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NATO Approaches to Forward Defence and Contemporary Deterrence and Defence Adaptation

“Improbability of war varies directly with the probability of surprise”

(Richard K. Betts, 1981)

Russia’s large-scale war against Ukraine was a wake-up call for the entire international community and, in particular, for NATO Alliance. It became obvious that Europe is no longer at peace, and that serious steps should be taken by the Transatlantic collective defence Alliance. NATO intensified the adaptation of its deterrence and defence posture. The 2022 NATO Madrid Summit marked a major shift in NATO’s deterrence and defence posture, and it was agreed to transition from defence by reinforcement to forward defence. The article discusses the concept of forward defence, its historical evolution and its practical implementation by NATO. It evaluates forward defence in relation to defence and deterrence strategies that existed during the Cold War and how they have changed over the time. It examines how forward defence contributes to the doctrinal conventional deterrence and defence principles and indicates major changes in collective defence. It debates whether and how NATO is experiencing a real paradigm shift in its doctrinal deterrence and defence perception and how forward defence can help ensure that every inch of the Allied territory is defended.

Keywords

NATO, forward defence, conventional deterrence, conventional defence, military strategy

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Introduction

This article focuses on conventional deterrence and defence in the Transatlantic region. It evaluates major factors and implications affecting the credibility of conventional deterrence and defence, assuming that the success of conventional deterrence depends on military strategy, political will, nature of the threat, capabilities, and readiness of troops. It addresses the nexus between conventional deterrence and conventional defence, and examines the forward defence strategy to evaluate credibility of conventional deterrence and defence used by military alliances. The article debates two major roles of forward defence: as a means of deterrence and as a means of defence if deterrence fails.

The article traces the debates over the credibility of the conventional deterrence and conventional defence (if deterrence fails). It overviews historical changes in the NATO Alliances deterrence and defence posture, focusing on five major factors that ensure credibility of forward defence strategy, namely: (1) credible denial of enemy's forces (Daalder, 1991) by capabilities and readiness of troops; (2) compellence effect on an enemy; (3) prevention of surprise attacks, limiting vulnerability of surprise (Betts, 1981), and elimination of the striking-first advantage (Schelling, 1959); (4) elasticity and flexibility of the front (that gives room for mobility of forces, and ability to impose a cost on an opponent) (5) credible defence in case the deterrence fails, and prevention loss of territory and limit the damage of war (Edler, 1986; Rhodes, 2000). The article assesses strengths and weaknesses of forward defence strategies, it evaluates the means by which forward defence enhances the credibility of conventional deterrence and positively influences the credibility of nuclear deterrence.

The article aims to depict the role of forward defence strategy in the context of NATO deterrence and defence posture change. Empirically, it examines different types of forward defence used by NATO to ensure credibility of conventional deterrence and defence. It evaluates the role of forward defence in NATO deterrence and defence adaptation process, by answering the question how NATO forward defence helps Alliance adapt its deterrence and defence posture, and provides reassurance to the NATO Allies that are the most exposed to military threats? It also touches upon the debate on how much force is enough to deter the threat and (if deterrence fails) to defend the territory; and how to balance conventional defence and deterrence

with nuclear deterrence can be achieved?

From the very inception of NATO, forward defence was a part of its military strategy. Forward defence helped to keep the balance between deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. At NATO forward defence connected two major elements: the U.S. military presence in Europe and NATO principle/concept of positioning forces on the territories that are located closest to the enemy/opponent. The initial aim of forward defence was to deny the enemy from entering into the Allied territory and to prevent surprise attack. The article aims to contribute to deterrence studies by focusing on contemporary forward defence, it looks into the forward defence role in the context of current NATO deterrence and defence posture adaptation. It debates whether and how NATO is undergoing a real paradigm shift in its doctrinal deterrence and defence perception by ensuring that every inch of the Allied territory is defended.

Since its earliest years the NATO Alliance aimed at discouraging the Soviet Union from use of aggression against European Allies that were weaker and smaller in capability and numbers of forces. NATO military strategy was developed around the need to deter the risk of conventional aggression and collectively defend the territory if deterrence fails. NATO was built on the principle of a strong transatlantic bond, and reassured by the USA security guarantees. Conventionally, NATO was developing the strategy of forward defence. In reaction to major changes in security environment, NATO adjusted its defence line, which was few times moved closer to the border with the potential enemy. NATO's deterrence strategy was adjusted due to technological and capability developments and in reaction to enemy's strategies and strategic moves. The forward defence contained the material as well as psychological and cognitive dimensions. The conventional capabilities in forward areas were to be "sufficient to inflict serious losses on the aggressor and convince him of the risks of continuing his aggression". It might be assumed that the nature of threat perception determined that most of the defence and deterrence strategies of NATO were based on forward defence (with exception of 1991, 1999 and 2010).

By analysing the declassified documents from NATO Archives, and publicly available NATO documents (the NATO Strategic Concepts, Summit Declarations and Communiqués, Military Committee Documents, such as MC 48 series documents on implementation of Strategic Concept), as well as public communication

by senior officials of NATO (Secretaries General, Deputy Secretaries General, SACEURs, CMCs) the article looks into the principles of forward defence that existed during the Cold War and evaluates how they changed over the time. It evaluates how the credibility of conventional deterrence is to be ensured by using the forward defence strategy. It contributes to deterrence studies as well as the determinants of change in conventional deterrence and defence of collective defence alliances. The article focuses on the debates over the conventional deterrence and conventional defence nexus. It traces the changes in NATO forward defence and analyses its place in the NATO deterrence and defence posture. The article is not intended to draw the parallels between the Cold War deterrence and defence and contemporary ones, rather it aims at analysing NATO adaptation and major doctrinal the principles engrained in NATO strategic planning and institutional practices.

1. Forward Defence, Conventional Deterrence and Strategic Studies

Forward defence (or defence-in-depth) is the conventional deterrence strategy used in regional military strategies. It can be defined as the positioning of forces closer to the possible contact line aiming not to allow adversary's forces to enter your territory. It is aimed at neutralising the threats before they reach the border. It is based on high readiness, pre-deployed troops prepared for defence of the territory, coupled with new technologies and strategies for deep-strike (Cimbala, 1990). This article is focused on the case of NATO forward defence strategy that is related to conventional deterrence and defence.

Forward defence might be defined as "positioning the forces nearer the frontline" (Krisinger, 1991, p. iv) with the aim of not allowing the adversary's forces to enter your territory. In military strategy the concept of forward defence is usually seen as part of a regional offence-defence nexus. The term forward defence is used synonymously with the concept of *defence-in-depth*. *Defence-in-depth* or *forward defence* helps to prevent loss of territory and limit the damage of war to the greatest extent possible (Edler, 1986). Edler, in analysing NATO's forward defence, underlines that forward defence does not restrict mobility

of forces, but “the defender has to alternate rapidly between delaying operations, defence, and surprise counter-attacks to avoid massive enemy fire” (Edler, 1986) so it has to be flexible, adaptable and elastic.

Scholars analysing deterrence strategies usually pay more attention to nuclear deterrence and its role in regional and broader international security, leaving conventional deterrence as secondary and somehow less important. Indeed, nuclear and conventional deterrence support one another but entail fundamental differences. Nuclear deterrence is more rigid, it changes slowly, and usually ends with strategic balances (strategic stability); whereas conventional deterrence is more dynamic, flexible and less predictable. Conventional deterrence is not static, it is about “dynamics and strategic process” (Rhodes, 2000, p. 229). So, keeping the credibility of conventional deterrence means constant adaptation of strategy, technology, and ensuring effective decision-making. Nuclear and conventional deterrence also differ in their outcomes. Conventional deterrence is important for “denying a potential aggressor’s ability to achieve a quick military victory and political *fait accompli*” (Rhodes, 2000, p. 229), while nuclear deterrence is usually focused on the prevention of nuclear use *per se*.

Krisinger (1991, p. 1) observes that “projection of conventional military power is traditionally associated with the interrelated concepts of forward defence and strategic mobility”. Forward defence has significant cognitive elements in itself. It is about a perception/belief that “a conventional defence is capable of denying the adversary the achievement of his objectives” (Daalder, 1991). Snyder (1960) underlines that deterrence by denial “is accomplished by having military forces which can block the enemy’s military forces from making territorial gains”. This principle matches the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept’s principle underlining the Alliance’s commitment to defend every inch of Allied territory.

Defence experts emphasize the importance of operational flexibility (elasticity) and mobility that are needed to “take the initiative at an early stage” (Edler, 1986, p.1) of conflict, and the preparedness of troops to act urgently in case of a surprise attack, with the ability to react in a very short notice (or no notice). The essence of forward defence is directly related to the ability to prevent a surprise attack and, if deterrence fails, immediately react. In the context of conventional deterrence studies, the logic, intentions and principles of surprise attacks, military and political-decision making are broadly studied

by Schelling (1959), Handel (1980), Betts (1981, 2008), Writz (2004), Wohlstetter (1962), Gray (2005), Suedfeld and Bluck (1988), Cancian (2018), and other scholars.

