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IS NATO'S EFP A SUCCESSFUL COUNTER MEASURE TO RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE?

As a response to what it viewed as increasing instability and tension in Eastern Europe – specifically Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine – NATO established enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) after its Warsaw Summit in July 2016. eFP is a conventional force deployed in the Baltic states and Poland, through which NATO seeks to reinforce member states' commitment to Article 5 and thereby provide a deterrent against Russian action in the region.[1]

Although NATO has largely failed to identify it as such, Russia is engaging exclusively in the use of hybrid warfare to achieve its aims in the Baltic region. In order to assess the success of eFP as a countermeasure to this strategy, I will examine both the extent to which the deployment satisfies NATO's stated expectations for it, and, closely related to this, how well eFP combats or deters Russian hybrid warfare and thereby the threats faced by NATO in the Baltic region. The distinction between these criteria is very important, as it highlights the extent to which NATO misunderstands Russia's use of hybrid warfare and has developed flawed policy in response. I will begin by giving an overview of eFP as it stands, and the aims and intentions behind it, followed by an overview of hybrid warfare generally and specifically how it relates to the Baltic states. This will lead to a comparison of the two, and an examination of the criteria for success stated above.

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[1] NATO, *Warsaw Summit Communique* (2016), paras. 10 and 11, accessed online at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm [Jul 2019]

I will not be examining the nature of the hybrid warfare threat faced by Poland because my aim is to examine the interaction of hybrid warfare with eFP and, as will be explained, it makes no sense for Poland to be included in eFP. I will also not be looking at the wider geopolitics of the Baltic region – given the constraints of space this paper will focus on the strategies employed by NATO and Russia. However, to offer a brief summary: it is apparent that NATO misunderstands Russia's historical, social and political relationships with the Baltic states, and that this also heavily mars its policy in the region. This would be a productive area for further study I hope to pursue in the future.

NATO's eFP and wider measures in Eastern Europe

NATO's eFP consists of four multinational battalion-sized battlegroups in Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. Each is led by a framework nation – the UK (in Estonia); Canada (Latvia); Germany (Lithuania); and the US (Poland) – with supporting forces from the majority of other NATO members. As of March 2019, 19 of 29 NATO members had deployed troops as part of eFP.[2] The deployment primarily consists of armoured and mechanised infantry formations, designed to plug the gaps in the militaries of the host nations which generally lack such units; overall 4,700 NATO troops are part of eFP, with 1000-1400 in each country.[3]

The decision to establish eFP was justified specifically in terms of the perceived threat posed to NATO generally and the Baltic states in particular by Russia, more generally by the need to reinforce NATO's deterrence posture, and by the need to reinforce member states' commitment to Article 5. After its 2016 Warsaw summit, NATO stated that Russia represented a "destabilising" force that "posed…risks and challenges to the security of Allies and others."[4] As a direct response, NATO would "enhance[e] its deterrence and defence posture" with this "including a forward

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2 NATO, *NATO's enhanced Forward Presence Factsheet* (2019), accessed online at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_04/20190402_1904-factsheet_efp_en.pdf [Jul 2019]

3 Ibid.

4 NATO, *Warsaw Communique*, para. 10

presence in the eastern part of the alliance".[5] In addition to this deterrence and defence role, eFP was intended to "unambiguously demonstrate…Allies solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering immediate Allied response to any aggression" – that is, to trigger Article 5 in the event of the Baltic states being attacked.[6]

However, eFP is not the only measure that has been taken by NATO to respond to the threat posed by Russia, and the deployment must be understood and assessed in the context of wider NATO strategy. In specific response to the threat of hybrid warfare, NATO co-established the Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) with the European Union (EU) in 2017. Hybrid CoE is a think tank, intended to research the nature of hybrid threats and develop suggested responses to them.[7] More significant regarding deterrent capability is the fact the eFP forces constitute less than half of troops deployed by NATO or NATO members in Eastern Europe.[8] NATO has had air and maritime missions operating in the Baltic region since the mid-2000s.[9] On top of this, and in addition to the battalion it has deployed as part of eFP, the US currently has around 8,500 armed forces personnel in Europe as part of its European Deterrence Initiative (EDI).[10] The majority of these are deployed in Poland in the form of an Armoured Brigade Combat Team.[11]

Hybrid warfare, why Russia uses it and how it is used in the Baltics

The most commonly accepted definition of hybrid warfare is that given by Frank Hoffman. He defines hybrid warfare as a type of conflict involving "a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including

