

The NRF: from a Key Driver of Transformation to a Laboratory of the Connected Forces Initiative

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An icon of transformation, which has paradoxically become a symbol of the Alliance's difficulties in actually transforming itself: this severe judgment of the *NATO Response Force* (NRF) dates back to a 2005 article, which questions whether the NRF makes sense or is really capable of effective reaction and of becoming a true armed force². First conceived as one of the major elements in the Alliance's transformation in the early years of the 21st century, it was supposed to bring a rapid military response to emerging crises all over the world, having the range of capacities needed to project the Alliance and make full-spectrum operations possible.

Ten years on, what can be said of the NRF? One obvious remark is that it has been used only in non-combat operations of limited importance, like the 2004 Athens Olympics or the two disaster relief operations in September and October of the following year – first in Louisiana (Hurricane Katrina), and then in earthquake-stricken Pakistan. By contrast, as attention turned increasingly to Afghanistan, the NRF remained operationally idle, maintaining its routine rhythm of preparation, conditioning, certification and standby alert by rota. The NATO website has posted nothing new about the NRF since 2010, indicating the low level of current interest.

But things may have changed. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2012, the Secretary General mentioned the NRF several times as one of the mainstays of the new Connected Forces Initiative (CFI). Maximizing the value of NATO training and education facilities, the CFI focuses on increasing NATO-led multinational exercises and will involve strengthening the NRF. Despite the pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, the US Department of Defense has promised to increase its participation in the NRF and commit a battalion to each annual NRF rotation as from 2014.

All of this should bolster the NRF, after a period of severe criticism in the academic literature with doubts and questions about its relevance. The hope and enthusiasm of the early days – from the 2002 Prague Summit



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² Michael Mihalka, "NATO Response Force: Rapid? Responsive? A Force?", *DJP Consortium Quarterly Journal*, vol. 4, n° 2, summer 2005, pp. 67-80.



to the 2006 Riga Summit – have been followed by recognition of failures³. The NRF suffers from a lack of visibility, with implications in terms of volume, structure, organization and potential missions. Part of the responsibility admittedly lies with the lack of political will⁴. In addition, the effects of the economic crisis on national defence budgets make it understandable that member states do not replenish the forces in this pool. Finally, a further blow seems to have been dealt to the NRF by the creation of a European rapid response force, the *European Union Battlegroups (EUBGs)*; behind a generic discourse that advocates the complementarity of the two organisations, a major issue rises in terms of force generation, with the European forces pool not being extensible, especially when it comes to nations which contribute to both the EUBGs and the NRF⁵. One could go so far as to argue that neither the NRF nor the EUBGs have actually been used in theatre – and even (with a view to saving money) challenge their very existence.

But this means overlooking the NRF's many virtues. The most fundamental is its ability to address the issue of transformation and implement it in the field. After ten years, its process is considered as routine: there must be few units or headquarters that have not gone through the certification procedure. This guarantees qualitative standards that the NRF helps to establish – in other words, it can be seen as a label which provides an essential contribution to interoperability. Despite financial difficulties, the countries participating in the NRF do not envisage cutting back on this commitment to quality any more than they give serious consideration to scrapping it: to do so would create fresh problems⁶.

Such is the background against which this paper addresses the following issues: what is to be expected from the NRF? What has it achieved, and why is it worth developing further? In what ways has it progressed, transformed and constantly reinvented itself, thus becoming a model of how to implement the CFI? Within the strategic context of the post-Afghanistan period, why would it be relevant to pursue the NRF policy?

The paper argues that the NRF will remain a flagship of NATO's cohesion, for at least two reasons. First, nations neither can nor wish to lose the expertise acquired over the last two decades. Participating in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) – and, to a lesser extent, *Operation Unified Protector (OUP)* over Libya – has been a costly venture, but it has also imparted some important lessons. In order not to close the door on this operational experience, resumption of training on a regular basis is essential. Hence the NRF's return to favour, at least in word, perhaps leading to concrete assessment of its effects. The second reason for which the NRF will continue to play an important role is that it catalyzes interoperability and promotes multinational cooperation. With the drawdown of major combat operations, and the shift to training exercises, major allies should not forget the coalition framework within which they fought for the last twenty years. Thus, after a generation of shared work and the emergence of a true coalition culture, new impetus must be found to pursue this effort despite the drawdown. What better fit for the bill than the NRF, in terms of legitimacy and experience of permanent interoperability?