A surprise attack might be aimed at *fait accompli*, which can lead to major/radical changes in the security and strategic situation. A surprise attack aimed at *fait accompli* might have “a decisive effect on the balance of power in the international system” (Handel, 1980, p. 61) or it might significantly alter the security of a particular regional system and beyond. Handel (1980, p. 61) highlights the complexity of military surprise attacks, they might entail different elements, such as: “area or areas chosen for the attack, strategy and tactics employed; use of new military doctrines; technological surprise on the use of new weapon systems; surprise in terms of timing”. The surprise attack can also be related to intelligence failure (see for example, Zagare, Kilgour, 1993) or cognitive misunderstanding.

Cimbala (2000) emphasizes that a surprise factor is important if an opponent seeks to break down the forward defence. He observes that without a ‘partial surprise’ during the Cold War the Soviet Union was not able to destroy “a fully prepared defence-in-depth, which NATO was increasingly more capable of presenting” (Cimbala, 2000, p. 35). Evidently, surprise attack is a relational concept, and its vulnerability directly depends on the opponents ability to retaliate. Cimbala observes that surprise might serve as a deterring factor (Cimbala, 2000, p. 36). On the other hand, a conventional response (defence) is perceived as the primary deterrent against surprise attack (see, for instance, Schwartz, 1975, p. 120). A surprise attack itself bears high risks, as it “succeeds or fails by the finest of margins” (Wirtz, 2021, p. 139). Wirtz underscores the importance of ambiguity in preventing surprise attacks, since “a dynamic defence-by-denial strategy complicates the opponent’s planning environment, reducing confidence that the circumstances needed for a surprise attack will succeed” (Wirtz, 2021, pp. 138–139).

Indeed, forward defence can be used to reduce “vulnerability to surprise” (Betts, 1981, p. 119) by eliminating the advantage of a surprise attack. Schelling (1959, p. 414) observed that the aim of preventing a surprise attack is not only to reduce the risk of such attack, but also “to eliminate the advantage of striking first”. By striking first, the attacking side might gain the initiative and advantage in the conflict, which can compensate for quantitative inferiority (see, for instance Betts, 1981). This article looks at two possible sides of a surprise attack: one that

can break down forward defence (its vulnerabilities) and the other that can serve as a primary deterrent of surprise attack (preventing risks of surprise).

The most common criticism of forward defence is that it “conflates conventional defence and conventional deterrence; strategies to improve denial capabilities and tactical air forces are assumed to contribute to improved deterrence” (Cimbala, 1991, p. 45). In fact, conventional defence differs from conventional deterrence, but the concepts are closely interlinked. Muller observes that deterrence is not a shortcut or an alternative to defence (Muller, 2018, p. 81). Forward defence serves two purposes at once. Its main function is preparedness and readiness to urgently react to possible attacks and defend territory, but at the same time it also has a strong deterrent effect, especially when combined with deterrence by punishment.

Forward defence focuses on well-prepared armed formations stationed at the border, which contribute to deterrence by denial. They are denying the entry of foreign/enemy troops into the territory; at the same time, these troops are prepared to defend the territory if deterrence fails. As Daalder (1991, pp. 52-53) observed “deterrence is enhanced by the prospects of a conventional defence capable of denying the adversary the achievement of his objectives”. Cimbala (1991, p. 61) explained difference between defence and deterrence, underlining that defence means “defeating the invader’s armies and holding territory”, and deterrence includes a punishment component and defender can “inflict politically unacceptable damage on the attacker’s forces and society in return”.

According to Solomon (2013, p. 118), conventional deterrence works when offender is convinced by the defender’s “conventional forces of sufficient capability, quantity, readiness, and proximity to the contested area to ensure any conceivable conventional offensive by the antagonist stands an unacceptable chance of degenerating into a costly, risky, protracted, and indecisive conflict”. Thus, the cognitive perception is very important for the credibility of conventional deterrence, as are troops mobility, capabilities and the ability to quickly react to changing strategic situations. At the centre of defence – deterrence nexus is the credibility of denial and credibility of defence. This credibility is based on multiple material, strategic, cognitive, and political factors. Muller (2018, p. 81) underlined that “strategists should not fall into the trap of thinking that deterrence is a surefire formula for inexpensively solving security problems that

are too difficult to address by building capability ties sufficient to defeat the threat”.

Buzan and Herring (1998, p. 176) observed that conventional capabilities can enhance “effectiveness of conventional deterrence and compellence”. During the Cold War forward defence was perceived as having a strong compellence effect, namely convincing the opponent to change the existing situation (see Petersen, 1986). Historically, NATO pursued this aim through forward defence at its eastern border with the Soviet Union. In 1980’s, NATO forward defence (with nine corps stationed along the border with the Soviet Union) was perceived as compelling, as it was expected to “limit the conventional damage to the Alliance and lower likelihood of Soviet first use of tactical nuclear weapons” (see Freeman, 1981).

The risk of decoupling of the USA reinforcement from European Allies is another very important element addressed by forward defence strategies. Some scholars (for instance Snyder, 1960; Schwartz, 1975) underline that forward defence “would make no sense without the possibility of rapid and massive reinforcement from overseas, and the threats of nuclear retaliation” (Snyder, 1960), a strong conventional component must be coupled with credible nuclear deterrence. Schwartz (1975, p. 120) notices that “a conventional force would at least have to appear as if it could respond to and hold back a conventional assault”. After the Cold War, for many years NATO doctrine reiterated deterrence “based on an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional” (NATO, 2010) (and later also missile defence) capabilities as a core element of Allied overall strategy.

Palmer (2019), Krisinger (1991) analyse forward defence aspects observed in U.S. national strategies and used to ensure regional stability and security. Palmer (2019, p. 9) provides an example of “the U.S. Army’s 1982 ‘Air Land Battle’ doctrine on mobile operations and “*deep attack*”, aimed at “*out-manoeuving*” the Soviet Army”. Krisinger (1991, pp. 3-4) highlights numerous advantages of the U.S. forward defence strategy and assesses that the forward deployed “bases are essential to the creation of regional power balances, which deter aggression and promote overall regional stability” <...>; “assist in protecting the growing strategic and economic interests of weaker allies” <...>; and “reduce response time in meeting regional threats” (Krisinger, 1991, p. 17). Shortened reaction time is one of the essential elements of forward defence, as it must be prepared to respond to a surprise attack.

Forward defence requires a very high level of readiness,

preparedness, and large numbers of forces deployed in territories close to the source of aggression/defence line. It is underlined that maintaining a strong conventional component might be challenging over the longer period of time (see for example, Schwartz, 1975, p. 121). In fact, forward defence might be costly, “in case the deployment takes place along the entire front and with static defensive operations” (see Edler, 1986).

This article focuses on five major functions of forward defence strategy, namely: (1) credible denial of enemy’s forces (Daalder, 1991) through troop capabilities and readiness; (2) a compellence effect on the enemy; (3) prevention of surprise attacks, limiting vulnerability to surprise (Betts, 1981), and eliminating the advantage of striking-first (Schelling, 1959); (4) elasticity and flexibility of the front (that gives room for mobility of forces and the ability to impose a cost on an opponent); (5) options for credible defence in case the deterrence fails, to prevent loss of territory and limit the damage of war (Edler, 1986; Rhodes, 2000). The article explores these five major functions of forward defence and discusses the factors ensuring the credibility of conventional deterrence and defence.

2. Credibility of Conventional Deterrence

Credibility of forward defence and conventional deterrence is usually a central issue addressed by deterrence scholars. Scholars broadly discuss credibility of conventional deterrence by distinguishing its main weaknesses (see Wirtz, 2018; Muller, 2018; Rhodes, 2000, Huntington, 1984; Betts, 1984; Solomon, 2013). Material factors dominate in existing research, such as capabilities, numbers of troops, resources and defence spending. Defence expenditures are usually underlined as a major factor needed for credible conventional deterrence. The weakness of conventional deterrence lies in its dependence on conventional capabilities and their limitations, “and on the counter-capabilities employed by an opponent” (Rhodes, 2000, p. 226).

Besides, conventional deterrence cannot be credible solely because of the capabilities and troops in place. Conventional deterrence requires the ability to adapt strategy, introduce innovation, take urgent decisions, and also needs “a conscious choice by the defender to retaliate” (Huntington, 1984, p. 36) if deterrence fails. Similarly, Muller

(2018, p. 81) highlights the dynamic features of conventional deterrence related to the willingness to “impose costs on an attacker by resisting its assault, invasion or occupation”. In addition to capabilities and resources, other scholars add technological progress and adaptation to technological innovations, strategies, political will, decision-making processes, communication, as well as the ability to react urgently. Rhodes distinguished technology, strategy, tactics, training, morale, political will, and information about the deterrer’s capabilities (Rhodes, 2000, p. 228) as determining factors of conventional deterrence credibility. The political will, strategy, and decision-making are exceptionally important for the credibility of conventional deterrence and the ability to prevent surprise attack.

