

# NATO after Wales: Dealing with Russia – Next Steps

NATO's summit in Wales of September 2014 marks a turning point: For the first time in a quarter-century, the alliance is increasingly reverting its gaze eastward. The focus on Article V of the NATO Treaty, accentuated by the Ukraine crisis, is a robust minimal consensus. However, beyond that, the interests within the alliance diverge significantly, especially concerning the question of how to deal with Russia.

By Christian Nünlist and Martin Zapfe

The NATO summit in Wales ended on 5 September 2014 with a symbolic gesture: In 2016, the heads of state and government of the 28 allied countries will assemble in Warsaw for the first time – in the city where the Warsaw Pact was founded in 1955. In this way, NATO aims to reassure its Eastern European members, which were Warsaw Pact members until 1991, that they remain safe even after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the increasingly overt military invasion of Ukraine's eastern territories. The newfound minimal consensus on solidarity within the alliance appears to be resilient and also embodies the alliance's intrinsic ability to reach compromise on fundamental issues. Accordingly, the summit resulted in a large number of political and military measures that aim to foster the outward appearance of closed ranks. Nevertheless, there is no overlooking the fact that interests within the alliance diverge considerably, with many statements at the Wales summit remaining symbolic. Essentially, the debate is over the future role Russia should play within the European security architecture.

The Wales summit has resulted in compromises that signal coherence in alliance policy without constituting a decisive difference under any relevant scenarios. This might change in the future: The NATO decisions leave room for additional measures if the strategic picture in Europe



NATO leaders discuss the Western reaction to the Russian aggression in Ukraine in Newport, Wales.  
Larry Downing / Reuters

should further deteriorate – or improve once more. Until then, NATO is following a compromise course that will probably be particularly unsatisfactory to the member states in Eastern Europe.

In the following, it will be shown that the Wales summit, *first of all*, does constitute a turning point in NATO's history, even if its outcomes remain unclear. The reaffirmation of collective defense is an important moment; however, it is only the outcome of a development that was accelerated by the

Ukraine crisis, but did not begin with it: The withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, which marks a tentative end of the alliance's global ambitions, was long-announced. The timetable for the post-Afghanistan era had already been laid out at NATO's last summit in Chicago in 2012.

*Secondly*, NATO managed to find a new lowest common denominator at its Wales summit: The mutual assistance guarantee under Article V, rather than global operations or democratic expansion, has been re-

confirmed as the bedrock of the alliance; and, as the Summit Declaration makes clear, that guarantee is mainly directed against Russia. However, it is equally clear that beyond this minimal consensus, tangible disparities remain between the member states. Many of the decisions taken in Wales follow a fine line of compromise. Therefore, considerable disagreements and contrary preferences may be expected on the part of the individual NATO members.

*Third*, the new formats of partnership announced in Wales also affect relations between Switzerland and the alliance. In 2010, NATO had defined cooperative security through partnerships as its third strategic pillar besides collective defense and global crisis management. In the past years, the less well known informal partner group of “Western European 5” – or “WEU-5”, in NATO jargon – has become increasingly important for Switzerland; it includes Sweden, Finland, Austria, Ireland, and Switzerland. In Wales, NATO announced plans for closer cooperation with Sweden, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, and Australia. Switzerland, on the other hand, remains part of the broader format of 24 extremely heterogeneous NATO partners. This clear distinction between more active partners such as Sweden and Finland on the one hand, and the more passive members Austria, Ireland, and Switzerland on the other hand is likely to diminish the usefulness of the WEU-5 format as a homogeneous platform for discussions with NATO over security policy in a small circle of similarly-minded countries.

### Back to basics

Russia’s military actions in Ukraine came as a strategic surprise for the West. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen described the Russian aggression as a “wake-up call”. His US deputy Alexander Vershbow thought that NATO had to “go back to basics” and that it was time to re-emphasize the original purpose of the Western military alliance. Whereas the Wales summit had originally been expected to pass measures on sustaining interoperability and readiness for the post-ISAF period, due to the Ukraine crisis, it did so with a clear anti-Russian barb.

The summit was marked by the guiding theme of collective defense. In the Summit Declaration of 5 September 2014, unusually clear reference is made to Russia’s “escalating and illegal military intervention in

Ukraine”, and the violation of the country’s territorial integrity and sovereignty is referred to as a breach of international law. While it notes that NATO is not seeking a confrontation with Russia and does not constitute a threat to Russia, the Declaration makes repeated reference to Article V and asserts that the alliance takes very seriously its responsibility for deterrence and defense in case of threats against member states.

