

Central European Security After Crimea: The Case for Strengthening NATO's Eastern Defenses

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Executive Summary

The Crimea crisis has increased the military risks facing the frontline NATO states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Fifteen years after joining the Alliance, U.S. allies in this region continue to lack a significant Allied military presence and remain susceptible to Russian military pressure, intimidation or even invasion. NATO should move decisively to address this problem by reinforcing defensive capabilities, bolstering regional security and ensuring that no NATO member state is victim of a Crimea-style land grab.

Introduction

The Russian seizure of Crimea poses a direct challenge to the post-Cold War security order in Europe. By forcibly altering the borders of a sovereign neighboring state, Russia has weakened the foundations of the post-Cold War territorial settlement and reintroduced geopolitics to Europe's Eastern frontier.¹ The Crimean incursion is a violation of three international agreements that have underpinned the stability of Eastern Europe and Ukraine (the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 and the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997).

The move marks the second time in five years that Vladimir Putin's Russia has humiliated and dismembered an ex-Soviet state without encountering a strong reaction from the West. Compared with Russia's brief-but-bloody fight in the Caucasus during the 2008 Georgia War, the invasion of Crimea represents a significant

escalation in Russian military ambition. Ukraine is the largest and most important country in Eastern Europe, with 45 million inhabitants and a strategically-vital location straddling historic invasion routes and modern-day energy transit links between Europe and Eurasia. With tens of thousands of Russian troops deployed in and around Ukraine, the crisis has profound implications for the military balance of power in the region and longer-term configuration of the former Soviet Union and neighboring Central and Eastern Europe.

The fate of Crimea has underlined Russia's ability to use fast military strikes and bold diplomacy to create political *faits accomplis*. These compel obedience to its political and economic agenda and stoke fears of similar moves elsewhere.² In CEE countries, concern is growing of Russian military aggression, amid longstanding doubts about NATO's credibility. Unless countered, these fears risk dividing the Alliance and fueling instability along its Eastern flank.

The Roots of CEE Vulnerability

The string of small and mid-sized states between the Baltic and Black Seas have historically faced a security dilemma due to their location between Europe's continental power centers. This predicament and the power dynamics underpinning it were suspended when the Soviet system collapsed. The accession of CEE states to NATO and the European Union (EU) brought them into the most powerful military and economic groupings in the world.

¹ Peter B. Doran and Marta Sikorski, *CEPA Issue Brief 133: Crisis in Crimea: Four Scenarios*, March 3, 2013.

² John Blau, "Russia's Periphery: Who's Next?" *Deutsche Welle*, March 20, 2014.

Yet CEE states have remained exposed to coercive Kremlin tactics, from aggressive diplomacy and energy blackmail to retaliatory economic warfare, cyber attacks and even nuclear threats. Such tactics preceded NATO enlargement, but intensified after it.³ Causes include:

- The growth under Vladimir Putin of a revanchist Russian foreign policy;
- The downscaling of the U.S. military presence in Europe; and
- The stalling of the European political project as an alternative to U.S. patronage.

The Georgia War illustrated the speed and impunity with which the Russian military can alter regional political realities within a localized setting removed from Western protection. In its aftermath, countries across the region have been investing in alternative mechanisms for strengthening their security positions, from

321,000 in Estonia and 556,000 in Latvia). Russian naval maneuvers in the Baltic were ominously timed to coincide with the high point of the Crimean crisis. Subsequent comments by Russian officials have jarred nerves.⁵ Poland and to a lesser extent Romania also occupy precarious positions due to their borders with Ukraine and exposure to the military and humanitarian effects of Russian incursions.

NATO’s Two Tiers

An important ingredient in CEE insecurity is the relative weakness of the region’s own military ties. Most countries are habitual under-spenders on defense—a trend reinforced by the effects of the Eurozone economic crisis. Region-wide, average spending on defense is 1.1 percent of GDP, well below the 2 percent threshold stipulated by NATO. Two notable exceptions to this trend are Estonia and Poland; the latter maintains one of Europe’s most capable armies and has initiated a 10-year, \$40 billion military modernization program.