Some authors address cognitive and relational elements of deterrence success or failure. Conventional deterrence might fail when an aggressor miscalculates the existing military balance and mistakenly expects that its “strategy, doctrine, operational plans, and capabilities can negate the defender’s deterrent” (Solomon, 2013, pp. 119-120). It is also important to take into account the “counter measures the aggressor is able to take” (Rhodes, 2000, p. 226). It may be assumed that forward defence might change due to strategic or technological developments within the regional Alliance, changes in the opponent’s strategy, or in reaction to threat changes. In sum, the credibility of conventional deterrence relies on a sound mix of static and dynamic measures and on the adaptability of planners and decision-makers.

3. Forward Defence and First Years of NATO

NATO applied a forward defence strategy in military planning during different periods of the Cold War (NATO, 2013). It was based on high readiness of forces and pre-deployed troops prepared for immediate defence of particular territory (NATO, 1954b). The perception, nature, geography, strategy, and the scope of forward defence changed over time, but the very principle of armed forces placement closer to the possible source of threat remained.

The most obvious characteristic of NATO forward defence was the placement of troops along the defence line with the aim of keeping them ready to react. The defence line shifted as the Alliance reacted to developments in international security and to the changing nature of security threats. Cross (1985) underlined, “when NATO was formed

in 1949 the main defence line was in Rhine, with fall back positions in the Vosges and the Pyrenees" (Cross, 1985, p. 19). Later it was moved multiple times to the East.

The emergence of the forward defence strategy is related to the Korean War that started in June 1950. This war raised very serious concerns about the future of European security. The Alliance recognised that military threats to Europe might be very serious and that aggression by the Soviet Union could not be discounted. The Korean War encouraged NATO to move faster with the development of its institutional and military structures and to accelerate military planning. The first NATO Secretary General Lord Ismay expressed concerns that a similar outbreak of aggression that took place in Korea could be repeated in elsewhere, and "for NATO the period of cautious optimism and slow methodical progress was over" (Ismay, 1954, p. 31). On September 15, 1950, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) took a decision to establish forward defence in Europe in order to avoid a situation like the one taking place in the Far East (Ismay, 1954, p. 31).

The Korean War had a direct impact on NATO strategic thinking and military planning. NATO recognised the urgency to develop military capabilities, to build civilian and military headquarters, and command structures. The Alliance started thinking about more ambitious force goals and forward defence, while at the same time "the USA speeded up the deliveries of military equipment" (Ismay, 1954, p. 31). It was debated how to develop faster the Western European military capabilities and enhance troop readiness. But at that time Western European countries were very weak economically, had not yet fully recovered from the Second World War, and faced major financial and capability development challenges. The conventional deterrence that was developed then was not credible in terms of capabilities, troops numbers, and readiness to credibly deter or defend territory.

The greatest concern was that the Soviet Union might aim to invade Germany. Indeed, the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Germany was a strategic basis for the forward defence to occur. Lord Ismay highlighted that "aggression should be resisted as far to the east as possible, in order to ensure the defence of all NATO European countries" (Ismay, 1954, p. 32). The main question was the credibility defence per se. NATO moved its defence line eastwards, so that "the defence of Western Europe was thus to be conducted as

close to the Inner German Border (IGB) as possible" (Cross, 1985, p. 19)". As Romero (1992) observed, "NATO's planned main defence line has moved eastward, as absolute capabilities have increased and political requirements have placed greater emphasis on maintaining the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Germany".

At the 1952 Lisbon Summit, the North Atlantic Council agreed upon the urgent need for capability development, setting capability goals (NATO, 1952a) that required significant financial contributions and acknowledging that NATO countries could not meet those goals immediately. The Lisbon declaration states: "the Council provided for the earliest building up of balanced collective forces to meet the requirements of external security within the capabilities of member countries" (NATO, 1952a). It underlined the need for "a specific defensive strength" to be built during the year and increased in the future. The 1952 Strategic Concept of NATO called for the development of defence plans to ensure maximum strength of the Alliance, focused on standardization and capability development.

Forward defence evolved together with the military strategies of the Alliance. "NATO was geared primarily to a form of what could be seen as strategic defence in the sense that it was mainly focused on fighting on NATO territory in what was known as '*forward defence*' along the NATO-Warsaw Pact central front" (Buzan & Herring, 1998, p. 234). The 1954 forward strategy of NATO defined capabilities needed by the Alliance, namely: 12 divisions and 13 first line aircraft (NATO, 1954b). In the 1954 report on "The Most Effective Pattern of NATO Military Strength for the Next Few Years" NATO Military Committee distinguished the defensive aims of NATO: "providing a major deterrent to aggression; a successful forward defence in Europe against Soviet military aggression, and assurance that in war is thrust upon NATO by the USSR NATO will be able to exploit fully its land, sea and air power and thus assure defeat of the Soviets" (NATO, 1954a). This aim indicates that the primary aim of forward defence was credible deterrence, and in case of war – credible defence.

The early idea of NATO forward defence was based on the principle of avoiding fighting on NATO territory and preventing loss of territory. With the development of technology, nuclear capabilities, and missile defence capabilities, and the evolution of NATO defence strategies and military planning, the Alliance's forward defence changed significantly, but the main principle remained.

4. Massive Retaliation and Forward Defence

When it became clear that NATO would not be able to implement the Lisbon goals (that were defined in MC14/1), the focus shifted from conventional deterrence and forward defence to nuclear deterrence (see S. Huntington, 1983-1984, p. 32). In 1954, Eisenhower announced "the New Look", which was based on the *massive retaliation* strategy, which changed the earlier forward defence principles. This strategy stressed "the deterrent role of nuclear weapons, in terms of both massive retaliation by U.S. strategic forces and the early use of tactical nuclear weapons in Western Europe" (Huntington, 1983-1984, p. 32). It was based on good relations with the U.S. allies and deterrence by maintaining a massive capability to strike back (Wells, 1981, p. 33).

Conventional deterrence was pushed into the background, "conventional forces, still to be deployed forward, were to be merely a trip-wire to an immediate and guaranteed nuclear response" (Cross, 1985, p. 19). This shift required minimal force levels as the emphasis shifted from conventional to nuclear deterrence, and from "war fighting to war avoidance policy" (Cross, 1985, p. 19). John F. Dulles USA Secretary of State, underlined that the massive retaliation strategy was based "on a great capacity to retaliate, instantly, by means and at places of our own choosing" (Zagare & Kilgour, 2000, p. 178).

By adopting the *massive retaliation* strategy, the U.S. aimed to deter "the Soviet Union from threatening to transform local conflicts into strategic confrontations" (Zagare & Kilgour, 2000, p. 178). This strategy was criticized for lacking credibility and for the risk that it could "result in a protracted crisis or other limited conflict in which neither side enjoyed an obvious advantage" (Zagare & Kilgour, 2000, p. 180). so without robust number of forces at high readiness this principle of deterrence was not fully credible. The massive retaliation doctrine contained a level of strategic uncertainty and unpredictability. It was unclear which side was better prepared to suffer the cost of a possible attack.

The massive retaliation strategy came together with significant cuts in the U.S. military spending, "Eisenhower submitted the fiscal 1955 budget to Congress, which called for new military spending authority of \$31 billion, down \$3.5 billion from the previous year" (Wells, 1981, p. 33). The massive retaliation strategy allowed lower levels of capabilities, especially conventional ones, but at the same time it was heavily criticised for high risks of threat and insufficient

credibility of defence if deterrence failed. As Snyder (1960, p. 178) defined, massive retaliation carried “the risk of very high cost in war if the threat is carried out or high losses in terms of territory, prestige, and capacity to make future threats credibly if it is not carried out”. The massive retaliation strategy was not designed to hold every inch of Allied territory or to prevent aggressor’s troops from entering; it was very much a defensive and reactive strategy.

Later, as the Soviet Union developed a second-strike capability, the relevance of the massive retaliation strategy became even less obvious. The significant shift came in 1957 with the launch of Sputnik, which marked a technological advantage of the Soviet Union over the U.S. It was believed that the USSR was “fully capable of responding to any strategic attack by the United States with a strategic strike of its own” (see Zagare & Kilgour, 2000, p. 178; Mendelson, 2000), and the risks of attacks on U.S. cities by the Soviet Union increased. This risk fundamentally changed strategic calculus and encouraged rethinking the major principles of the massive retaliation strategy.

The developments of Soviet Union capabilities showed how important NATO’s extended deterrence was, based on European soil. The U.S. started to deploy nuclear weapons in Europe in the late 1950s, based on the 1957 North Atlantic Council decision to deploy nuclear warheads in Europe, and “a decade later that stockpile peaked at 7000” (Burns, 2012, p. 4). During this period the Allied spending on defence decreased, along with investments in conventional forces of NATO Allies, and the Allies’ conventional capabilities were in poor condition and outmatched by those of the Soviet Union.

