Operationalizing Deterrence

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At the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Madrid Summit in 2022, heads of state adopted a new Strategic Concept in response of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In the face of a fundamental truth, "The Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace" (2022 NATO Strategic Concept, p. 3) and the core tasks of deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security, the new main threat was also identified: "The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area." (2022 SC, p. 3). While challenges such as terrorism, cyber threats and climate change remained, they clearly took a back seat to conventional deterrence. This strategic reorientation has operational consequences. How does the shift

from out-of-area engagement to renewed territorial defence play out on the ground? And how do NATO's command structures, particularly on the operational level, translate high-level political strategy into effective military posture?

Three measurements seem to be primarily important: clear guidance and strategic vision, people who understand how to implement change and time.

NATO is a political-military alliance by design. And every strategic output is usually directed by the NATO Headquarter in Brussles. It is the political heart, responsible for the mentioned guidance, in this case already pointed out above in the New Strategic Concept. The translation into operational practice though is done by the military part of the alliance. Here, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) oversees three operational-level headquarters: Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum (JFCBS), Naples (Italy) and Norfolk (USA). They are each responsible for distinct geographic areas of allied territory, for the planning, executing and support of NATO military operations. Looking at Russia as the most visible threat to Europe security, JFCBS seems to be from urgent importance, as it is responsible for NATO's eastern flank. And it also illustrates perfectly how NATO's focus has evolved. In the early 2000s, JFCBS was deeply involved in coordinating the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Today, it is a cornerstone of NATO's forward deterrence posture, supporting planning for exercises and readiness across the eastern flank. From out-of-area stabilization to high-intensity deterrence, JFCBS reflects NATO's operational adaptation to shifting strategic realities. Additionally, it is the only one of the three operational HQ permanently under European leadership, with a three-year rotation of command between Germany and Italy. Recently, the former Chief of the German Airforce, General Ingo Gerhartz, assumed command, which seems to be a coincidence, since JFCBS transformation reminds one of the German security policy transformations from out-of-area back to territorial defense.

Looking at the subordinate commands, what remains of the experiences of the last decades? Missions such as the Kosovo Force (KFOR), which is a current example of NATO peacekeeping and peace enforcement, the NATO Mission Iraq (NMI), maritime security operations (e.g. Operation Sea Guardian) and air policing illustrate the breadth of ongoing engagement beyond allied territory. Although none of the named operations are located in the Joint Operational Area (JOA) of JFCBS, past operations represent an important reference point, which the HQ is profiting of in today's daily business. ISAF especially provided the HQ with valuable experience, and one could argue that it served as an operational testing ground and contribute significantly to the principle of "train as you fight", by improving the operational readiness, interoperability and adaptability of NATO forces. Out-of-area operations have been a key driver for the operational modernization, flexibilization and globalization of the alliance and these lessons

learned now inform NATO's deterrence posture in Europe. Large scale exercises planned by JFCBS like BALTOPS or Baltic Sentry 2025 (BASN25) build on this institutional memory, and train NATO forces in multinational, high-readiness scenarios.

So, the strategic vision and the operational centres for implementation are in place. Where does NATO stand with its personnel?

The complexity of NATO as an employer stems from its composition of 32 member states. This begins again at the political-strategic level: „NATO is determined to safeguard the freedom and security of Allies. Its key purpose and greatest responsibility is to ensure our collective defense, against all threats, from all directions. We are a defensive Alliance." (2022 SC, P. 3) What at first seems simple, later becomes highly difficult. This sentence is just the smallest common denominator, the compromise that everyone could agree on.

Especially the subordinate commands of NATO serve as a prime example of a culture of interoperability, bringing together a wide range of disciplines, military cultures and nationalities. And in this context, interpersonal trust becomes a critical success factor for effective collaboration. It is a good reminder that institutions – regardless of their size or mission – are ultimately not based on procedures and structures alone, but on the people who bring them to life.

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