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## Putin Has Exposed NATO's Weakness

Mar 23, 2014

Even as Russia's annexation of Crimea is answered with an economic, rather than a military, response from the West, the crisis is provoking some uncomfortable reckoning on the part of NATO. Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has called it a “wake-up call” that should prompt both the U.S. and Europe to ratchet up their commitment to the transatlantic alliance.

He's right. And if North Atlantic Treaty Organization officials are serious, they will seize the occasion to rediscover a mission that once defined the alliance, but has fallen into disregard: deterrence.

In recent years, NATO has been distracted by the war in Afghanistan, its first extended “out of area” combat operation, which has proved long, costly and deeply unsatisfying for publics on both sides of the Atlantic. Discouraged and, at the same time, beset by monetary and financial crises, Europe has systematically dismantled its military capabilities. For its part, the U.S. withdrew the two potent heavy-armored brigades in Germany that had anchored its European presence.

U.S. officials have complained for years about Europe's abdication of defense responsibilities. Among NATO's 28 member countries, only a handful come close to the goal of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. The U.K., France, Greece and Estonia meet or almost meet the target, but the European average is about 1.5 percent. (That compares with U.S. defense spending of more than 4 percent of GDP.) The result, as former Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted in his farewell speech to NATO in 2011, is a two-tiered alliance: a select

group of members capable of contributing to intensive military operations, and a larger group of free riders.

Lately even the strongest European partners have been drastically trimming their forces. Britain and France have retrenched to the point where they have contemplated sharing a single aircraft carrier. Pentagon leaders fear that reductions in armored ground units could render U.K. forces incapable of operating alongside their U.S. counterparts. Meanwhile, the Dutch have eliminated heavy tank forces altogether, and Germany is in the process of cutting its ground and tank forces roughly in half.

In light of Russia's second military incursion into a neighbor's territory in recent years, the Pentagon's decision to withdraw heavy tank forces from Europe also looks questionable. Keeping these units in the U.S. is only marginally cheaper than keeping them in Germany, where their deterrent value is maximized. Last week, to steady the nerves of shaky Eastern European allies, the U.S. dispatched fighter aircraft to Poland and the Baltics. But nothing says military commitment quite like heavily armored forces on the ground.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Army redeployed to Germany for training and exercises a battalion of roughly 22 M1A1 Abrams heavy tanks. It should go much further and return to Europe at least one heavy brigade, and position three to four tank brigades' worth of equipment where it can be quickly accessed. European partners should be encouraged to help foot the bill.

None of these actions could be expected to disturb Vladimir Putin's calculus in Crimea or Ukraine. But NATO's flagging European forces conveyed a message of weakness that could not have been lost on the Russian strongman. To express a new resolve will require reinforcing the foundation of deterrence on which NATO was built.