5. From Massive Retaliation to Flexible Response

When the USA and the Soviet Union reached approximate parity of strategic nuclear weapons, NATO could not rely solely on possession of nuclear weapons and ignore conventional imbalances. The Soviet Union was rapidly developing conventional weapons and pacing up with nuclear capabilities. It was worrisome that, given NATO’s conventional inferiority in Europe, U.S. security assurances could not be fully credible. As Celeste Wallander observed, “the development of Soviet strategic nuclear capability appeared to call into question the United States’ commitment to escalate any conventional war in Europe and thus to undermine NATO’s deterrent strategy” (Wallander, 2000, p. 715).

The Soviet Union's conventional superiority and ambition for even greater military build-up (Kugler, 1991, p. vii), raised great concerns among Allies. NATO recognised that nuclear weapons could not outmatch conventional imbalances and agreed to adjust its strategic approach by strengthening conventional capabilities. The Alliance agreed upon the need for "strong conventional forces as an integral element of the overall NATO deterrent; and conventional warfighting capability was once again recognized as necessary (Cross, 1985, p. 19)". The NATO "troop strength (much reduced in 1949) increased to a peak in the 1950s, and then diminished and stabilized at an intermediate level in the 1970s and 1980s" (NATO, 2014b).

In 1967, *massive retaliation* was replaced by the *flexible response strategy*. It set the goal for NATO to be "able to respond to attacks of any size, to prevent uncontrollable escalation, to assure damage limitation and to terminate a conflict imposed upon it at the earliest possible point" (Osgood & Wegener, 1986, p. 5). NATO recognised the need to have a capability to react "across the entire spectrum of possible challenge" (Facer, 1984, p. 4), which required sufficient numbers of conventional forces prepared to defend Allied territory. The flexible response strategy in the Central Region meant "defending and holding at the intra-German/Czechoslovakian border and repelling Warsaw Pact forces by whatever means – conventional or nuclear – NATO commanders and governments found appropriate" (Freeman, 1981, p.1).

The Alliance recognized the need for more significant investment in conventional forces and underlined the need for higher readiness of troops (see IMSM-2-67, 1967) 2. The 1967 forward defence was integrated into the overall NATO military strategy, the same year NATO Military Committee directly connected forward defence with a NATO's reaction to a possible surprise attack and the compellence of the Soviet Union.

In 1967, the NATO Military Committee defined major objectives

² In 1967 NATO Military committee provided definition of credible deterrent, which marked aim for credible conventional defence based on high level of readiness: "*Sufficient ground, sea and air forces in a high state of readiness, committed to NATO for prompt, integrated action in times of tension or against any limited or major aggression. Forces-in-being, with conventional and nuclear capabilities, must be committed to NATO command in peacetime to present a credible deterrent to any level of aggression ranging from incursion to major aggression*". See NATO. 1967. Memorandum for Members of Military Committee, Subject: NATO Strategy. IMSM-2-67. NATO Archives, Retrieved from: https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/nato-archives-online/1/t/a/1fae6a6c227653df76e563fd38de66fa7a1701e1c0eaa401de858311beb80ab7/IMSM-0002-67_ENG_PDP.pdf

of forward defence³. The approach aimed to prevent the aggressor from seizing and holding territory, underlined the necessity of credible and balanced forces, the identification of possible aggression, and the urgent adjustment of reaction. If deterrence failed, NATO would use all its capabilities (conventional and nuclear) to win the conflict and retake lost territory. So, credibility of conventional deterrence was ensured by material factors, by compellence and by adaptability of strategy, and in case deterrence failed possible employment of tactical and strategic by nuclear weapons was not discounted. This strategy was based on the principle that “at each level of fighting the deterrer would seek to be able to do better than the challenger (*escalation dominance*) and thereby discourage the challenger from escalating” (Morgan, 2003, p. 18). At the same time, this approach sought to discourage the enemy from using nuclear weapons (Karpavičiūtė, 2021).

Nuclear deterrence at that time was limited to responding to nuclear attack and was defined as a last resort to be used in case conventional defence failed (see for instance, Burns, 2012, p. 6; Osgood & Wegener, 1986). The flexible response (MC 14/3) entailed three steps: (1) direct defence, (2) deliberate escalation controlled in scope and intensity, and (3) general nuclear response (see Osgood & Wegener, 1986; Rynning, 2021). The flexible response strategy aimed to reduce NATO’s reliance on nuclear weapons (see Burns, 2012, p. 6; Huntington, 1983-1984, p. 35), and underlined the need to develop sound conventional capabilities, increase their readiness, and have them prepared to respond immediately in case of threat. In this way, NATO expected to raise the threshold of escalation and enhance conventional capabilities. In 1969, “NATO’s strength had enlarged to 24 divisions in Central Europe in peacetime, a number that would have grown to 37 divisions after about a month of mobilization and reinforcement” (Kugler, 1991, p. vii) (See Picture no.1).

³ *“Defence Concept - to safeguard the territories and populations of NATO a forward defence concept should fulfil the following basic objectives: (a.) to maintain in the forward area of NATO as near to the Iron Curtain as possible sufficient combat ready and balanced forces to make it credible to a potential aggressor that he will have to contend with an immediate and effective response by NATO. (b) to identify the scale and nature of any aggression as quickly as possible. (c) to counter limited aggressions without resorting to strategic nuclear warfare and prevent the aggressor from seizing and holding NATO territory; or, if the aggressor remains intent on his purpose, to confront him with such resistance that he will be compelled to escalate to a major attack in order to achieve his objective. (d.) to cope with a major aggression by bringing to bear such conventional and tactical and strategic nuclear capabilities as may be necessary to ensure that NATO prevails”*

NATO. 1967. Memorandum for Members of Military Committee, Subject: NATO Strategy. IMSM-2-67. NATO Archives, Retrieved from: https://archives.nato.int/uploads/r/nato-archives-online/1/t/a/1fae6a6c227653df76e563fd38de66fa7a1701e1c0eaa401de858311beb80ab7/IMSM-0002-67_ENG_PDP.pdf

Picture No. 1. **EVOLUTION OF NATO's GROUND FORCES IN CENTRAL EUROPE**
(Division equivalents)

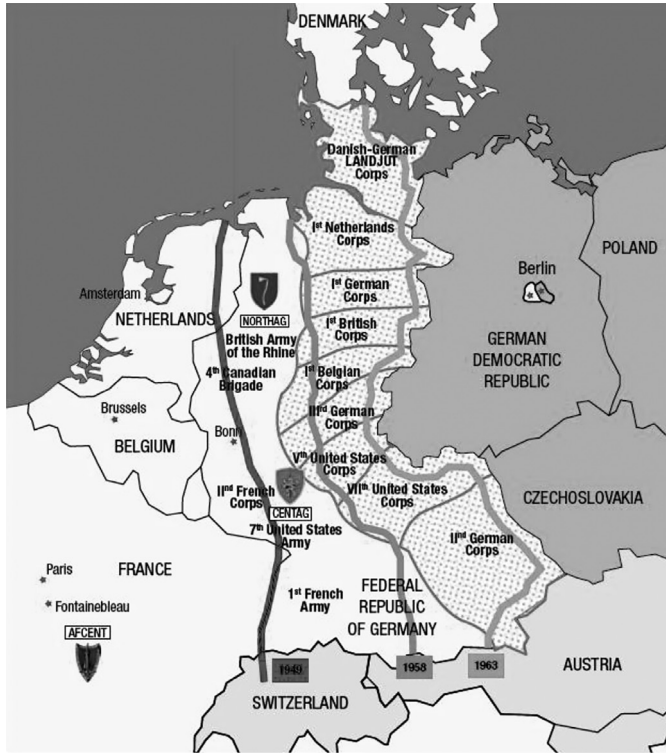
Year	M-Day	M+10	M+30/45	M+60	M+90
1949	9	12	14	16	19
1959	17	20	22	28	40
1969	24	29	37	45	52

Source: Kugler, Richard R. 1991. *The Great Strategy Debate: NATO's Evolution in the 1960s.* RAND NOTE, p. vii. M-Day – mobilisation Day.

NATO was focusing not only on capabilities, readiness, and territorial defence, but also on strategy to credibly deter a possible surprise attack. The Alliance increased the number of NATO's divisions prepared to defend the Alliance (see Picture 1). There were 24 divisions prepared to defend the Eastern European part of the Alliance immediately, and in 90 days NATO could more than double its troop numbers, reaching 52 divisions prepared for defence of the Alliance. In the 1960s, forward defence was based on a force of nine corps stationed right at the contact line with the Soviet Union (see Picture No.2) and relied on the principle "win the first battle, while outnumbered" (Palmer, 2019, p. 10). Even the increased numbers were still very low compared to the rapid expansion of Soviet conventional capabilities.