The NRF: story of an unfulfilled hope?

On a political and strategic level, the NRF gave factual expression to a process of transformation for NATO and implemented part of the objectives agreed at the NATO Prague Summit in 2002. This so-called Prague Capacity Commitment was designed to improve capabilities in specific areas which were important to the efficient conduct of Alliance missions, focusing on a sharper involvement of all nations.

The NRF was a visible outcome, keenly supported by the USA: the idea was to ensure that the Alliance had a robust, rapid, interoperable and integrated response capacity for the threats of the 21st century, intervening at short notice as an initial entry force for deployments ranging from Article 5 missions to humanitarian assistance and

³ For example, compare the enthusiasm of Richard Kugler (one of the promoters of the NRF) in *The NATO Response Force 2002-2006: innovation by the Atlantic Alliance*, Washington, DC, Center for Technology and National Security Policy, National Defense University, 2007 and the pessimism of Vladimir Socor, "NATO's Response Force, other planned capabilities stillborn". *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 6, n° 38, 2009, at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34556, accessed 25th October 2012.

⁴ Bojan Savić, "Credit Crunch or a Crunch of Credibility? Causes of NATO's Stalled Transformation", University of Kent 2010, http://www.ecprnet.eu/conferences/graduate_conference/dublin/paper_details.asp?paperID=401, accessed 14th October 2012; Jens Ringsmose, "Taking Stock of NATO's Response Force", *NDC Research Paper* n° 50, January 2010.

⁵ Ludovica Marchi Balossi-Restelli, "Fit for what? Towards explaining Battlegroup inaction", *European Security*, vol. 20, n° 2, June 2011, pp. 155-184; Christian Mölling, "NATO and EU rapid response: contradictory or complementary", *Center for Security Studies (ETH Zurich)*, vol. 2, n° 22, October 2007, www.ssn.ethz.ch; Carlo Masala, "NATO Response Force and Battle Groups: Competition or Complementarity?", *NDC Research Paper* n° 18, April 2005, pp. 5-7.

⁶ This is the final point made in the study by Jens Ringsmose, "Taking Stock of NATO's Response Force", p. 8.



peacekeeping operations. But this new force was also an incentive for the Europeans to update their defence arrangements, in order to bridge the transatlantic capacity gap dating back to the first lessons drawn from the Balkan engagements.

The NRF's "DNA" thus combined two functions: capacity for out-of-area engagements with state-of-the-art materials, and increased high-tech standardization – not only between Europe and the USA, but also between European countries⁷. The NRF was to be seen as a showcase for a modernized and effective Alliance, ready for expeditionary engagements at the very time when the European Union (EU) was, according one former chairman of the EU Military Committee, "without teeth" and too fearful in terms of first-in capacity⁸. This explained the considerable publicity for the initiative during the four years from its inauguration in November 2002 until it was declared fully operational at the Riga Summit, with various intermediate stages highlighted by exercises (for example, in Cape Verde in 2006) and deployment in real operational conditions, albeit for the provision of humanitarian aid and earthquake crisis management.

In order to comply with this full-spectrum range of missions, the NRF had to be organized within a very specific structure. The initial model was thus very much based on the example of a *Marine Expeditionary Brigade* (MEB), albeit "Europeanized" – the total number of US officers involved, mostly in planning cells and general staffs, was about 300⁹. This joint force theoretically totalled over 20,000, comprising a naval component, the equivalent of a light brigade and an air force capable of 200 raids a day, under the command of a deployable joint task force headquarters¹⁰. Commanded by a European general under the authority of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), the NRF had to be ready for a wide range of very different missions, from evacuation of displaced persons to intervention as an advance force and anti-terrorism activities – hence the need for the NRF pool to count on the support of special forces and other specific capacities such as CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear) facilities.