When complete, Poland will have the heaviest land force in European NATO.⁶

But NATO behavior has also fueled CEE insecurity. Under the 1997

NATO-Russia Founding Act, which preceded the first round of eastern enlargement, Alliance members issued a joint declaration (the so-called “three Nos”) stating that they had “no intentions, no plans and no reason” to place significant military assets, including especially tactical nuclear weapons, in CEE countries.

While receiving the all-important Article 5 guarantee (the essence of the NATO commitment and a revolutionary improvement in security), the CEE member states have been given few physical embodiments of that guarantee. In short, their security rests more on trust than military muscle.

“THE UKRAINE CRISIS HAS VINDICATED CEE CONCERNS ABOUT RUSSIAN STRENGTH AND WESTERN WEAKNESS.”

military modernization (Poland) and regional defense coordination (the Visegrád and Nordic-Baltic groups) to deepened ties with outside powers (Poland with Germany and Sweden). The gradual reorientation of U.S. foreign policy toward other global regions (the “pivot”) has reinforced this trend; so too has the administration’s downgrading of CEE in favor of enhanced ties with Russia (the “reset”).

The Ukraine crisis has vindicated CEE concerns about Russian strength and Western weakness.⁴ The crisis has been particularly relevant for the Baltic States, given the similarities of their geographical and demographic position (Russian minorities, broadly defined, number

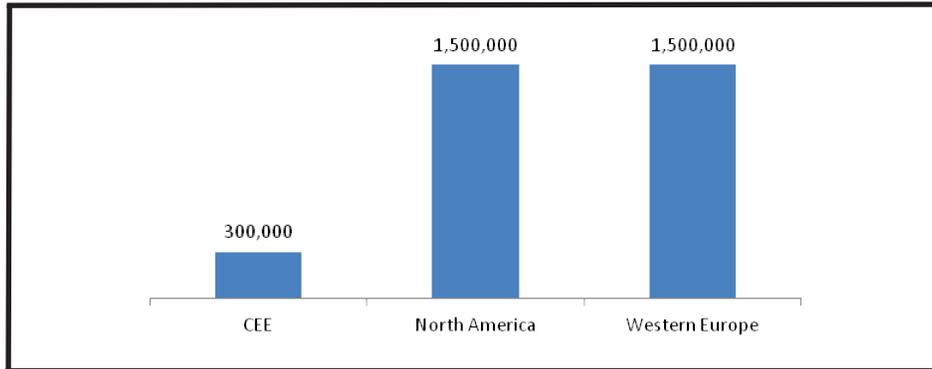
³ Jakub Grygiel, *CEPA Report 25: Russian Strategy in Central Europe*, October 2009.

⁴ Andrew A. Michta, “Countering Putin’s Push,” *American Interest*, February 5, 2014.

⁵ Robert Evans, “Moscow Signals Concern for Russians in Estonia,” Reuters, March 19, 2014.

⁶ Dominik P. Jankowski, *Issue Brief 132: Beyond Air and Missile Defense: Modernization of the Polish Armed Forces*, CEPA, September 5, 2013.

Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of NATO Forces



Source: *The Military Balance 2012*, IISS; analysis by CEPA.

The result (despite official quibbles), is a *de facto* two-tiered strategic reality:

- Of a combined NATO strength of around 3 million troops, including 1.5 million in Europe, less than 10 percent (around 300,000) are located in CEE.⁷ [See Figure 1.]
- Of a total of 28 NATO installations, 23 (including all major bases) are located in Western Europe; only 5 are located in CEE member states.⁸ [See Figure 2.]
- Of 66,217 U.S. forces in Europe, 66,081 are located in Western Europe and 136 are located in CEE member states. There are more U.S. forces in the Netherlands than in all CEE nations combined.⁹
- Of the nearly 200 non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe, none are located in CEE states.

⁷ *The Military Balance 2012*, IISS. Unless otherwise stated, all military figures are from this source.

⁸ Michael J. Lostumbo, et al., *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Benefits*, Rand Corporation (2013), p. 21.