The Flexible Response strategy "led to significant improvements in conventional forward defences" (Landry et al., 1983). Despite meaningful numbers of Allied forces deployed close to the border, NATO's conventional inferiority did not disappear, as the Soviet Union was building its capabilities very fast, and NATO had to keep up by enhancing its conventional capabilities. For instance, in 1980 the Soviet Union (together with the Warsaw Pact) had around 230 divisions. By 1987, this number had increased to 295, while NATO had only 170 divisions. In 1987, the Soviet Union had 69,000 battle tanks, whereas NATO had 28,000 (and this was already twice more than in 1980) (NATO, 1987). This military build-up was related to the offensive Soviet doctrine and should also be seen in the context of arms control negotiations (MBFR, SALT, INF) taking place during the late 1970s and 1980s. The Soviet Union intended to build leverage in negotiations and therefore accelerated its build-up.

Picture No.2 NATO Forward Defence 1949-1963



1949 – Main defence line of Rhine-Ijssel; 1958 - Semi “Forward Defence” line on the Weser-Lech; 1963 – full forward defence Source: https://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_archives/20140410_forward_defence_handout.pdf

Forward defence was based on significant numbers of troops along the contact line, with intention of keeping NATO’s conventional deterrence credible, especially as NATO was conventionally outnumbered by the Soviet Union. The forward defence was defensive in nature and based on preparedness to urgently react in case of a surprise attack and “destroy or delay enemy forces well forward of the line of contact—believed to offer NATO an opportunity to offset quantitative superiority of Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) conventional forces” (Landry et al., 1983). Forward defence was aimed at “a coherent defence conducted close to the intra-German border with the aim of losing as little ground as possible and confining damage to a minimum; this includes the recapture of lost territory” (Freeman, 1981, p. 3).

However, the Soviets could not expect easy and quick victory, so the forward defence was an effective deterrent from a surprise attack. NATO had 44 to 50 “divisions envisioned in a fully prepared 30–50 km deep zone along the border, with barriers and obstacles to slow and disorganize any attack, thus increasing tank losses” (Freeman, 1981, p. 19). Indeed, in this case, forward defence had a significant deterrence effect. This NATO strategy increased uncertainty and expected to discourage the Soviet Union from attacking first. As Freeman (1981, p. 19) underlines “real but affordable conventional warfighting capability would correct the strategy/force mismatch, and buy true deterrence”. When it comes to numbers related to forward defence forces at high readiness, in 1989 “there were 250,000 American troops, just in Germany — not to mention 55,000 British troops in Rhine Army, with additional French, Canadian, Dutch, and Belgian allies alongside” (Ray, 2022).

Nuclear deterrence was the factor that discouraged the Soviet Union from entering NATO territory: “the defence plans were intended for the defence of borders rather than invasion of enemy territory”(NATO, 2014b). Similarly, Kugler (1991, p. x) underlined that the major aim of Flexible Response strategy was “to avoid nuclear escalation <...> , to delay it as long as possible if not, and then to undertake it in a carefully controlled and measured way”. Ray (2022) recalled that “almost a million allied troops were toe-to-toe with the Russians in forward defence (with more divisions ready to reinforce from Europe and North America)”. Despite that, Soviet Union retained overall superiority of conventional capabilities. So, NATO could not achieve overall numerical conventional superiority over the Soviet Union, but it could gain superiority in “mobility, concentration of forces, deception, and surprise” (see Huntington, 1983-1984, p. 46), also in technological advancements and strategy.

NATO forward defence for many years was perceived as purely defensive, aimed at stopping enemy on Allied territory. This principle was criticized as not giving much elasticity/room for manoeuvre, or even as potentially leading towards defeat in case of war (see Huntington, 1983-1984). It would have frozen NATO forces along the entire defence line “and hence highly vulnerable to an over-powering Soviet concentration of offensive forces” (Huntington, 1983-1984, p. 47). NATO strategists were considering how the Alliance could disrupt the Soviet Union’s quantitative superiority and persistent build-up, while ensuring the credibility of forward defence if deterrence failed. NATO

needed to counter the USSR's "reliance on an offensive doctrine calling for the extensive use of echeloned forces" (Diver, 1991, p.1). In an interview, West German General Franz-Joseph Schulze, Commander in Chief of Allied Forces Central Europe from 1977 to 1979, underlined that in 1980's, the strategists were concerned about the discouraging force ratio, and also debated the possibility "to extend the fire into enemy's territory" (see Correll, 1983), including attacks on enemy's "airfields and rear echelons" (Correll, 1983).

In late 1970's early 1980s' NATO recognised the need to adapt its strategy and continue building its conventional capabilities, increase defence spending, develop new technological solutions, improve conventional weapon systems, and adjust its operational strategy. The forward defence concept was revised, with greater focus on rapid reinforcement and follow-on forces attack (FOFA). In 1982, SACEUR Gen. B. Rogers introduced the Rapid Reinforcement Plan (the so-called Rogers Plan) (NATO, 1982), followed by the 1984 Long-Term Planning Guideline for Follow-on Forces Attack and the 1984 SACEUR decision on FOFA.

The Follow-on-Forces Attack strategy aimed to isolate incoming adversary forces, particularly the second and third echelons, before they reached NATO's border. The aim was to locate, "delay, disrupt and destroy" (U.S. Congress, 1987, p. 3) the enemy's follow-on-forces before they join the offensive (see Huntington, 1983-1984; U.S. Congress, 1987). This strategy "sought to reconcile the requirement to defend forward with the need to survive and prevail in any 'follow-on battle', as the Soviet Army developed its capacity to commit additional echelons of fresh forces" (Palmer, 2019, p. 9). At the same time NATO forces were to hold the forward defence line (see Huntington, 1983-1984). This strategy added "depth to the NATO battlefield and to extend the area of NATO's operations into the enemy's rear area" (see Roger, 1983).

The Alliance recognized that forward defence had to be complemented by deep-strike capabilities to provide some operational flexibility for troops, and should also be supported by technological improvements. This strategy required NATO to improve its intelligence capabilities and employ long-range conventional weapons. The focus was on rapid identification, high-precision weapons, microelectronics, improved surveillance, and the development of remotely piloted vehicles.

In this context of changing strategic mindset, it was recognized that such adaptation "requires a diversified effort including more

resources, qualitative improvements, and strategic innovations” (Huntington, 1983-1984, p. 49). Cotter and Wikner (1984, p. 189) observed that “NATO forces would continue to defend forward but will now recognize the need to strike deep in Pact territory to prevent Pact reinforcement or exploitation of massed armour”. Deep strike capabilities also served as a tool for credible denial as well as compellence of Soviet Union forces.

In sum, the Flexible response period was dynamic and challenging for NATO defence planners. Forward defence strategy was adjusted multiple times, evolving through different stages since 1967 till the end of the Cold War. NATO recognised that conventional inferiority and rigid forward defence strategy could favor the Alliance only if deterrence failed. The shift in strategic mindset was critical for major adaptations in forward defence, and the introduction of FOFA fundamentally strengthened conventional deterrence and Alliance defence at that time.

NATO strategy evolved from a static approach, maintaining the defence line, to addressing the strategic need to preserve credibility of conventional deterrence while adapting to the persistent Soviet capability build-up and its offensive doctrine. NATO attempted introduced operational elasticity through deep-strike capabilities, invested in defence and technology (surveillance, reconnaissance, precision weapons, microelectronics), and encouraged closer cooperation among Allies in armaments, science, and technology (Diver, 1991, p. 3). Forward defence aimed to neutralize threats before they reached the border, reducing reaction time and relying on the notion that “new technologies and strategies for deep strike will disconnect the spearheads from [enemy] offensive from its tail, thus bringing it to a halt” (Cimbala, 1991, p. 45).

6. Forgotten Forward Defence in NATO’s Post-Cold War Posture

Back in 1989, “the prospects for a short warning, unreinforced attack against NATO seemed to have dropped from improbable to impossible” (Cimbala, 2000, p. 35) and keeping 9 corps of troops at the Eastern European border prepared to react on a very short notice was seen as unnecessary. In the 1990 London Declaration, NATO agreed that it no longer considered the Soviet Union a threat, and the Alliance

committed to “reduce its reliance on flexible response, though it did not rule out the nuclear option” (Wallander, 2000, p. 717). At the same 1990 NATO Summit in London, UK Prime Minister M. Thatcher addressed the North Atlantic Council stating: “You don’t cancel your home insurance policy just because there have been fewer burglaries on your street in the last 12 months!” (Thatcher, 1990). That “insurance” proved to be more than needed in few decades. However, right after the end of the Cold War NATO was expected to become “an empty shell” with no strategic relevance (see, Duffield, 1994-1995, p. 763). The Alliance made significant adjustments in its strategy, abandoning territorial defence. The 1991 Strategic Concept, agreed just before the end of the Cold War, limited the role of conventional forces to their “contribution to collective defence” (Yost, 2014, p. 86), without recognizing their significance as a credible deterrent.⁴

Subsequent decisions focused on significant changes in NATO military posture and political agenda by adapting to the new the security environment, which was seen as peaceful and relatively stable. The Alliance attempted to find a place in the post-Cold War security environment, and sought to address new threats (see for instance Kugler, 1992). However, the wars in the Balkans, risks of nuclear proliferation, and Russia’s conventional weapons near Allied borders prevented the complete removal of conventional defence and deterrence from NATO strategy.