The units and commands in preparation for alert status are first trained at national level, to NATO standards. Some nations – newcomers within the Alliance, or those with limited capabilities – call the Organization at this stage, so that the required level of knowledge can be certified. There are then inter-Allied exercises for the various services separately: the prefix 'Noble', 'Brilliant' or 'Loyal' indicates the staff in charge of the exercise (Naples, Brunssum or Lisbon respectively), while the code names specify the component involved: *Mariner* (navy) *Ardent* or *Archer* (air force) and *Ledger* (army). At the operational level, the staffs take part in specific training exercises (*Steadfast Cobalt*, *Jazq*, *Pyramid* etc.). This inter-Allied certification validates the capacity of the commands in a multinational setting: only when the prior validation process is complete does the NRF actually go on standby, with the duration of each nation's turn now extended to twelve months¹¹. Implementing this extension has not been easy for commands, in a period of intense restructuring which has seen the closure of those in Heidelberg, Madrid and Lisbon.

Three reasons for decline: insufficient numbers, lack of ambition, obsolescence?

Although the NRF concept has proved relevant, a number of problems have necessitated a review of its role and structure.

The first problem has been the force generation process. One must understand that participating in the NRF is not only a political matter, but also a question of manpower and resources. Each nation provides either a volume – on a percentage basis – or specific capabilities – expressed in equipment or units – for a given period. These requirements have been at the heart of the problems experienced by the NRF since the system was introduced, and explain the mismatch between expectations and results. They boil down to three issues: ability to generate a force which is credible in relation to the time frame; readiness for use; and effectiveness and suitability for current conflicts.

⁷ Ronja Kempin, "The new NATO Response Force: Challenges for and Reactions from Europe", *Working Papers* vol. 9, Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, 2002.

⁸ Ronja Kempin, "The new NATO Response Force: Challenges for and Reactions from Europe", p. 9, quoting General Hägglund, then Chairman of the EU Military Committee.

⁹ Michael Mihalka, "NATO Response Force: Rapid? Responsive? A Force?", p. 69; and Anthony King, *The Transformation of Europe's Armed Forces. From the Rhine to Afghanistan*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 89.

¹⁰ Sources differ on the personnel count: Binnendijk and Kugler ("Transforming European Forces", *Survival* vol. 44, n° 3, 2002, p. 127) indicate 21,000, while other sources speak about 25,000.

¹¹ Northern Star (JFC Brunssum), "NATO Response Force: Preparing for 2012 Rotation – Interview with Brigadier General Eddy Staes", October 2011, pp. 12-13.



First, in terms of force generation, the initial rotation (NRF 1, in late 2003) involved 9,500 personnel from 15 nations, but with a breakdown of 8,500 from the navy and air force as against 1,000 soldiers. The question of the available force volume has since then been the recurrent weakness of the NRF: in the first four years, the average force completion rate was below 50%; from 2007 to 2010 (NRFs 9 to 14), only two-thirds target capacity was achieved. The situation was at its most critical for land forces: when the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) went on standby for NRF 13, the land component stood at only 27% of target capacity, meaning that deployment in less than fifteen days would have been impossible – well beyond the mandatory deadline of five days¹². One difficulty at that time (and ever since) was the rhythm which this rotation cycle entailed: for a total force of 20,000, an availability of no fewer than 60,000 troops was required, following the principle that argued: “*One NRF in training, one on duty, and one standing down*”.

The obvious difficulty of meeting such demands could be partly explained by considering the geopolitical situation more fully. At the same time as nations had to commit troops and assets to the NRF, the ISAF mission in Afghanistan was proving increasingly demanding. Thus, some nations had no other choice than to focus on what was to become the priority mission. From 2006 to 2009 there was a constant increase in the number of contingents deployed in Afghanistan, limiting availability of troops for the NRF rota. Considering the lack of manpower and the constant reduction of the nations’ military, a number of hard decisions had to be taken, with heavy consequences: “*Traditional “salami slicing” of training and exercise budgets of nondeploying operational forces allowed resources to be concentrated on deployed or deploying forces. However, the impact has become substantial across NATO: more and more forces becoming less ready or not available at all—a slow hollowing out of the overall force*”¹³. The NRF was no exception, with costs obliging some countries to opt out of contributing to it in favour of ISAF – Latvia in 2009 being a case in point¹⁴. The United Kingdom thus proposed, in February 2009, the creation of a mini-NRF along the lines of the defunct AMF-L (*Allied Command Europe Mobile-Force-Land*), with 1,500 troops ready for deployment and the same number ready for training. The aim was to reassure East European states, so that

they could increase their contingents in Afghanistan but feel confident of Allied intervention in the event of any threat from Russia; this proposal was not taken up, but did highlight the need for a detailed review of the NRF.