⁹ *Total Military Personnel and Dependent End Strength by Service, Regional Area and Country as of December 31, 2013*, Defense Manpower Data Center, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2014.

Steps have been taken to address this imbalance. In 2004, when the Baltic States joined NATO, the Alliance inaugurated a rotating air-policing mission. In 2009, it breached a taboo and drew up its first contingency plans for Poland and the Baltic States. In 2012, the United States assigned an Air Detachment from the 52nd Fighter Wing comprising F-16s and C-130 transport planes to Łask, Poland. In 2013, the Alliance conducted the *Steadfast Jazz* exercise in Poland and the Baltic states—the first big military exercise to be held in the region. And in March 2014, during the high point of the Crimea crisis, the United States dispatched additional air assets to the region, including 12 F-16s and 300 airmen to Poland and six F-15s and an KC-135 aerial refueling tanker to the Baltic States.

These measures sent out an important if belated message, but are still mostly symbolic. CEE countries remain vulnerable to Russian tactics, which emphasize fast, limited-goal military strikes to create facts on the ground that will prove difficult for a politically disunited Alliance to reverse. The Russian military incursions in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrated that the early phase of a regional conflict is especially crucial for determining its eventual outcome. Given the reaction time required for forces to be deployed from Western Europe or North America, such tactics neutralize to some extent the

Figure 2: Geographic Distribution of EUCOM-NATO Installations



Source: Rand Corporation, 2013; analysis by CEPA.

advantage of the Article 5 guarantee. The vulnerability created by this delay highlights the need for pre-sited defensive forces.

CEE states are not equipped to play such a role. While Russia is militarily weaker than NATO as a whole by a wide margin, it is strong compared to individual CEE militaries. The degree of imbalance in regional military power is striking:

- Combined NATO defense spending is \$1 trillion – half of Russian GDP and almost nine times greater than the annual Russian military budget.
- But Russian military expenditures dwarf those of CEE militaries: Russia spends 4.5 percent of its GDP (\$116 billion) on defense, compared to 1.9 percent (\$9.3 billion) for Poland and an average of 1.1 percent (\$18 billion total) for the entire CEE region.
- With nearly 1 million active troops, the Russian military is 10 times larger than that of the largest and most capable CEE NATO member Poland (100,000). Russian forces dwarf the militaries of the Baltic States (between 5 and 10 thousand troops apiece) and are more than three times larger than all

of CEE region’s active forces combined (290,000).¹⁰ [See Figure 3.]

- In the crucial category of airpower, Russia’s advantage is especially lopsided, with 1,793 combat capable aircraft compared to 112 in Poland, none in the Baltic States and 327 in all of CEE. [See Figure 4.]

These disparities are likely to grow in the years ahead as Russian military modernization accelerates.¹¹ Over a 10-year period, Russia plans to spend \$700 billion (about the amount of the annual U.S. defense budget) on upgrades to its military. Even if fulfilled only in part, in light of the *de facto* disarmament of Europe, those expenditures have already begun to shift the power balance in the region.

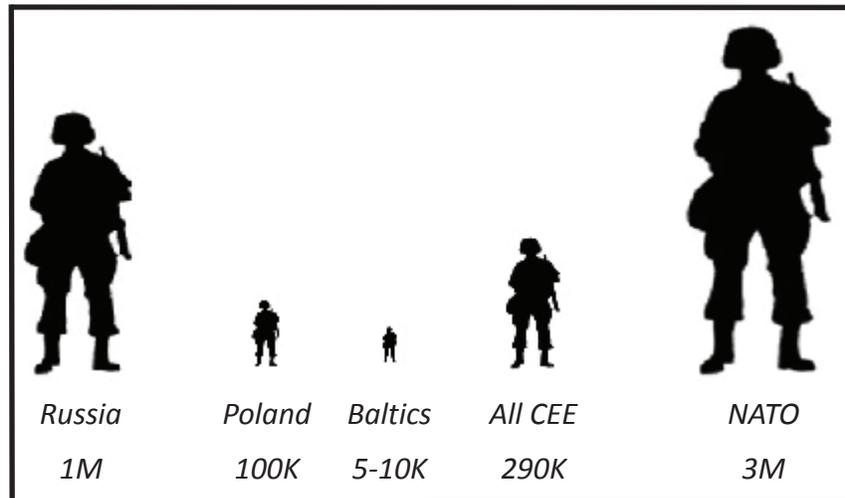
The Limits of Extended Deterrence

NATO faces two strategic problems in the East. First, extended deterrence offers diminishing utility in confronting the threats likely to characterize the 21st

¹⁰ Ibid., IISS.