The security environment was perceived as irreversibly peaceful and long-lasting. This perception was reflected in significantly decreased numbers of military forces and reduced levels of their readiness. NATO military preparedness and readiness was diminished and the concept of forward defence disappeared from NATO strategy. NATO shifted its focus to “short-notice, crisis-response operations and on tailored planning” (Palmer, 2019, p.76).

Some scholars anticipated in the early 1990s that deterrence strategies of the post-Cold War would change and “standing conventional forward-deployed forces in close proximity to adversary will give way to strategies relying more on the threat of retaliation by expeditionary forces launched from outside the region” (Hooker, 1992,

⁴ “With the radical changes in the security situation, including conventional force levels in Europe maintained in relative balance and increased reaction times, NATO’s ability to defuse a crisis through diplomatic or other means or should be necessary to mount a successful conventional defence will significantly improve” NATO Strategic Concept, 1991. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23847.htm also see Yost, D. 2014. NATO’s Balancing Act. United States Institute of Peace Press, p. 86.

p. 84). NATO shifted from forward defence strategy to “out-of-area crisis response, underpinned by expeditionary capability based around more deployable, but also smaller and lighter units” (Paulauskas, 2016). Defence operations planning shifted to out-of-area operations planning, and “by the mid-1990s NATO was firmly ‘out-of-area and in business’” (Palmer, 2019, p. 76). The Alliance moved from collective defence and deterrence to crisis management and cooperative security. The emphasis from deterrence and defence was transferred to crisis management, partnerships, and political cooperation. As Palmer (2019, p. 76) observed that

“The gradual standing up of a new NATO Force Structure (NFS) through the 1990s, composed of air, land and maritime high readiness, multinational headquarters, led by one or several framework nations, that were evaluated and certified by SHAPE and declared to NATO, accelerated the demise of the “heavy metal” force structures associated with the old Forward Defence concept”.

By 1999, “NATO land, sea, and air units had been reduced by 30-40 per cent, with only 35-60 per cent kept at a thirty-day readiness level (compared with 70–90 per cent kept at a minimum of two days’ readiness in 1990)” (Wallander, 2000, p. 718). The United States reduced “its forward presence in Europe from 325,000 to 100,000 troops, and the European members cut their forces by more than 500,000 troops” (Wallander, 2000, p. 718). The U.S. also cut its nuclear stockpile and strategic nuclear forces in Europe by 90 per cent (Palmer, 2019, p. 74). Back in 1991, Krisinger suggested that a credible post-Cold War strategy would retain a modified form of forward defence, expressing concern that abandoning it would seriously harm strategic mobility of the USA. He underscored that abandonment of forward defence could create “a gap between the ability to project power and world-oriented policy could place America’s global interests ‘in harm’s way’” (Krisinger, 1991, p. 1).

NATO scaled down military headquarters and numbers of troops, NATO Allies significantly reduced defence spending. Defence spending at NATO was intensively debated since its inception, but post-Cold War there was a natural intent to scale it down, which continued until 2014. An important was the 2011 reform of NATO command structure, following the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, “aimed at cutting headquarters at all levels and reducing the assigned personnel from 13,000 to around 8000, driven by a tighter budgetary environment and <...> based on assumption that the Alliance’s level of

ambition would remain the same" (Zapfe & Vanaga, 2019, p. 47).

The Alliance pursued a strategy that downgraded the deterrence and defence, retaining only the symbolic role of collective defence and it was marked by "denial of deterrence". The territorial defence almost disappeared from NATO posture. However, the principle of collective defence and territorial indivisibility, linked directly to NATO's Article 5 commitments, remained the cornerstone of the Alliance, even as practical implementation waned. In the 2000s, this posture persisted despite clear warning signs, such as Russia's 2007 suspension of CFE obligations, Putin's speech in 2007 in Munich, and the 2008 Russian aggression in Georgia. NATO ministers of defence debated territorial defence in London in 2008 (NATO, 2008), but the Alliance was not ready to fully revert its doctrine.

Since Russia's war against Georgia in 2008, as Yost observed, "the newer NATO Allies fear Russia and might seek reassurance to the reliability of NATO's deterrence and defence posture, including extended deterrence" (Yost, 2011, p. 1409). Indeed, the Baltic States began publicly raising the need for contingency plans. In 2010, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė, when asked why the three small countries needed a special NATO plan, told in an interview to Reuters that "the Baltics do not ask for anything special. Contingency plans exist for all NATO member states, and the Baltic States would like to have the same" (The Atlantic Council, 2010). Referring to M. Thatcher, D. Grybauskaitė added "It's a kind of health insurance: it does not mean you will get sick, but it is better to have it..." (The Atlantic Council, 2010). It took NATO more than a decade to start building this "health insurance".

This period can be framed as the dismantlement of the Cold War deterrence and defence system and strategies, it came with significant cuts in defence spending and capabilities, also fundamentally reduced readiness, changed principles of troop deployment principles, and disarrangements in command-and-control system. Thus, it was a hope, that all the Cold War strategies (including forward defence) will remain only in books of history. NATO was actively forgetting all the Cold War strategies and denying deterrence.

7. Deterrence by Reinforcement and Enhanced Forward Presence

Before 2014, NATO's defence and deterrence posture focused on out-of-area operations, the priority was given to expeditionary forces and specialisation of NATO Allies. NATO focused on conflict resolution and conflict prevention, carried out a number of out-of-area operations to include ISAF and Resolute Support (Afghanistan), Unified Protector (Libya), Ocean Shield (counter piracy), KFOR (Kosovo), Active Endeavour (counter-terrorism), and others.

The 2010 NATO Strategic Concept stated that "the Euro-Atlantic area is at peace and the threat of a conventional attack against NATO territory is low" (NATO, 2010). Some scholars define the deterrence posture that existed in first decades after the Cold War "existential deterrence", meaning "NATO exists, it has significant conventional and nuclear capabilities, and it has a commitment to defend all allies" (Kramer, 2018, p. 6), so it has an appropriate mix of conventional, nuclear and missile defence capabilities to defend if the need arises. NATO was prepared to defend the Allies should the existential threat occur but any major conflict in Transatlantic region was not envisaged in the nearest future. The existential deterrence was a very comfortable posture, most likely because of that NATO found it challenging to introduce changes in this type of deterrence.

The 2008 Russia's war against Georgia did not change NATO's mindset of collective defence and deterrence. Moreover, in a newly agreed 2010 Strategic Concept NATO defined Russia as a partner of strategic importance. The changes occurred only in 2014, after Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and started military aggression in the Eastern Ukraine. In response, NATO suspended all practical cooperation with Russia and decided to adjust its deterrence and defence posture, so NATO slowly recognised the need to return to territorial defence and perceived the need to pay more attention to conventional deterrence and defence.

In 2014, NATO started adjusting and adapting its deterrence and defence posture. The Alliance agreed to develop the Rapid Assurance Measures for the Eastern Allies that were in the closest vicinity to Russia, in particular, the Baltic States and Poland. NATO agreed upon the package of reassurance measures for the Eastern Allies, and they took a decision "to double NATO's rapid reaction force (NRF), create

an even faster the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, and increase defence budgets to 2 per cent of GDP by 2024" (Dempsey, 2017, p. 3). This decision was called Defence Investment Pledge. However, NATO achieved the 2 per cent aggregated bar only in 2024.

In the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO agreed upon the Readiness Action Plan, that aimed to enhance NATO Response Force (NRF), increase its readiness and establish the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), with the aim to demonstrate "NATO's capability to have a highly trained, rapidly deployable unit on standby to respond to a crisis or conflict if necessary" (NATO, 2021). The VJTF was created as a spearhead force to be deployed in 48 hours; it was a part of the NRF, and served as "a 'spearhead force' of around 20,000 troops, of which about 5,000 were ground forces" (NATO, 2025b). The VJTF was criticized for its limited scope and only symbolic mission, and the number of personnel was extremely limited (see Arnold, 2016, p. 76), which did not fully reflect the strategic reality and did not show NATO's determination to significantly strengthen its deterrence and defence posture. It was underlined that 5,000 troops were too small number in case of "offensive operation" (Dempsey, 2017, p. 5), and it did not provide either credible deterrence nor defence.