The second problem which dogged the NRF from the outset was what to use it for. In other words, what was it meant to do? How should it be used? In which institutional framework was it to be set, and in readiness for what missions? This highlighted the contradiction between the basic idea of the NRF – a response force at the service of the Alliance – and divergent national perspectives regarding the type of operation to undertake. The ambiguity was related to the “rapid response” nature of the force, given that it was first of all a political instrument and, as such, subject to consensus and North Atlantic Council approval. In addition to the lack of agreement between Allies on how to use such a force, the NRF thus suffered from difficulties ultimately related to the very nature of the Alliance.

The NRF at the crossroads? Towards a NRF 2.0?

Created with unprecedented speed, the NRF came soon to a stalemate; despite repeated appeals from SACEUR, who demanded greater commitment of the nations to the NRF process, force generation was a perennial problem which attracted much attention and criticism. In 2008-2009, this led to speculation about possible disbanding of the NRF¹⁵. While this extreme prospect was ultimately averted, a review process was carried out.

In this respect, the original concept of the NRF could be seen as outdated. It initially relied on the conceptual approach ushered in by the in-depth restructuring of the 1980s, with the transition from a basic notion of territorial defence to an expeditionary perspective. Western armies were admittedly able to capitalize on their traditional know-how, with the emphasis on rapid action achieved by technological superiority. However, in the conflicts of the last twenty years, these armies have had to adapt to completely different types of environments and foes: missions have changed. Based on the model of interstate wars in a European setting, armies have

¹² Julian Lindley-French, Paul Cornish, Andrew Rathmell, *Operationalizing the Comprehensive Approach*, Programme Paper, Chatham House, 2010, p. 13.

¹³ Charles Barry and Hans Binnendijk, “Widening Gaps in US and European Defense Capabilities and Cooperation”, INSS, *Transatlantic Current* n° 6, NDU, July 2012, p. 2.

¹⁴ According to the US Embassy in Latvia, budget considerations have been the reason for this painful choice: see telegram of 12th June 2009, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=09RIGA331&q=nrf> (accessed 2nd November 2012).

¹⁵ For instance, Voice of America, “Commander: NATO Reaction Force Needs More Contributions”, 31st October 2009.



increasingly found themselves engaged in stabilization and reconstruction missions far from home¹⁶. Everything had to be reviewed accordingly: structures, doctrines, not to mention equipment. Highlighting the dilemma between capacity and capability, the major mismatch between force availability and requirements could – and can still – be pinpointed as a possible key to understanding the ineffectiveness of European armies and their credibility deficit¹⁷.

Conceived as a compact force for a “first in, first out” type of intervention, while the theoreticians of counter-insurgency and of “war amongst the people” insist on large forces, permanent control of territory and longer missions, the NRF thus had to reinvent itself. As a result of critical review, in 2008-2009 the Force was reformed in depth and moved towards what we could call the “NRF 2.0” stage. First, on a political level, the NRF has been continuously mentioned as one of the Alliance’s most visible tools. Neither its missions nor its spirit have changed; it is able and willing to provide a rapid demonstration of force and the early establishment of a NATO military presence in support of an Article 5 or non-Article 5 crisis response operation. The range of tasks for which the operational commander of the NRF should prepare include: contributing to the preservation of territorial integrity, deployment as a demonstrative force package, peace support operations, embargo operations, disaster relief, protection of critical infrastructure, security operations and, as part of a larger force, conduct of initial entry operations. In the end, it is not a brand-new label but a different package.

As a consequence, a new structure has emerged. Although the generic name ‘NRF’ remains, the component force is now divided into an Immediate Response Force (IRF) and a Response Forces Pool (RFP). The IRF basically reflects capability and capacity shortfalls throughout the Alliance; with a total personnel count reduced to 13,000 (half the initial NRF figure), it is easier to increase the level of readiness. *De facto*, the IRF seems more credible and, if it still suffers some capability shortfalls for key items like helicopters, drones or air-lift transportation, these are shared by all European military forces. On the other hand, the RFP works as a reserve from which reinforcements can be drawn if necessary. The new

structure, implemented in readiness for 2012, is much more efficient: the assessment after the first year is fairly positive.