Already in April 2014, NATO had announced a series of military measures to strengthen the collective defense of the alliance’s territory and in order to signal solidarity with the Baltic and Eastern European states in particular. NATO increased the number of fighter jets taking part in its mission for airspace surveillance and airspace defense over Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In June 2014, the NATO foreign ministers agreed on a Readiness Action Plan (RAP). Its aim is to enhance readiness through shorter response times in case of crises or threats against a member state. The alliance also considered introducing a higher frequency of maneuvers within the Connected Forces Initiative (CFI) as a way of establishing a kind of permanent presence

## NATO will still have to monitor crises outside of Europe in the future.

on its eastern flank without actually having to station forces in the region permanently. These measures were officially passed by the NATO members’ heads of state and government at the Wales summit.

The RAP is aimed at reassuring Eastern European member states’ doubts as to whether NATO would even be capable of mounting a military response to Russian aggression at all. A new “spearhead” force of 4’000 troops with the rather lengthy designation of Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) is to be combat-ready within two to five days and should be capable of reacting to challenges, especially on the periphery, from the end of 2014 onwards. The much larger NATO Response Force is also to be improved. Moreover, NATO will establish permanent command-and-control assets and store vehicles, weapons, and other equipment for the VJTF in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania, as well as adapting its command structures. More important than the decisions themselves, which are new,

but ultimately do not demonstrate military resolve, is their dual symbolism: They demonstrate the political determination to assist the Eastern alliance partners; at the same time, they avoid any overt breach of the NATO-Russia Founding Act and a permanent stationing of NATO units east of Germany.

Despite this clear emphasis on collective defense, NATO will still have to monitor crises outside of Europe in the future. Although the topics of Russia and the Ukraine crises were central issues, the Wales summit also dealt with the growing insecurity in the Middle East and North Africa. Moreover, the Wales Summit Declaration also made clear that the Readiness Action Plan is not only oriented towards Russia’s strategic challenge, but is also a response to risks and threats in the alliance’s southern neighborhood. The planned measures are thus intended to strengthen not only collective defense, but also the crisis management capabilities of the alliance as a whole. Whether that will succeed remains doubtful: The focus is too obviously fixed on defense of the alliance territory, and the disagreements among the member states are too grave when one looks beyond the narrow minimal consensus.

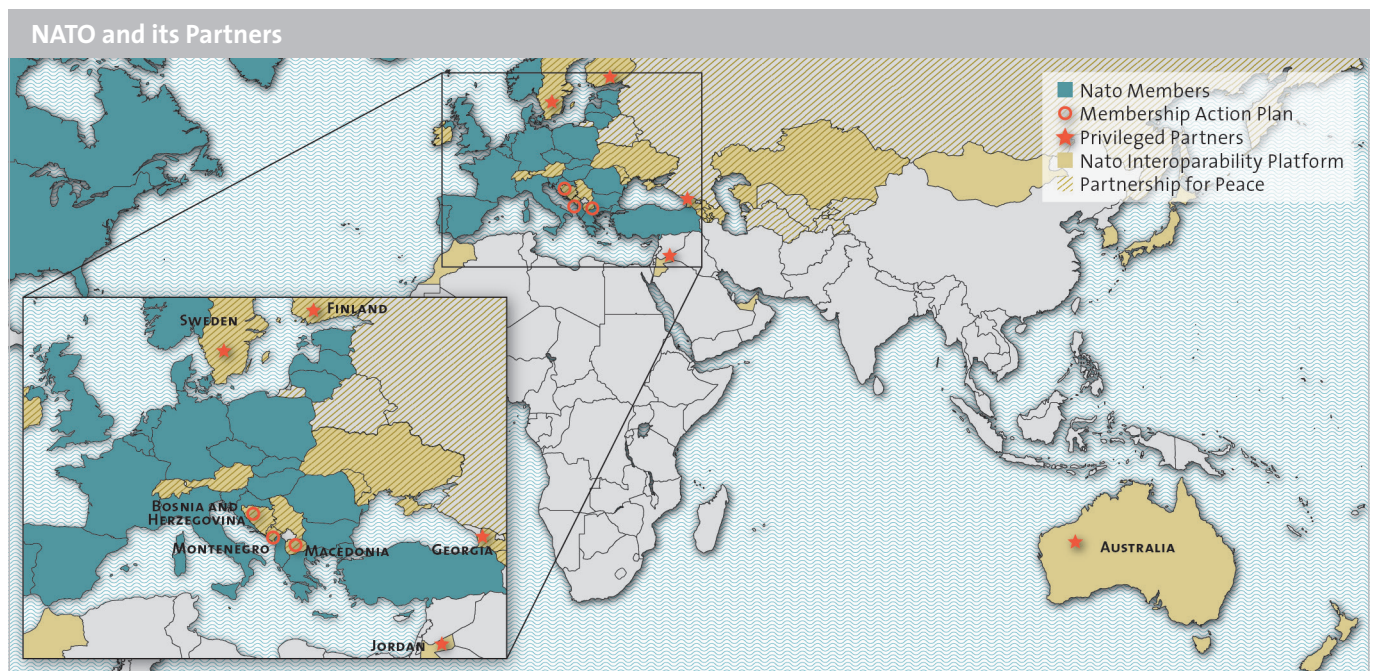
### Disagreements on how to defend

The unity demonstrated at the Wales summit in terms of securing and defending the alliance territory cannot conceal a considerable divergence of interests.