One year later, in 2015, NATO took a decision on Graduated Response Plans as a new advanced planning tool and decided to enhance the NRF up to 40,000 personnel. Later, in the Warsaw Summit (2016), NATO took a decision to establish the NATO Enhanced Forwards Presence (EFP). The EFP was agreed by NATO defence ministers "as the minimum capability to signal a credible Allied commitment along NATO's north eastern flank" (Leuprecht et al., 2018, p. 10). NATO moved ahead in 2017, with decisions on the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) by stationing four multinational battalions in the Baltic States and Poland. Multinational battalions were to rotate persistently and were established on the basis of the framework nation concept. They were led by the designated framework nations, namely, Germany (in Lithuania), UK (in Estonia), Canada (in Latvia), and USA (in Poland).

NATO's forward presence was based on deployments of multinational battalion-size battle groups; later this forward presence evolved by expanding territory and scaling-up the multinational troops to brigade size. In 2022, four additional multilateral battalions were established in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Those measures laid foundations for deterrence by reinforcement and forward

presence. Forward presence also served as a reassurance measure for Allies that are close to military threat, to demonstrate political and military support and send the message outside.

Since 2014, NATO focused on its “ability to respond to major challenges, including military ones, readiness to have capabilities and preparedness to respond, and assurance measures for Eastern Allies and ability for timely reinforcement” (Karpavičiūtė, 2020). SHAPE, back in 2014, underscored that the collective defence – Article 5 and the reassurance mission of the EFP, stating that “their presence makes clear that an attack on one Ally will be considered an attack on the whole Alliance” (NATO SHAPE, 2014). This rhetoric was expected to send a message of reassurance and commitment to NATO collective defence.

With the reassurance measures, the VJTF, the NFIUs and the EFP NATO enhanced its conventional deterrence and improved defence posture, but in a very limited way. In fact, it retained the “existential deterrence” and made a small step towards the deterrence by forward presence, or, so called, deterrence by reinforcement. The enhanced forward presence was extended along the eastern borders of the Alliance. Scholars emphasized that the battle groups were not permanently stationed, but were based on the rotation principle (Dempsey, 2017; Rynning, 2021). Until February 2022, the perception that Russia might pose a serious threat to the Alliance did not exist. So, conventional deterrence and defence were gaining more credibility by forward presence, strengthened reinforcement, better preparedness of troops, and also with the focus on the need to increase defence spending.

NATO started strengthening its conventional deterrence and defence based on principles of forward presence and deterrence by reinforcement. However, until 2022 the Alliance was hesitant to engage in debates on the possibility to change the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept. The reassurance measures and deterrence by reinforcement and forward presence was developed on the basis of the already irrelevant 2010 NATO Strategic Concept. Most likely, Allies hoped that the reassurance measures were temporary, and NATO would return to a previous deterrence and defence posture very soon. So, no significant changes would be needed. They did not expect that the security environment would change fundamentally and for a long period of time. This perception led to the rotational principle of the Enhanced Forward Presence.

Many scholars and security experts noticed a limited and rather symbolic nature of NATO reassurance measures; for instance, Schmitt underlined that “the upped presence has been marginal in terms of numbers; the high-readiness force being created is limited in size, and the training exercises still pale in comparison with the scale of the exercises that have been conducted by the Russian military” (Schmitt, 2015). Demsey (2018) observed that “all-out Russian offensive” was perceived as improbable. This assumption may be evaluated as quite optimistic, bearing in mind the large-scale Russia’s war against Ukraine that started in February 2022.

Indeed, the EFP and deterrence by forward presence were criticised by many experts who believed that deterrence by denial (see Dempsey, 2017, p. 5) and forward defence would have been more efficient and relevant adaptation of NATO posture (for instance, Rynning, 2017). The EFP was perceived as a tripwire that could trigger larger reinforcements; it was evaluated as a very symbolic measure meant to demonstrate solidarity with NATO Eastern Allies. Many experts agreed (Rynning, 2021; O’Hanlon, 2015; Haffa, 2018; Dempsey, 2017) that it was limited, and “too small to deter Russia” (Dempsey, 2017, p. 5) and too symbolic to reassure the Allies.

Haffa (2018) observed that “the strongest deterrent might be formed by the permanent stationing of large NATO air and land forces in the Baltics or by demonstrating an effective capability of rapid reinforcement” (Haffa, 2018, p. 109). For instance, drawing parallels with the flexible response historical experiences, O’Hanlon (in 2015, p. 109) developed a methodology, following Cold War conventional deterrence models and based on forward defence principles, suggesting that NATO would need “to deploy from 150,000 to up to 225,000 U.S. troops to deter and defend against a Russian force that might approach 300,000”. Rynning observed that “the politics of managing escalation have grown more complex, and NATO was therefore explicit on defence and deterrence posture and principle but deliberately vague on escalation” (Rynning, 2021, p. 67), so it kept a certain level of ambiguity and uncertainty. He added that “NATO’s ladder of escalation thus lies between its forward ability to defend its borders and its deterrent capacity to inflict nuclear punishment” (Rynning, 2021, 68), so NATO conventional and nuclear deterrence were firmly tied together and inseparable.

Defence analysts argued that “a direct conventional defence [and, therefore, deterrence] was possible with reforms or improvements

in troop deployment, employment, strategy, and doctrine” (Haffa, 2018, p. 104). Dempsey (2017, p. 5) underlined that “NATO’s forward presence was meant to discourage Russia from escalating in such cases, and to give Moscow reasons to seek a non-military solution”. The EFP, as a lightweight version of conventional deterrence and defence, was also designed to discourage the escalation and prevent a surprise attack. Back in 2017, Rynning highlighted the need for increased investments in defence technology and capabilities, noting that Europe was short on military power and that Russia could amass large numbers of troops on very short notice. He emphasized that “any future collective defence posture in NATO must therefore involve offsetting investments in automated systems of reconnaissance, fire, and logistics in support of fewer but highly trained forward-deployed troops” (Rynning, 2017, p. 19).

In sum, deterrence by forward presence and reinforcement evolved over the time, but the major focus on the EFP, the Defence Investment Pledge, increased readiness and enhanced training remained. In the 2018 Brussels Summit, NATO introduced Readiness Initiative, with the aim to “offer an additional 30 major naval combatants, 30 heavy or medium manoeuvre battalions, and 30 kinetic air squadrons, with enabling forces, at 30 days’ readiness or less” (NATO, 2018). Deterrence by forward presence was based on “trip-wire” deployments, focused on increased readiness and the ability to rapidly reinforce in case of crisis or conflict. Forward presence was meant to deter the potential adversaries with rather small numbers of forces, but these were reinforced by larger forces at high readiness. The set of decisions taken from 2014 till 2022 marked the first NATO steps towards the post-Cold War territorial defence and laid the foundations for moving towards the forward defence of the Alliance. NATO deterrence by forward presence was criticised for its symbolic size and its inability to credibly deter the threat and reassure Allies. Its weakness was also seen in the rotational principle of the EFP and the perception that these measures were temporary changes in deterrence and defence posture. Furthermore, defence investments and spending were insufficient.

8. From Forward Presence to Forward Defence

The New Strategic Concept (NSC), a long-term planning document of NATO was agreed in 2022 Madrid. The NSC underlined NATO's commitment to defend every inch of Allied territory. The NSC reintroduced forward defence (NSC, paragraph 21):

"We will deter and defend forward with robust in-place, multi-domain, combat-ready forces, enhanced command and control arrangements, prepositioned ammunition and equipment and improved capacity and infrastructure to rapidly reinforce any Ally, including at short or no notice."

Indeed, year 2022 brought fundamental changes in security environment and in NATO's strategic mindset. NATO recognised that Europe was no longer at peace. In 2022, the Alliance not only agreed upon the New Strategic Concept, but also began making significant changes in deterrence and defence posture, reintroducing forward defence. Russia's war against Ukraine left no doubt that NATO is obliged to ensure the credibility of the Alliance's collective defence and deterrence. Within the Alliance's strategic mindset, the perception of defence by choice gradually disappeared and it was replaced by defence by necessity. The means to ensure the credibility of deterrence and defence were political, strategic and tactical.

NATO took a number of decisions to urgently adapt the deterrence and defence posture and attempted to find the most relevant way path forward. In this context, NATO reintroduced forward defence, though in a lighter version compared to the end of the Cold War. In 2022, the term "forward defences" was reintroduced to NATO-agreed documents first time since the end of the Cold War and remained in NATO strategy for the years to come. This marks the transition from deterrence by forward presence to deterrence by forward defence. The 2024 Washington Summit Declaration underlined the deployment of "in-place combat-ready forces on NATO's Eastern Flank, strengthened forward defences, and enhanced the Alliance's ability to rapidly reinforce any Ally that comes under threat" (NATO, 2024a).