¹¹ “Russia’s Military is Back,” Nicholas K. Gvosdev, *The National Interest*, October 4, 2013.

Figure 3: CEE-Russia Military Balance



Source: *The Military Balance 2012*, IISS; analysis by CEPA.

century regional military landscape. Article 5 and the U.S./UK nuclear umbrella are ill-suited to dealing with Crimea-style tactics, which are localized, low-intensity and quick—the opposite of what NATO is militarily structured or politically disposed to handle. Nor does the Alliance have an effective defense against the energy blockades, economic sanctions and information warfare that make up Russia’s tactical triad in the region.

Second, military procurement patterns suggest new doctrinal and technological challenges that could impair NATO’s physical ability to defend CEE members under attack. Current Russian modernization plans emphasize the development of so-called “Anti-Access/ Access Denial” (A2/AD) capabilities – advanced weapons designed to prevent NATO reinforcements from reaching frontline states in order to boost local Russian military superiority. While Polish modernization plans seek to address this challenge, they will take time to develop as the Polish military reorients to a territorial defense footing following its deployments in Afghanistan.

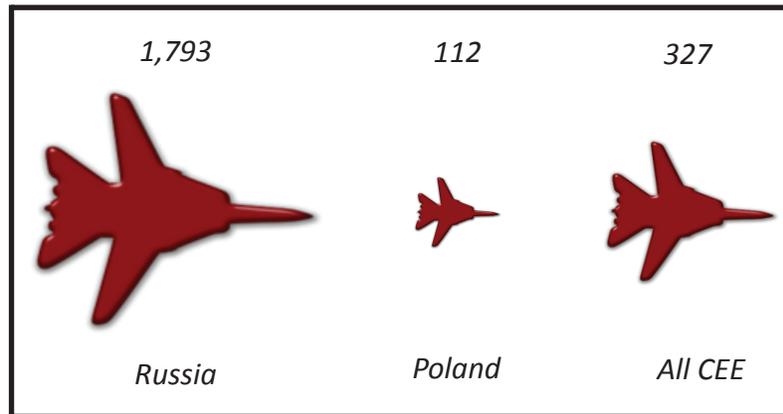
These changes have degraded NATO’s ability in CEE to deter and defend against threats—the core purpose of the Alliance. In a not-so-distant scenario, they could hinder its response to an armed incursion into

CEE’s most vulnerable corner: the Baltic States. Such a scenario might involve Moscow stage-managing incidents involving ethnic Russians as a pretext for invoking the so-called Medvedev Doctrine, which asserts a “right” to protect Russians outside the country’s borders. Acting on this doctrine, Russia would be able to employ ground and amphibious assault forces to quickly seize a Baltic port or carve out a land corridor connecting Kaliningrad with Belarus.¹²

Naturally, such actions would prompt NATO’s Baltic members to ask the Alliance to take military action. But after an initial incursion with limited territorial objectives, Moscow might repeat its tactics from Georgia and Ukraine of halting the military advance and allowing time and political circumstances to validate its position in the ensuing political “crisis.” Hoping to avoid a further escalation of hostilities, some Alliance members might be inclined to accept the offer before NATO could offer military support.

¹² Peter B. Doran, Beata Górká-Winter, Robert Kron, Łukasz Kulesa, Marcin Terlikowski, “*Military Challenges to the Security of North Central Europe 2014–2024*,” CEPA-PISM Brief, September 2012.

Figure 4: Combat Aircraft in NATO's East



Source: *The Military Balance 2012*, IISS; analysis by CEPA.