This is seen, *first of all*, in the refusal of NATO to make the symbolic step of permanently deploying Western European and US forces in the Baltic. The rotation-based troop presence and joint exercises agreed at the summit demonstrate NATO’s effort to remain faithful to the spirit of the NATO-Russia Founding Act and not to provoke Moscow. Much the same is true for NATO’s Rapid Deployment Force, which is to respond to emergencies on the alliance’s periphery: For the Baltic states and Poland in particular, deployability – and be it ever so rapid – is no substitute for actual deployment. For the doubters, a vestige of insecurity remains regarding the alliance’s solidarity.

*Secondly*, looking beyond the narrow military sphere, it is the nature of the identified Russian threat that is creating disagreement. Nobody in the alliance truly expects that Moscow would attempt to reincorporate the Baltic with a surprise military attack. There are fears, instead, that the “Pu-





tin Doctrine” might be applied forcefully – initially in the form of creeping intervention to “protect” Russian-speaking minorities abroad. The current threat is described as “hybrid”, a term initially introduced into the vocabulary after the 2006 Lebanon War. In the European context, it usually refers to a long-known, politicized form of warfare below the threshold of full-blown conventional war that combines subversion and low-key political violence with external military pressure.

Unlike Georgia or Ukraine, the Baltic is NATO territory, where Moscow is unlikely to proceed with the same speed and determination as it did in the case of Crimea. It is more likely that Russia will combine a military show of force with its claim to act as a protecting force for the Russian-speaking minorities in order to secure informal influence on domestic political affairs and thus undermine the unity of the alliance. But irrespective of the likelihood of a Russian intervention in the Baltic, the main elements of the threat are situated in the realms of politics, policing, and intelligence, and it is here that the consensus within the alliance reaches its limits. Notable representatives of NATO have already implied that the response to such politicized warfare should include domestic measures. This logic, stringent though it may be, quickly leads to variations on the idea of “civil defense” in the sense of a comprehensive defensive strategy involving measures both at

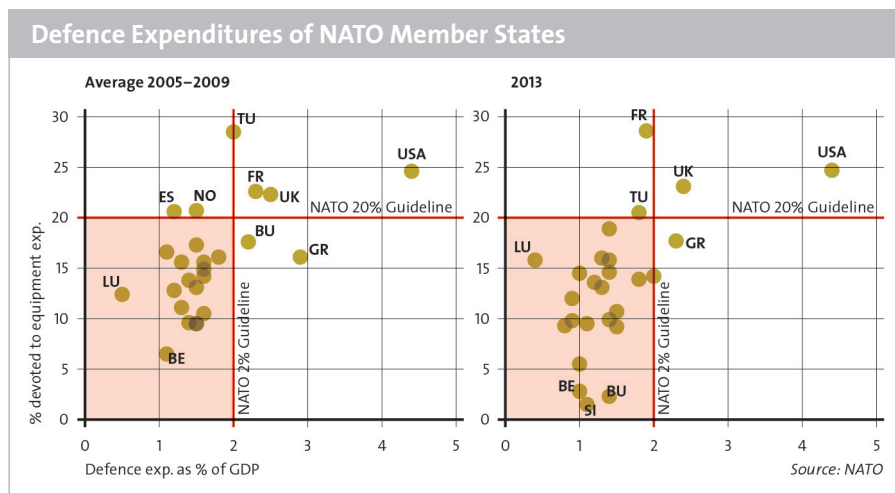
home and abroad; it will therefore be rejected vigorously by many member states based on democratic principles and the recent histories of the countries in question.

*Third*, it is apparent that of all the decisions taken at the Wales summit, the seemingly most unequivocal agreement is devoid of binding force. The commitment by member states to raise the share of defense expenditures to two per cent of GDP and to raise the investment quota to 20 per cent of the defense budget is not tenable. This is just as true for Germany, the economically strongest European country, as for most of the Western and Southern European states. It is true that announcements to this effect are occasionally heard, for instance from the Netherlands. However, in view of the financial constraints that are still very much in effect, no breakthroughs are expected. If the member states should succeed in preventing further shrinkage of the budgets, which have been in decline for many years, that would already be a considerable success for alliance policy.