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5 Ibid, para. 11
6 Ibid., para 40
7 Hybrid CoE, *What is Hybrid CoE?* (2019), accessed online at: https://www.hybridcoe.fi/what-is-hybridcoe/ [Jul 2019]
8 Kalev Stoicescu and Pauli Järvenpää, *Contemporary Deterrence: Insights and Lessons from Enhanced Forward Presence* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2019), pp. 4-5
9 Ibid., p. 4
10 Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *European Deterrence Initiative: Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2020* (2019), pp. 1 and 4
11 Stoicescu and Järvenpää, *Contemporary Deterrence,* p. 4

indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects."[12] In the specific context of Russian strategy, this has manifested in practice as: the use of military shows of force to back up diplomatic efforts; the use of plausibly deniable special forces and mercenaries; the use of criminal networks; spreading propaganda and disinformation; and using cyber attacks.[13]

Russia has engaged in the use of hybrid warfare because it sees itself as being in the equivalent of a war with the West but is determined to keep this conflict in the realm short of war.[14] Just as all other states, Russia is well aware of the human and material cost conventional war with a near-peer adversary would entail. Further, a conventional conflict with NATO would always carry the risk of escalating to the use of nuclear weapons. In addition to this, wargames have demonstrated that even if a conflict with NATO remained conventional it is likely that Russia would lose.[15] Therefore, in lieu of being able to fight more directly and assert itself, Russia seeks instead to both strengthen pro-Russian sentiment and weaken anti-Russian sentiment across the West in general and Europe in particular. Through changing the political landscape, Russia seeks to establish more favourable conditions for itself, reducing the level and number of hostile actions directed at it by the West and giving Russia more freedom to operate internationally.

The predominant manifestation of hybrid warfare in the Baltic states is information warfare, using television, radio, and the internet, to distribute information intended to influence the

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[12] Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), p. 14

[13] Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 78-108 and Mark Galeotti, *Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages its Political War in Europe*, (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017), pp. 3-6

[14] Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, p. 61

[15] A high-profile RAND wargame in early 2019 concluded that the US would lose badly in a war with Russia and China. However, there were numerous flaws in the assumptions that created the premise for the conflict, and in the assumptions of how Russia would act during the war. A detailed assessment of these flaws was written by Stephen Bryen, 'Did RAND get it right in its wargame exercise?', *Asia Times* (Mar 2019), accessed online at: https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/03/article/did-rand-get-it-right-in-its-war-game-exercise/ [Jul 2019]. A USMC wargame, also in early 2019, produced what is, in my view, a more balanced and realistic assessment of how a great-power conflict might play out: James Lacey, 'How does the next great power conflict play out? Lessons from a wargame', *War on the Rocks* (Apr 2019), accessed online at: https://warontherocks.com/2019/04/how-does-the-next-great-power-conflict-play-out-lessons-from-a-wargame/ [Jul 2019]

populations of the Baltic states. The actual content spread has taken two forms. Firstly, there has been an effort to spread purposefully untrue information. This has been done less in the hope that people in the Baltic states will believe it, but rather to ensure that there are so many possible variants on the truth that people are unclear on what the truth actually is.[16] Through this, Russia hopes to undermine confidence in both democracy and the media in the Baltic states.[17] Second, and more significant, Russia has attempted to mobilise Russian-speaking minority populations. This has occurred through playing on perceived and actual grievances felt by these groups – who often find themselves marginalised – to encourage them into political activism and thereby install pro-Russian regimes in local and national political offices. This has met with some success, with the cities of Riga and Tallinn both being administered by pro-Russian political parties.[18] Thus, through its information campaign, Russia is attempting to both create more favourable political conditions for itself in the Baltics and undermine the extent to which resistance to this is possible.

In addition, Russia has carried out military exercises on the borders of the Baltic states, in order to create a climate of fear and uncertainty and demonstrate its potential force. For example, the *Zapad* 2017 exercise carried out jointly by Russia and Belarus was not only held in close proximity to the Baltic states but appeared to be designed to simulate fighting against a coalition of NATO members backed by the US – the mostly likely scenario if a conventional war broke out in the Baltics.[19] This has occurred alongside frequent invasions of the Baltic states' airspace, and more infrequent but serious incidents such as the major cyberattack on Estonia in 2007. However, these actions must be viewed as supplementary to Russia's primary aim of influencing the political conditions in the Baltic states. Russia is seeking to manipulate the information environment, and