A related Baltic-State concern is that NATO could be impeded from acting in a crisis not by Russian tactics but by NATO's own politics. Under Article 4, members can call for emergency consultations if "in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security" of the Alliance is threatened. However, under the North Atlantic Council (NAC)'s convoluted decision-making process, a request for support can be blocked by members that disagree with the threatened state politically or do not share its threat assessment. In 2003, for instance, Turkey's request for air defenses was denied because of resistance from NATO members that opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

A repeat of such a scenario involving Russia could paralyze NATO before Article 5 could even be invoked. Either scenario would mark the end of geopolitical stability in contemporary Europe and of NATO as an effective military and political alliance.

The Costs of CEE Vulnerability

Such anxieties in CEE states bode ill for the region, the Alliance and the United States—irrespective of near-term Russian military intentions.¹³ Their political and strategic costs include:

- *Division in NATO and the EU.* Uncertainty fuels disunity. Only member states whose basic security needs are met feel confident to invest in the "normal" politics of cooperation. The less effectively those needs are met, the louder the vulnerable members become, inadvertently highlighting the contrast with more secure members and fueling unnecessary political crises.
- *Reduced military interoperability.* CEE states have been generous contributors to U.S. and NATO operations, refuting critics' claims of new-member "free-riding" in NATO. But the increasing need for territorial defense will tempt CEE states to over-invest in standalone capabilities which are out-of-sync with the Alliance, squandering assets and training accumulated during the ISAF mission and degrading interoperability.
- *Increased regional nationalism.* The absence of convincing security assurances could fuel state intervention in the economy, in particular in defense and energy. This could sap economic competitiveness and growth – the ultimate foundation of the region's long-term security.
- *Weakened Western "magnetism."* Insecure allies make poor role models. Developments among the CEE member states of NATO are closely monitored

13 A. Wess Mitchell and Robert Kron, *CEPA Issue Brief 108: Counting the Costs of Insecurity in North Central Europe*, February 1, 2010.

by ex-Communist states further east and U.S. allies in other vulnerable regions.¹⁴ The robustness of Western security commitments to, and reciprocal trust from, CEE countries is widely viewed as a barometer for the health and credibility of the West in the post-Soviet space. If security linkages are perceived as weak or fraying at a time of Russian resurgence, political elites elsewhere may be less likely to risk pro-Western policy agendas.

- *Invitation to crisis.* Most importantly, a militarily weak Eastern flank of NATO increases the risk of Russian adventurism. The Georgia War and Crimea crisis have demonstrated Putin’s desire and ability to redraw the map to Russia’s advantage. Escalating Russian ambitions could threaten the Baltic States. NATO does not do enough to counter this threat.

Bolstering NATO’s Eastern Defenses

These costs are more likely to grow than shrink. This represents a fundamentally different geostrategic environment. The pledge to avoid placing military assets on new-member territory was made in exchange for Russia eschewing territorial aggression. Now that Moscow has become militarily aggressive, NATO should respond by changing its stance. Today’s NATO is still the product of an era when the major threats were to West Germany, not to eastern Poland or the Baltic States. As a result, risk is unevenly and unsustainably distributed between insulated Western and exposed Eastern members. The need to rectify this is not new. But Crimea has made it an existential imperative.

A Preclusive Strategy

NATO’s enormous strengths should be used to close off Europe’s Eastern approaches as an area of renewed military competition. The goals should be to (1) strengthen deterrence to reduce the risk of a Russian move against the Baltic States; and (2) improve the odds of a successful CEE defense by strengthening capabilities

needed to counter emerging Russian offensive techniques. The means might include some combination of the following actions:

1. **Get U.S. boots on the ground.** Most efforts to reassure CEE member states have taken the form of *ad hoc* gestures involving air assets that are easy to deploy—but also easy to remove. The stationing of a U.S. ground unit in Poland – for example, by relocating elements from the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment from their current billets in Vilseck, Germany – would be a good start. The unit’s anti-armor troop would hold particularly high symbolic value. Larger deployments may be necessary in the future depending on Russian behavior.
2. **Develop an A2/AD strategy for CEE.** The United States has been working with its allies in the Pacific to devise effective defenses against Chinese power projection. NATO should develop a similar approach for CEE. The aim would be to create “hedgehog” frontline states bristling with sophisticated weaponry that would impose a high cost on attempts at aggression and preclude Russia from blocking access to CEE states in a crisis. NATO should designate tailored reinforcement packages (such as the NATO Response Force) while encouraging local investment in A2AD capabilities. An important component in this strategy will be the Swedish island of Gotland, which dominates the approaches to the Baltic coast. A hostile force operating advanced anti-aircraft systems (e.g., S-400s) from this island would be able to suppress Allied air activity in the region. NATO should counter such a scenario by helping Poland and non-NATO Sweden and Finland acquire advanced capabilities (Finland has already acquired the JASSM stealthy cruise missile).¹⁵
3. **Enhance regional air defenses.** The centerpiece of an effective counter-A2/AD strategy is air

14 A. Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel, “The Vulnerability of Peripheries,” *American Interest*, Spring 2010.

15 See for example Jacek Bartosiak and Tomasz Szatkowski, *Geography of the Baltic Sea Military Perspective: Implications for the Polish Armed Forces Modernization*, National Center for Strategic Studies, December 2013 and Edward Lucas, “Finland tones up its Security Muscles,” *European Voice*, September 20, 2012.

and missile defense (AMD). Poland’s current air defense capabilities date from the Communist era and are ineffective against modern threats such as the Russian SRBM “Iskander” missiles located in Kaliningrad. Poland is currently seeking to purchase a modern AMD system. The United States should actively participate in this process and provide temporary, fully-operational Patriot missile batteries until it is complete. The Alliance should also make targeted efforts to address the regional imbalance in combat fighter aircraft. The U.S. air presence at the Łask airbase could be used as a hub for regional coordination by creating a rotation schedule involving U.S., V4 states and Romanian air units. Doing so would help to ensure a more integrated and combat-ready NATO air screen.

4. **Route planned unit relocations to CEE.** As part of ongoing U.S. base realignments, a number of units have been returned to the United States. Among those remaining in Europe, a heightened emphasis is being placed on cost-effectiveness and maximizing proximity to strategic regions.¹⁶ CEE countries should be actively considered in this process – for example, by moving the Germany-based 52nd Fighter Wing to Romania instead of Aviano, Italy as planned.
5. **Play to areas of CEE strength—and concern.** The development of the Cyber Defense Center in Estonia after the 2007 Russian cyber attacks sent a targeted message about the Alliance’s commitment to addressing specific CEE vulnerabilities. Similar efforts could be made to build up Centers of Excellence elsewhere in the region, such as an Energy Security Center in Lithuania, Strategic Communications Center in Latvia and AMD Center in Poland. The Alliance should also consider reestablishing the NATO Economic Warfare Department.
6. **Make better use of CEE open spaces.** NATO forces have limited options in Western Europe for conducting routine training maneuvers. The CEE region’s generally less-populous states offer cheaper and more spacious sites, as evidenced by the Joint

Task Force-East exercises in Bulgaria’s Novo Selo Training Range. NATO should relocate its Joint Multinational Readiness Center to Western Poland, which would offer wider expanses for armored maneuvers while retaining proximity to NATO command and control structures.

7. **Deepen CEE linkages to NATO command and control.** NATO’s uneven risk structure is symbolized by the concentration of all Alliance headquarter functions in “old” member states. Relocating a significant facility such as the Land Command Center to a new site in CEE would send a clear signal that the region is an integral part of NATO and not just an appendage to an alliance whose center lies in the West.
8. **Consider lifting the ban on tactical nuclear weapons in CEE.** The Crimea crisis gives the Alliance significant grounds to re-think plans for removing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe, as well as its self-imposed moratorium on their placement in CEE states.¹⁷ The selective transfer of even a small number of dual-use weapons to CEE territory from Germany, where there is growing resistance to their presence, would provide far-reaching strategic reassurance and strengthen NATO deterrence against attack. Such a move would require extensive political dialogue within the Alliance. That process needs to begin now.