*Fourth*, the question of how military multinationality should be shaped within the alliance remains open. The strengthening of NATO’s eastern flank has diminished a longstanding imbalance between the Western European founding members and the new members that joined as part of the alliance’s eastward expansion, and its original purpose of collective defense is being taken

seriously once more. However, when it comes to global crisis management, it is likely that coalitions of the willing will continue to be formed in changing compositions, depending on the nature of the crisis, in order to deal with commonly perceived security policy challenges, in the course of which they will also avail themselves of NATO’s military toolbox. One model that meets these requirements is the Framework Nation Concept, which was taken another step forward at the Wales summit. As part of that concept, “framework nations” undertake to coordinate groups of nations working together voluntarily in a certain area to close capability gaps identified within NATO. Three groups were introduced at the Wales summit: Germany is at the head of a ten-nation group that will focus on command-and-control assets and fire support for combined operations. The UK, on the other hand, heads a 10’000-strong Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) with the participation of Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Norway. The goal is for the JEF to be deployable for the entire spectrum of operations without regional limitations; however, the geographic composition of the contributing states suggests a concentration on the northeastern flank. Third, Italy together with other states will focus on important enablers.

Smart Defense, introduced as recently as 2012 at the Chicago summit as a core ini-



tiative for efficient maintenance of military capabilities, is thus gradually diminishing in substance. The examples cited are not based on cost-efficient capability sharing, but involve constant coordination based on national sovereignty. This appears to be a sustainable model for the future – however, the tension between the military necessity of collective defense, the desire for efficient and cost-effective integrated solutions, and the shifting alliances under the umbrella of NATO has not grown smaller at the Wales summit (cf. *CSS Analysis No. 154*).

### Switzerland as a NATO partner

The decisions taken at the Wales summit also affect Switzerland’s partnership with NATO. In 1996, Switzerland joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP), even though it had no intention of ever becoming a full-fledged NATO member. In 1996, after the end of the Cold War, that partnership was an attractive proposition because NATO was transforming from a military alliance into an instrument of collective security that wished to strengthen Western values such as democracy and civilian control of armed forces from Warsaw to Vladivostok. The spirit of “stability through cooperation” at the time was a perfect match for Swiss security policy in the 1990s. The context of the Balkan wars matters: For Switzerland as a neutral country, cooperation with NATO was possible because it focused on fostering peace and stability in Europe.

Switzerland for its part benefits to this day both from stability in the Euro-Atlantic space and from military cooperation in the framework of the KFOR stabilization mission in the western Balkans (Swisscoy).

Due to the impetus of NATO’s ongoing eastern expansion, the importance of PfP was diminished. Western partners such as Sweden, in turn, regarded participation in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan as an opportunity to reform their armed forces. Sweden participated far more actively in the Libyan War of 2011 than many NATO members.

Switzerland, on the other hand, continued to focus on the western Balkan even during the Afghan decade. The engagement of Swisscoy is valued highly by NATO. At the NATO summit in Chicago in May 2012, Switzerland was one of the 13 select “main partners”.

At the Wales summit, NATO decided to expand its dialog and practical cooperation with five privileged countries – Sweden, Finland, Georgia, Jordan, and Australia. As part of the new Partnership Interoperability Initiative, Switzerland is part of a group of 24 very heterogeneous partners including Austria, Ireland, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Morocco, Serbia, and Ukraine as well as the five above-mentioned “super-partners”.

The intensified cooperation of Sweden and Finland with NATO raises the question of which future remains for the small, informal homogenous group of five or six Western European countries that had coalesced in Brussels over the past years. The so-called WEU-5 group consisting of NATO partners Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Finland, and Ireland worked to promote shared interests, occasionally supported by Malta (WEU-6). In a way, the group was a reincarnation of the Western non-aligned states that had mediated successfully between East and West in the Helsinki Process from 1972 to 1990. For Swiss security policy, this privileged format was an attractive one, for instance when it came to discussing jihadism in Mali or cyber-risks. Among the “likeminded partners”, this format facilitated more focused discussions with NATO than larger venues such as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). The current Ukrainian crisis appears to have driven a wedge between the more active states of Sweden and Finland, on the one hand, and the more passive countries Switzerland, Austria, and Ireland on the other.

Stockholm and Helsinki responded to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine by deepening military cooperation with NATO and signed so-called host nation agreements during the Wales summit. These will facilitate future NATO troop deployments to the Nordic countries upon invitation, either for exercises or in the case of a crisis. Switzerland, on the other hand, continued to advocate cooperative security and Euro-Atlantic security together with Russia, rather than against Russia. Therefore, NATO’s future approach in dealing with Russia after the Wales summit is of the greatest interest for Switzerland as a PfP country.

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

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

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