Back in Madrid, NATO decided "to deploy additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on our eastern flank, to be scaled up from the existing battlegroups to brigade-size units where and when required, underpinned by credible rapidly available reinforcements, prepositioned equipment, and enhanced command and control" (NATO, 2022a). On the basis of deterrence by reinforcement and forward presence, NATO

started building its forward defence. Since 2014, the Alliance has added the aspects of robustness of in-place combat-ready forces, and underlined the importance of credible reinforcements. The focus was on enhanced capabilities, rapid reinforcement, training and need to ensure preposition of equipment and supplies to be prepared for a surprise attack.

Many scholars emphasized the urgent need for a more robust Allied presence in the Eastern part of the Alliance. For instance, Ray noticed that “a simple recreation of allied forward defence as seen during the Cold War is not what’s called for today <...> Allies must upgrade the current, small tripwire deployments and harden the Eastern Flank” (Ray, 2022). Minna Ålander and William Alberque provided a very similar assessment, underlining that the transformation of NATO’s defence posture from a tripwire to forward defence became more urgent. They suggest that “NATO should not accept even temporary occupation by Russian forces; NATO military planners, therefore, should anticipate the worst with regard to Russian intentions and capabilities and alter their defence plans accordingly” (Ålander & Alberque, 2022).

In 2023, in Vilnius, the Alliance decided to enhance its air defence posture, and agreed upon the new-generation defence plans, marking another fundamental step forward. It was a meaningful step to ensure credible forward defence. As Loorents (2024, p. 1) observed, NATO’s new regional defence plans indicate “the steps and resources needed to protect specific regions of Alliance territory from attack”, they were considered as significant improvement to previous Gradual Response Plans (GRP’s). The new-generation defence plans aimed to “strengthen forward defences and increase the Alliance’s ability to rapidly reinforce any Ally that may come under threat” (NATO, 2024c). The plans aimed to ensure “that Allies can provide the right forces at the right time and in the right places” (NATO, 2024c).

Vargulis (2023) observed that NATO deterrence based on a small tripwire principle “may lead an adversary to miscalculate”. He suggests, that “the best possible message to any adversary is that NATO possesses a significant pool of forces, ready and trained for a wide range of rapid response operations”. Similarly, Rynning (2017, p. 19) underlined that, in order to sustain NATO’s credible deterrence and signal to Russia a certain kind of punishment NATO could inflict with the aim to deter, and “NATO must deliver a string of conventional forces that are deployable and fit for fight”. Rynning (2017, p. 19) suggested that, on the foundation of the NRF forces, NATO can build the wider

Follow-on-Forces. Indeed, the initial aim of 40,000 troops in the NRF to be deployed in 15 days evolved into the New NATO force model with “larger pool of high-readiness forces across all domains” (NATO, 2025b). When established, the NATO force model was aimed to achieve “300,000 combat-capable troops at high-readiness” (NATO, 2022b), and in 2024 NATO announced that Allied countries “comfortably exceeded” 300,000 target (see *The Defence Post*, 2024), so the goal was fully met.

Indeed, NATO started from very small symbolic battalion-size units as tripwires and gradually transitioned to forward defence, emphasising the robustness and readiness of forces. Rynning (2024) observed that “strategy of defence by denial can be immensely costly to implement in full”, Allies compromised and tripled NATO forward presence, also bolstering the defence line with powerful rapid-reaction force of more than 300,000 troops (see Rynning, 2024, p.267).

Another factor significant for the credibility of conventional deterrence and defence is Allied focus on technologies, innovation, and investments in defence industry. The Alliance recognised the urgency of investments in defence industry and set new capability targets. NATO (at The Hague Summit, 2025) recognised the importance of closer cooperation in defence industrial domain, investing in capability development, research, and technologies. In June 2025, NATO Ministers of Defence agreed upon a new set of capability targets (NATO, 2025e), focusing on urgency, scope of forces, quality of capabilities, and greater defence investment. This set is aimed to build “a stronger, fairer, more lethal Alliance, and ensure warfighting readiness for years to come” (NATO, 2025d). It focuses on closer Allied cooperation in the development of defence industry and investment in technology. Priorities are given to “air and missile defence, long-range weapons, logistics and large land manoeuvre formations” (NATO, 2025e).

NATO Secretary Mark Rutte, ahead of the Summit in The Hague, underlined the transformation of the Alliance and the aim to “build a better NATO, one that is stronger, fairer and more lethal. So that we can continue to keep our people safe and our adversaries at bay” (NATO, 2025c). He also added, “major new investment was needed Alliance-wide and urged a 400% increase in air and missile defence alongside the doubling of NATO’s enabling capabilities including logistics, supply, transportation, and medical support” (NATO, 2025c). Angus Lapsley and Pierre Vandier (2025) emphasize that NATO must focus on areas where Russia “has sought to build up asymmetric advantage”, namely, air defence, deep strike capabilities, electronic warfare, enabling capabilities,

and modern communication systems (see Lapsley & Vandier, 2025).

Together with capability development and focus on troops readiness, another very important factor affecting credibility of conventional deterrence is defence spending. For more than two decades, NATO suffered the underinvestment in defence “European militaries have lost 35 per cent of their capabilities; to take the example of European navies, European countries had almost 200 large surface combatants and 129 submarines in 1990, but only 116 and 66, respectively, in 2021” (Bergman et al., 2022, p. 3). In 2024, NATO declared average aggregated defence expenditures of around 2,71 per cent GDP (see Falkenek, 2024). This number continues to rise, but differences remain between the Eastern NATO Allies and a group of Allies that progress at a difference pace. In June 2024, 23 NATO Allies were spending more than 2 per cent on defence (NATO, 2024b), a tangible improvement compared to 2014, when only two Allies reached the 2 per cent threshold. In August 2025, NATO acknowledged that all Allies were on track to reach the 2 per cent goal.

A further increase in NATO defence expenditures is expected in the following years, as NATO, in the 2025 Hague Summit, announced the aim to allocate 5 per cent of GDP to defence (1,5+3,5 formula). NATO Allies agreed to invest more in the defence industry and ramp up defence production. Significant attention was also designated to new technologies, focusing on the development of the Allied defence industrial base and supporting the development of Ukraine’s defence industry. The priority areas of defence investment focus on “forces, capabilities, resources, infrastructure, warfighting readiness, and resilience needed to deter and defend” (NATO, 2025e).

In sum, NATO is currently accelerating its deterrence and defence adaptation by focusing on defence investment, larger and better-prepared troops, logistics, prepositioning of supplies, enhancing Allied cooperation, and ramping up investment in technology and innovation. NATO is strengthening its capabilities, including IAMD, focusing on force posture development, and modernising command structures. Forward defence is in the development stage; it aims to build credible denial and prevent surprise attacks. The emerging forward defence entails a mix of static and dynamic elements – robust capabilities, technological solutions, cyber defence, as well as doctrinal and strategic measures. The Alliance is also maintaining strong and effective nuclear capabilities “in order to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression” (NATO, 2025d).

Conclusions

The conceptual and strategic foundations of NATO forward defence were developed during its earliest years. From its inception, forward defence aimed to avoid fighting on NATO territory and prevent territorial loss. NATO Alliance demonstrated the ability to develop different forms of forward defence to ensure credible conventional deterrence and defence, based on its material capacity (capabilities, defence expenditure, size and readiness of troops), political will, and strategy. This strategy had various forms, employed different means, and was applied across diverse geographies.

During the Cold War, forward defence addressed NATO's conventional inferiority to the Soviet Union. With the development of technology, nuclear and missile defence capabilities, and the evolution of NATO defence strategies and military planning, the Alliance's forward defence changed significantly, but the main principle – prevention of territorial loss – remained. Forward defence evolved from very static and rigid to dynamic and highly flexible means of conventional deterrence and defence. The major lesson and factor that enhanced the credibility of forward defence during the Cold War was its adaptability to forward defence strategy and the ability to urgently incorporate technological innovations and doctrinal changes, particularly in reaction to Soviet Union's reliance on offensive doctrine.

Currently, NATO is developing contemporary forward defence by learning lessons from Russia's war against Ukraine. The Alliance's strategists are also rediscovering historical lessons from the Cold War period. Contemporary forward defence reflects new security dynamics and new strategic challenges that NATO Allies face. NATO's contemporary forward defence is under development, with the Alliance still taking initial steps toward building credible conventional deterrence and defence. This strategy is perceived as contributing to deterrence by denial, ensuring the credible defence, and helps maintain high readiness of armed forces. NATO is taking steps to enhance conventional deterrence and defence to make them strong and sustainable.

NATO forward defence aims to develop robust forces, a credible set of defence capabilities, ensure efficiency in multi-domain operations, and keep every inch of NATO territory safe and secure. NATO is recognising the long-term changes in the security environment and the threat posed by Russia to the region. Credible forward defence requires high readiness of troops and prepositioned equipment, along

with investments in technologies and innovation, as well as dynamic/adaptable defence strategy. The major challenges NATO faces in enhancing the credibility of forward defence include the need to increase defence expenditures, the urgent need for investments in the defence industry, capability building, and the development of new technologies.

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