This list is illustrative rather than exhaustive. The key is to move decisively to address the longstanding strategic void in the Eastern portion of the NATO alliance while the lessons of Crimea are fresh and the Alliance remains politically focused on the growing threat of Russian revisionism. Russian military behavior will determine the pace of redeployment of equipment and personnel. Should Russian forces push deeper into Ukraine or attempt similar land grabs on other neighboring states, the Alliance should immediately implement planks 1, 3 and 8 (U.S. boots on the ground, strengthening air defenses and transfer tactical nuclear weapons).

¹⁷ Jim Thomas, “How to Place Military Pressure on Russia,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2014.

¹⁶ Ibid., Lostumbo.

Irrespective of Russia's next moves, NATO should make reinforcing its Eastern flank its highest priority. It can begin by making territorial defense the centerpiece of the upcoming 2014 NATO Summit in Cardiff. At the conference, Crimea should be used as a focal point for turning the Alliance's post-ISAF doctrinal focus from out-of-area operations to military consolidation in Europe. NATO should also expand the scope and visibility of its upcoming Trident Juncture exercises, deploying a larger-than-planned U.S. contingent, showcasing the advanced technology and doctrines honed by Alliance forces in Afghanistan and placing particular emphasis on the Skolkan scenario involving defense of the Baltic States.

The Benefits of Addressing CEE Vulnerability

While the CEE member states would be the immediate beneficiaries of these steps, NATO as a whole would benefit from addressing strategic imbalances. Such a shift would make better use of the West's large but lopsided military potential to reduce the likelihood of future war. It would send a message to Russia and other potential revisionist states that, while the Kremlin may be able to alter the territorial *status quo* close to home on a small scale, the wider post-1991 settlement in Europe is not open to revision. It would show that the United States is capable of backing up its rhetorical censure of Russian moves with measured and strategic actions that deter Russia and protect NATO allies.

Politically, providing deepened strategic reassurance to CEE member states would help deal with the uneven burden of risk and the two-tier structure—two problems which have dogged NATO since its eastern enlargements. The absence of a proper military presence means too much attention is invested in individual military projects with the United States. The fallout in Poland from the cancellation of the 'Third Site' missile defense in 2009 is one such example. A better balance would reduce potential for such friction and improve Washington's ability to pursue global strategic priorities.

Finally, these changes could save money. The United States has already cut its forces in Europe deeply. They are down by 85 percent from their Cold War high of 460,000 troops. If pre-Crimea crisis plans are implemented, America will only have seven garrisons and 30,000 troops left in Europe within the next two years. Placing U.S. and other Allied forces in CEE countries is cost-effective, maximizes speed of deployment and provides an instant deterrent effect.

Conclusion

For sixty-five years, NATO has kept the peace in Europe. In the Cold War era, it deterred a large-scale Soviet attack. In the post-1989 period it helped bring stability and reform to the countries of the former Warsaw Pact. After 2001, it went on the offensive against a threat located far afield—a mission in which CEE states were actively involved in promoting European and U.S. security. Today, the risks facing NATO have once again changed to include a potential military threat from Russia. As in previous eras, NATO must quickly and creatively evolve to confront this challenge.

Preventing the return of geopolitics to Central and Eastern Europe was the original aim of expanding NATO into this region in 1999 and 2004. At that time, NATO did not have the "reason, intention or plans" to place military structures on the territory of its newest members. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Crimea, that has changed. NATO possesses a clear strategic reason and, increasingly, the political intention to consign the three "no's" to the history books. As the 10th and 15th anniversaries of the eastern enlargements approach, the Alliance should devise a plan for rectifying a long-standing imbalance by improving the military defenses of its CEE members. Doing so now, while the events of Crimea are still fresh, could help to stabilize NATO politically and reassure its most exposed members. Most importantly, it would ensure no future Russian act of aggression is directed at a NATO member state, with all the terrifying risks of escalation that such a move would entail.

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