Piłsudski, considered it as the worst defensive strategy. The core of defensive forces could be easily surrounded and destroyed if the enemy breaks through defence lines. An imminent defeat of the defending side would subsequently put a quick end to the war.

The concept of defence in depth is focused on buying time at the expense of space (territory) in order to slow down advances of superior enemy forces, undermine their first strike and to let the defending side regroup its own troops in strategic depth. This strategy also allows to minimise an impact of an unexpected attack as far as the time and the area of assault are concerned. The first line of defence is deployed on advanced positions to conduct reconnaissance and delay enemy forces; in the meantime, the defending side can prepare its main forces to counter an enemy in the strategic depth and to launch a counterattack. In this scenario, the first line of defence is secured by a very limited number of troops, whereas the main forces as well as the main lines of defence are dispersed in the strategic depth. In consequence, a defender can concentrate its main forces where it is necessary. The spreading of troops is also more efficient against non-territorial aggression compared to area defence.

Doctrinal scenarios

The aforementioned strategies ought to be analysed in order to identify the most suitable approach to defensive operations that could be used as a foundation of NATO's military doctrine. Therefore, it is crucial to scrutinise prospects of the future doctrine of NATO and to determine a potential response to the most likely threat, which is an unexpected, limited military operation.

NATO has sufficient military potential to dispatch intelligence and combat units required to conduct a pre-emptive strike. Such an operation, however, cannot be carried out without political will. The other problem is the very low feasibility of a pre-emptive strike. It is very

unlikely that a pre-emptive strike could be approved by all members as a major doctrine of a defensive alliance. This approach can be applied by states, for instance Israel and the United States (U.S. counter-terrorism military operations under President G.W. Bush, as well as doctrines of some nuclear powers that do not rule out an option of pre-emptive strikes). Nevertheless, it is quite difficult to imagine that one state could suggest such an option, but even so, it is doubtful whether the Alliance would ever consider a pre-emptive strike as a response to a threat of a full-scale war. In case of war, this scenario would involve a pre-emptive nuclear attack and would also require concentration of large forces ready for a rapid attack along NATO's external border. Today, such an operation is not feasible.

The second issue is whether a pre-emptive strike can be considered a deterrent against limited military aggression; this is definitely not an option as far as aggression below the threshold of war is concerned. Conducting a pre-emptive strike against a nuclear power would lead to a full-scale conflict that could eventually escalate into a nuclear war. Therefore, the pre-emptive strike option cannot be taken into consideration by NATO.

However, it does not rule out a pre-emptive strike from NATO's military doctrine. Such an option can be considered at the operational level as a component of allied joint operations and campaigns. In conclusion, a pre-emptive strike remains a possibility for NATO as long as we consider an operational approach rather than a strategy.

As far as the area-defence approach is concerned, it is worth noting that deployment of the main forces along the state's border is a risky option in the full-scale war scenario. If strategic surprise were achieved, an aggressor could destroy the core of allied defence forces in the first phase of the conflict in Eastern Europe. Given the conventional war scenario, a defeat of NATO forces would be either a political catastrophe for Europe (the collapse of the Alliance) or a trigger for a long-term process of preparing a counteroffensive in the future. The other option, however, is a nuclear war and a strategic catastrophe for both sides of the conflict.

Given that a full-scale war is very unlikely due to NATO's and Russia's nuclear deterrence capabilities, the limited military aggression remains a major threat to the Alliance. In these circumstances, a detachment of large defence forces concentrated on the Eastern flank could indeed deter an enemy from conducting a military operation against the Alliance. Therefore, this concept could be a strategic opportunity to keep the new cold war below the

threshold of conventional warfare. Nevertheless, there is still a question of whether such an option is feasible. Given that deployment of large forces of NATO along the Russian border would have significant political implications and would certainly increase the risk of military confrontation, the aforementioned scenario is also very unlikely. Furthermore, large NATO deployments comparable to those during the Cold War would require member states of the Alliance to increase their defence spending and possibly exceed the recommended spending target of 2 percent of GDP that has not been achieved by most nations.

Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the last scenario which is based on a concept of defence in depth. Considering NATO's strategic environment, this last option seems a natural choice for a collective defence organisation. As far as strategic aspects of defence in depth are concerned, NATO definitely has both capable forces and space to conduct its operations as opposed to time which remains a critical factor. NATO needs time to make collective decisions and to deploy its forces given that the Alliance's forces are multinational and have a transatlantic potential that can grow over the course of the war. The First and the Second World War proved that deployment of the US troops to Europe is of particular importance; however, it requires time that can be bought by elastic defence.

In this case, however, politics is in conflict with the strategy: strategic advantage of this concept are undermined by its political drawbacks. The Alliance's Eastern flank shall not approve such a plan due to the fear that other NATO members will not be determined to continue the war at any cost. As a result, territorial losses (either permanent or temporary, depending on post-war negotiations) of the countries on the Eastern flank – an inevitable consequence of defence in depth – could be presented to them as a *fait accompli*. These concerns are especially related to limited military aggression which remains a threat to the Baltic states but also Poland. Therefore, the defence-in-depth concept seems too risky for Central and Eastern European members of NATO.