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[16] Rod Thornton and Manos Karagiannis, 'The Russian Threat to the Baltic States: The Problems of Shaping Local Defense Mechanisms', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29:3 (2016), p. 336

[17] Matthew Armstrong, quoted in Chris McGreal, 'Vladimir Putin's 'misinformation' offensive prompts US to deploy its Cold War propaganda tools', *The Guardian* (Apr 2015), accessed online at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/25/us-set-to-revive-propaganda-war-as-putin-pr-machine-undermines-baltic-states [Jul 2019]

[18] Thornton and Karagiannis, 'Russian Threat', p. 343

[19] Michael Kofman, 'What actually happened during Zapad 2017', *Russia Military Analysis* (blog, Dec 2017), accessed online at: https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/2017/12/22/what-actually-happened-during-zapad-2017/ [Jul 2019]

the climate of uncertainty and fear these military actions create – in addition to suggesting the potential for support towards Russian-speaking minority populations – serves to lay the ground for information operations and make them more impactful.

eFP as a countermeasure

eFP is a failure because it has not deterred hostile Russian activity in the Baltic states. This is primarily because it was built on incorrect assumptions about the nature of the threat Russia posed. It is true that eFP meets NATO's specific stated expectations, in that the deployment does reinforce NATO's conventional deterrent in the Baltic states, and member states' commitments in the event of an inter-state war. However, it is irrelevant if eFP satisfies these criteria because Russia has no intention of engaging NATO in a conventional war in the Baltic states or anywhere else in Europe. Russia seeks to gain in an absolute as well as local sense; the Baltic states are not an end in themselves, but rather one part of Russia's wider plan of seeking great power status. Military occupation – whole or part – of these states would massively harden resistance to Russia in the West and would result in extensive sanctions and likely military action. Any marginal gains made by Russia in attacking the Baltic states would be more than outweighed by the repercussions this would incur.

NATO's failure to correctly identify the nature of the Russian threat to the Baltics and develop an effective response is symptomatic of the fact that there is a significant lack of innovation in the organisation's responses to threats. Its strategic thinking always appears to be predicated on the assumption that more troops on the ground in a region will counter any and all threats it faces, as is illustrated by the example of Poland. There is no understandable reason why Poland was included as part of eFP. As outlined above, an entire combat brigade is deployed in Poland to provide conventional deterrent capabilities as part of US EDI. This is not a NATO deployment, but an attack on US troops in Poland would trigger Article 5 regardless of whether they were officially deployed as part of NATO or not. If the nature of the threat posed to Poland could be

ameliorated by conventional deterrence, this strategy is already being adequately carried out. However, Russian intentions in Poland and the Baltic states are the same. Russia has no more intention of engaging in conventional war with Poland than it does with the Baltic states; rather, it is seeking the same change towards a more positive political environment or, failing that, a less negative one.

Fundamentally, it is clear that conventional deterrent strategy does not deter hybrid warfare. Russia continues to engage in hybrid activities in the Baltic states, with no reduction in their intensity or frequency. Some hostile acts are even appearing to increase, with the RAF having flown more sorties to interdict Russian aircraft as part of its air policing mission in the Baltics in the period 24th April to 17th July 2019 as in its entire deployment in 2016.[20]

Prior to eFP, if a generous view is taken, this was perhaps a more open question. Although NATO has never articulated its intentions as such, it could have been argued that showing resolve in the Baltic states eFP might result in Russia backing off, recognising that the Baltics were not fair game. However, as was hopefully illustrated by the detail on each given above, conventional deterrence and hybrid warfare are entirely unrelated strategies with neither impacting on the other in any sense. The manipulation of the information environment in the Baltic states, whether to confuse the population generally or mobilise Russian-speaking minorities, is in no way affected by the deployment of armoured units there. Similarly, there is no deterrent against carrying out military exercises on the borders of the Baltic states, as NATO forces only come into play if Russia crosses those borders; it is important to emphasise again that Russia has no intention of doing so.