The NRF and the interoperability issue

Reviewing the structure may not be sufficient. The NRF was created as both a transformational and a military tool, even though there was less emphasis on its operational dimension. The time has now come to make more of the NRF. In the past few years, the academic literature has focused essentially on the extent of its use; there has been little comment on the benefits it has brought in many different fields, from the planning entailed in force generation, to doctrine, use of technology, logistic support and integration of partners. The NRF can be considered as a successful attempt to resolve difficulties encountered in the operations of the 1990s: how to ensure that forces coming from different backgrounds achieve the same standards and limit capacity shortfalls.

Throughout its history, the Alliance has always focused on enhancing levels of cooperation and searching for common denominators. The NATO Military Agency for Standardization was established in 1951 but, despite steady improvement, significant challenges remain¹⁸. While some NATO states have a strong tradition of developing and equipping their armed forces with their own national resources, this can involve reliance on national monopolies in the defence sector and insistence on sovereignty in the field of national security. In addition, the integration of new members from the former Soviet bloc and the enlargement of partnerships both highlight the question of whether the Alliance’s cohesion and coherence could be endangered by a fragmented military equipment market.

The NRF was meant, from the time of its birth, to improve the level of interoperability between units, staffs, and even allies. This magic word, interoperability, has to be understood as “*the ability of systems, units, or forces to provide services to and accept services from other systems, units, or forces, and to use the services so exchanged to enable them to operate effectively together*”¹⁹. It is a never-ending and costly process, involving a variety of challenges in terms of

¹⁶ The debate was started by Sir Rupert Smith (*The Utility of Force. The Art of War in the Modern World*, London, Allen Lane, 2005) and is still ongoing (e.g., Jan Angstrom, Isabelle Duyvesteyn (ed.) *Modern War and the Utility of Force: Challenges, Methods and Strategy*. New York, Routledge, 2010).

¹⁷ Julian Lindley-French, “The Capability–Capacity Crunch: NATO’s New Capacities for Intervention”, *European Security*, Vol. 15 n° 3, September 2006, pp. 259-280.

¹⁸ BrigGen Julien Maj, “Standardization in NATO - Challenges of Interoperability in the Post-Cold War Era”, *Nato’s nations and partners for peace*, vol. 4, 2004, pp. 172-174.

¹⁹ US Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Washington, D.C., Joint Publication 1-02, 1994.



materials, doctrine, education and training. To work together effectively, coordination and shared objectives are needed. Far from confining the field of interest to purely technical concerns, it is necessary to think about how best to combine not only systems, equipment and units, but also different approaches and methods. Interoperability thus implies both technical matters – materials, armaments and systems (particularly in the field of communication) – and procedures, entailing the need for universally accepted doctrines and terminology.

Paradoxically, the problem is not so much one of equipment as of how everything is coordinated and made to work together; for the fathers/founders of the NRF, coalition warfare of the future consists not so much in a sort of homogenization of armaments as in the linking up of North American and European networks²⁰. In crude terms, interoperability is related more to compatible softwares and shared codes than to technological transfer. It is also – or above all? – a question of mindset, most nations being unwilling to share or transfer industrial know-how and information seen as sensitive²¹.

A pragmatic approach is thus needed: the NRF, in this setting, is designed to ensure convergence and upgrading, centred on concrete practices. If one argues that miscommunications in multinational settings arise because of insufficient fluency in the language that is being used, the NRF rota and its exercises help improve the overall level of communication which is mandatory in multinational operations. The use of English as a common language is not always easy; however, the increased tempo of operations and common exercises within the NRF have dramatically increased language skills throughout the nations.

The principle of rotation and the work shared between North Americans and Europeans at all levels – strategic, operational, tactical and technical – make the NRF a true laboratory for forging interoperability: “*The rotation of units through the NRF readiness windows will assist in disseminating enhanced capabilities and experiences in joint operations into a broad segment of Alliance forces.*” Let us take the example of the various component commands – particularly the Land Component Commands (LCCs). Certification becomes a necessity, entailing thorough preparation, as

shown in the case of the Lille-based Corps de Réaction Rapide-France (CRR-FR). Created in 2005 and activated in 2007, the CRR-FR predated by four years the change in French policy on NATO and was an act of political will; a former commandant considers that the real goal was not the certification in itself but the related opportunities – i.e. the chance to train with other commands and lead operations²³.