Given all aforementioned conditions as well as the strategic and political arguments the deployment of NATO troops in the Baltic republics and Poland seems the best compromise the Alliance is currently able to reach. The strength of the deployed units ought to balance enemy forces and deter potential limited aggression towards NATO which means that the Alliance should increase the number of its troops in the region. It seems also logical that the operational commander of the Polish Armed Forces should also serve as a commander of allied operations in the region based on a dual hat command structure^[xi]. Moreover, to

maximise the credibility of this concept NATO should deploy not only more American troops but also additional units from Western European member states[xii].

Conclusions

1. The new cold war between NATO and Russia requires the Alliance not only to conduct operations as a response to the existing threats and challenges but also to create a new strategic concept that would fit the current security environment. Such a concept ought to be based on a doctrine of conventional strategic defence to deter any potential aggression against NATO member states.
2. As far as a strategic assessment of potential war scenarios is concerned, it is necessary to consider two types of possible aggression against European members of NATO: a) non-territorial aggression which can be depicted as a military campaign that does not involve occupation of conquered territories, this type of military operations is based on the so-called 'non-contact' warfare; b) typical territorial aggression based on either a limited military campaign (involving limited targets, forces, time and location) or full-scale war. One of the greatest concerns of NATO is that Russia does not rule out an option of sudden limited aggression under the umbrella of the so-called 'doctrine of nuclear de-escalation' that dictates the use of tactical nuclear warheads.
3. There are three general concepts of strategic defence that NATO ought to consider: a) a pre-emptive strike (launched to impair forces of an anticipated enemy); b) area defence (linear and permanent position defence intended to deny enemy's access to designated territory); c) defence in depth (a defence in space using operational depth and military manoeuvres intended to slow down an enemy and buy time for defenders).
4. Considering the existing strategic and political conditions, the deployment of NATO troops in the Baltic States and Poland seems the best solution in terms of both deterrence and defence against potential limited aggression against NATO member states on the Eastern flank. The deployed troops can also facilitate defence in depth in the case of a full-scale war.
5. Poland should seek to reassure that the allied forces in the region would remain under command of the Polish operational commander in the initial phase of the defence operation based on a dual hat command structure.

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[i] See S. Koziej, *Hybrydowa zimna wojna w Europie*, „Pułaski Policy Papers”, Warszawa 5.09.2016 r., https://pulaski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Pulaski_Policy_Papers_Nr_20_16.pdf

[ii] See S. Koziej, *Neozimnowojenna gra raketowa, czyli konsekwencje zerwania traktatu INF*, [www.koziej.pl](http://koziej.pl), 24.10.2018 r., <http://koziej.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Zerwanie-traktatu-INF.pdf>

[iii] *Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance*, RAND, Santa Monica 2019, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/RR2779/RAND_RR2779.pdf

[iv] S. Koziej, *Ewolucja i scenariusze kształtowania się środowiska bezpieczeństwa europejskiego*, [w:] *Bezpieczeństwo Europy w globalnym świecie. Szanse i zagrożenia przyszłości w warunkach przesilenia cywilizacyjnych*, redakcja naukowa: Jerzy Kleer, Konrad Prandecki, PAN, Warszawa 2018, s. 280 – 309, <http://koziej.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Koziej-Ewolucja-i-scenariusze-%C5%9Brodowiska-bezp.pdf>

[v] A. Lanoszka, M. A. Hunzeker, *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe*, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, March 2019, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/download.cfm?q=1404>

[vi] S. Koziej: *Nowa zimna wojna na wschodniej flance – scenariusze dla rozwoju środowiska bezpieczeństwa państw Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, „Pułaski Policy Paper”, Nr 3, 2019. 02 kwietnia 2019 r., <https://pulaski.pl/pulaski-policy-paper-s-koziej-nowa-zimna-wojna-na-wschodniej-flance-scenariusze-dla-rozwoju-srodowiska-bezpieczenstwa-panstw-europy-srodkowo-wschodniej/>

[vii] See A. Шарковский, *В современной войне воюют технологии. Основная ударная нагрузка в боевых действиях нашего времени ложится на авиацию*, „Независимая газета”, 22.12.2017, http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2017-12-22/1_978_technologies.html

[viii] *By Other Means, Part I: Campaigning in the Gray Zone*, CSIS, July 2019, [https://csis-](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-)

[public/publication/Hicks_GrayZone_interior_v4_FULL_WEB.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Hicks_GrayZone_interior_v4_FULL_WEB.pdf); *The Growing Need to Focus on Modern Political Warfare*, RAND, Santa Monica 2019, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/RB10000/RB10071/RAND_RB10071.pdf; *Deterring Russia in the Gray Zone*, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, March 2019, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/download.cfm?q=1407>

[ix] M. Kroenig, *A Strategy for Deterring Russian Nuclear De-Escalation Strikes*, Atlantic Council, April 2018, http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council_StrategyDeterringRussianNuclearDeEscalation.pdf

[x] F. W. Kagan, N. Bugayova, J. Cafarella, *Confronting the Russian Challenge*, Institute for the Study of War, June 2019, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20CTP%20Report%20-%20Confronting%20the%20Russian%20Challenge%20-%20June%202019.pdf>

[xi] See S. Koziej, *Zachód kontra Rosja: Podwójny kapelusz bezpieczeństwa* „Rzeczpospolita”, 6.05.2018, <http://www.rp.pl/Publicystyka/180509764-Zachod-kontra-Rosja-Podwojny-kapelusz-bezpieczenstwa.html>

[xii] *Strengthening the Defense of NATO's Eastern Frontier*, CSBA 2019, https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Stengthening_the_Defense_of_NATOs_Eastern_Frontier_WEB_1.pdf

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