Not only is conventional deterrence an inadequate response to hybrid warfare, it could also be a dangerous one. As Alexander Lanoszka has argued, using the concept of the stability-instability paradox, the massive costs of conventional war with NATO – which both sides are well aware of

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[20] Valerie Insinna, 'British Air Force charts a rise in Russian activity around the Baltic states', *DefenseNews* (Jul 2019), accessed online at: https://www.defensenews.com/smr/a-modern-nato/2019/07/18/royal-air-force-charts-a-rise-in-russian-activity-around-baltic-states/ [Jul 2019]

– could incentivise Russia to continue to engage in hybrid warfare, and possibly increase its use of hybrid activities, with little concern that the situation could escalate to conventional war.[21]

NATO has acknowledged the threat of hybrid warfare but has done little to counter it, and is ignoring the recommendations of its own think-tanks for methods of doing so. For example, Hybrid CoE published a paper in 2018 titled 'Addressing Hybrid Threats'. In this, the nature of hybrid warfare was studied in-depth, several states were examined for examples of responses, and a series of actionable policy suggestions were given.[22] None of these have been carried out by NATO in the Baltic states. It is therefore quite hard to see what the point of Hybrid CoE is, given that its primary purpose is to develop policy responses to hybrid warfare; if these are ignored they are of little value.

In addition, NATO's broader strategy on responding to hybrid warfare is very unclear. NATO stated in its Warsaw Communique that "the primary responsibility to respond to hybrid threats rests with the targeted nation."[23] However, in the same paragraph it is stated that "NATO is prepared to assist and Ally at any stage of a hybrid campaign", that countering hybrid warfare is considered to be part of collective defence, and such activity could be considered sufficient to trigger Article 5.[24] It is thus unclear just how serious a threat hybrid warfare is seen to be. The fact that NATO is willing to assist allies at any point in a hybrid campaign would suggest even the lowest level at which hybrid warfare can operate is considered a serious NATO-wide threat. However, the policy of initially leaving responses up to individual states would suggest that the threat posed is not considered a serious one – at least, not serious enough to warrant NATO-level response. In addition, NATO has never stated specifically what forms of activity would be

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[21] Alexander Lanoszka, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe', *International Affairs* 92:1 (2016), p. 191
[22] Gregory F. Treverton *et al*, *Addressing Hybrid Threats* (Online: Hybrid CoE, 2018)
[23] NATO, *Warsaw Communique*, para. 72. An identical statement is made in the *Brussels Summit Declaration* (2018), para. 21
[24] Ibid.

considered sufficient for triggering Article 5. This ambiguity is probably deliberate, designed to dissuade Russia and others from engaging hybrid warfare through the suggestion that such activities could result in a massive NATO action, whilst simultaneously avoiding committing NATO to such responses straight away. However, if this is the intended approach it is an ineffective and potentially dangerous response. Firstly, dissuasion requires clear statements of intent – even if these statements are deliberately ambiguous – not paragraphs buried deep in summit communiques. Moreover, commitments that could lead to involvement in a major European war should be precisely clarified if they are to be at all meaningful, or it is likely states will use ambiguity to find get-out clauses. This necessarily leads to the wider question of if Article 5 could ever be justifiably triggered by hybrid warfare activities. These are, in theory at least, always below the threshold considered to constitute war, and it is certainly the case that hybrid warfare activities are deliberately low level and unprovocative in the sense of triggering state-level military response. The massive response Article 5 would presumably demand thus seems disproportionate. It is also unclear what triggering Article 5 would actually mean in the context of hybrid warfare. The only historical precedent for the result of invoking Article 5 commitments is in the invasion and regime change of Afghanistan. It is difficult to see how such an act could ever be justified in response to Russian hybrid warfare.

Hybrid warfare involves a range of activities and a spectrum of threats. It is therefore incumbent on NATO – given that strategic ambiguity has failed – to clarify precisely what it considers to be red lines, and what its response would be to each. These must be as varied as the threats to which they respond. This could fit with existing policy to an extent by retaining primary responsibility to respond at the state level, but it must be clarified when this tips over into NATO-level response. It is currently entirely unclear when NATO would assist a state under attack, and how it would do so.

Conclusion

eFP has failed to meet both NATO's requirements for it and to combat and deter Russian hybrid warfare. Regarding the former, the failure is because of NATO's fundamental misunderstanding of the threat posed by Russia, which has resulted in a policy intended deter a threat which does not exist and commit member states in the event of an attack that is not going to come. Regarding the latter, it is clear that conventional deployments do not deter hybrid warfare tactics. The two are entirely unrelated. Deterrent forces only work because they pose a threat to a would-be attacker in taking a particular course of action, such that it is not pursued because the potential costs involved would be too great for it to be justified. Tanks pose no such threat to information warfare. Moreover, Russia does not wish to challenge NATO or the Baltic states directly, and indeed this is a key element of its hybrid warfare strategy. Russia seeks gradual change over a period of years or even decades, such that anti-Russian views weaken, and pro-Russia views strengthen, and that this process is led by the citizens of the state in question, meaning the process is very difficult to question or stop.

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