Being involved in the NRF certification process, in a rota or an exercise is demanding. However, the outcome is rated very positively, as the units or headquarters considerably improve their command procedures and try out new ones. The NRF framework does not place the emphasis only on inspection and maintenance of traditional know-how regarding conventional warfare. Complex operations and the sequence of phases – from initial entry to stabilization – require reversibility of forces: there are thus new practices to adopt, to integrate and to master. The complexity of certification exercises offers units and/or commands the opportunity to adapt rapidly to new threats, to implement and test official doctrines, but also to put forward new solutions in a NATO framework.

This familiarity with normalized procedures and the questioning of habits forge a common spirit. The result is that a sort of “operational convergence” permeates the network of certified units²⁴. The NRF is a source of lessons learned from each turn on alert status. Days after the serious flooding in Pakistan in July 2010, the country appealed to NATO for aid. The headquarters at Brunssum, at the time on alert status, offered a range of possible solutions, deploying a team within 48 hours to assess the situation and give valuable support to the planning done at higher levels. Five years after the NRF’s first deployment in Pakistan (October 2005), this example illustrates the soundness of the concept.

The NRF as a way to enhance the Connected Forces Initiative?

The NRF is currently at a turning point in its history. Even though it has never been genuinely used as a response force, this does not mean that it is worthless. Here lies

²⁰ Jeffrey P. Bialos and Stuart L. Koehl, *The NATO Response Force. Facilitating Coalition Warfare through Technology Transfer and Information Sharing*, Washington DC, National Defense University, Center for Technology and National Security, 2005, pp. 9-11.

²¹ Robert Ackerman, “In NATO, Technology Challenges Yield to Political Interoperability Hurdles”, *Signal*, February 2006, n° 60, pp. 63-66.

²² Allied Command Transformation, MC 477, 2009, p. 7.

²³ General de Kermabon, quoted by Anthony King, *The Transformation of Europe’s Armed Forces*, p. 94.

²⁴ Anthony King, *op. cit.*, p. 92.



the paradox. The NRF was conceived as a response to growing threats in a non-permissive environment, that is to say, a highly improbable commitment, as nations may always be reluctant to commit their forces on potential killing grounds. This reluctance helps understand why the NRF has to date been deployed only in permissive environments. If one looks at crises which have occurred since 2006 (when the NRF reached full operational capability), which are the ones that may have required an initial entry force like the NRF? The Russia-Georgia conflict in 2008? Highly unlikely. The surge in Afghanistan in 2009 would have been an opportunity, but nations opposed the idea for a variety of reasons. In the case of OUP over Libya, many commentators omit to mention that the operational command in Naples was at the time just finishing a NRF training process, which was then successfully implemented during the real-life operation. The frequently heard argument that the NRF cannot be deployed because it is inexperienced is also invalid, because the commands and units involved are more or less those which, under another flag and in different circumstances, were part of the Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya campaigns.

An essential tool within the Alliance

After a decade in the heart of Afghanistan, with the withdrawal scenario starting to unfold, the NRF seems a tool for the future. One possible perspective on its relevance is the consideration that some partners and allies are increasing their participation. Finland is a good example: a member of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) since 1994, the country has shown increasing interest in the NRF. In 2012, Finland made available a CBRN laboratory staffed by experts and, in the coming years, it looks likely to provide other capacities²⁵. Another example is the Visegrad Group's declaration of April 2012: the four countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia) give considerable emphasis to the NRF, described as one of the Alliance's most essential tools²⁶.

The drawdown and subsequent withdrawal of the contingents deployed in Afghanistan or the Balkans will probably prompt nations to be more involved, and to

look on the NRF as an important means to pursue the common task. The hardening of adversaries (in counter-insurrection settings as elsewhere) and the emergence of "techno-guerrillas" capable of inflicting defeat on powerful armies make it sensible to maintain a permanent lead in terms of knowledge and technology. As operational experience will soon be replaced by lessons learned from training, this will have implications for the way we envisage our armies. Thus, increasingly close links must be fostered between Allied Command Transformation (ACT) and the NRF, the former as a promoter of interoperability and the latter as the framework within which this interoperability will be put into practice. Another possibility could be to enhance closer links between United States Army Europe (USAREUR) and NATO: Exercise *Saber Junction*, the most recent and the most important in the last twenty years, highlighted interoperability between American forces and those of nineteen different nations, introducing a new training format far removed from the situation in Afghanistan or Iraq²⁷.

To avoid the risk of a new gap between US and European forces as a possible consequence of the US pivot to the Pacific, two different directions could be explored for the NRF: greater development of its transformational role, with a focus on training and exercise; or a shift back to the operational dimension, enhancing the NRF's credibility by use in the field.

Transformational role

A unique forum for exchange, the NRF is capable of fulfilling its cutting-edge mission in transformation; its operational culture might still be limited, but it has nevertheless validated the role and importance of rapid response commands, giving them the opportunity to train and prepare successfully for other missions. In the future, the NRF could experiment new concepts and doctrines, even in response to new threats. This would mean that the certification process would not only take into account generic missions, but test the ability of units and headquarters to deal with more complex environments as well as with hybrid or cyber threats. To quote Lindley-French, exercising can be a powerful agent of change if the testing of concepts implies the taking of risks and

²⁵ Janne Kuusela and Jed Willard, "NATO and Finland cooperation", 14 May 2012, <http://we-nato.org/2012/05/14/blog-on-finland-and-nato> (accessed 5th November 2012).

²⁶ Declaration of the Visegrad Group, "Responsibility for a Strong NATO", Brussels, 18 April 2012, http://www.mzv.cz/nato.brussels/cz/verejna_vystoupeni_clanky_projevy/declaration_of_the_visegrad_group.html, accessed 9 November 2012.

²⁷ Charles Barry, "Building Future Transatlantic Interoperability Around a Robust NATO Response Force", INSS, *Transatlantic Current* n° 7, NDU, October 2012, p. 13.

²⁸ Julian Lindley-French on the CFI: <http://www.acus.org/natosource/organic-jointness-natos-connected-forces-initiative>, accessed 28th November 2012.



not just “*a rehashing of the already known*”²⁸. These exercises would facilitate the identification of possible future multinational projects, and also strengthen the Smart Defence initiative by aligning investments in national capabilities with NATO’s priorities. NRF exercises could help identify the best capabilities, and make nations aware of what new capabilities will have to be developed in the coming years.

Operational dimension

It is widely recognized that it would be dangerous to lose expertise whose acquisition has taken a human and material toll, all too well understood by political decision-makers, ministries and public opinion. Ensuring that this operational experience is not lost requires a minimum level of involvement, in other words a minimum preparation and alert threshold. This is what the NRF offers and demands. Maintaining the principle of rotation is vitally important for promoting a shared culture of operations and interoperability; the units trained within the NRF ensure that this culture permeates the forces of their respective nations. Some nations have already shown greater willingness to be involved in the NRF, as a possible means to ensure that budgeted defence investments are maintained in relation to the required exercise and certification process.

The NRF also has to become more flexible, so that it can be increasingly put to effective use. The reorganization of the command structure is a first step; it means that the

NRF alert will in future alternate between the command in Brunssum and that in Naples. Perhaps this is a true opportunity for these commands to regain credibility, given that their effectiveness and even their relevance are sometimes harshly criticized. One of the risks identified is that of overheating, above all in the event of the operational rhythm continuing. With the prospect of these commands ultimately having a total personnel count of 850, about 500 of whom will be projectable, they would not have the critical mass to fulfil their missions; by comparison, an American army command has a staff of more than 750 and must deal with only a part of the tasks handled by the Brunssum and Naples commands²⁹. Missions and role must thus be redefined, identifying the types of crisis which will require the deployment of the NRF and reviewing relations between theatre commands and strategic command. Thought should also be given to allowing nations the possibility to opt out of their operational requirement, even when on alert phase, for whatever reason. Reorganization taking all these factors into account would definitely make operational deployment of the NRF a feasible prospect, albeit with predictable difficulties such as critical capability shortfalls – but that is a different story.

Ten years after its inception, the NRF affords a clear focus on the military model of the future. As a key driver of military interoperability and an efficient way to promote multinational cooperation, this tool has to be promoted. It is time to get rid of old-fashioned misconceptions. NRF 2.0 is about to start.

²⁹ Based on part of the conclusions drawn by Charles Barry, “Building Future Transatlantic Interoperability Around a Robust NATO Response Force”, *Transatlantic Current* n° 7, NDU, October 2012, pp. 2, 10-11.