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NATO Appears Toothless in Ukraine Crisis

By SPIEGEL Staff

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If Russia were to engage in military aggression in the Baltics, NATO would be unable to defend the region using conventional means. An internal report highlights weaknesses in the alliance.

They were big words, spoken almost as if they had been written in stone. "Our commitment to collective defence is rock solid, now and for the future," NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said more than a week ago, first in the Polish capital Warsaw and then, on the same day, in the Estonian capital Tallinn. Before that, the US ambassador to Latvia, speaking to local and American soldiers at a military base in the country, had sounded equally forceful when he insisted that the NATO partners and Latvia are standing "shoulder to shoulder."

Rasmussen's remarks were well intentioned but relatively toothless -- little more than whistling in the dark. The Balts and Poles sense it, and the NATO secretary general knows it.

At its core, the Western defense alliance consists of a promise that the 28 member states make to each other in Article 5 of the NATO treaty: An attack against one or several members is considered as an attack against all. The article states that if the so-called mutual defense clause is applied, each member state, to the best of its ability, must rush to the aid of the NATO partner under attack. Most recently, Turkey considered invoking Article 5 and requesting assistance after several rocket attacks from neighboring Syria in late 2012. Since then, two German batteries of Patriot air defense missiles have been stationed in Turkey as protection.

So what happens if the Baltic nations invoke Article 5? What if Russia attempts to destabilize the Baltics with threatening military gestures? And what if it violates its borders with Estonia and Latvia?

These scenarios are currently being discussed at length in NATO and at the German Defense Ministry in Berlin. According to information SPIEGEL obtained by SPIEGEL, a draft version of a comprehensive, restricted internal NATO assessment of the situation reads: "Russia's ability to undertake significant military action with little warning presents a wider threat to the maintenance of security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. Russia can pose a local or regional military threat at short notice at a place of its choosing. This is both destabilizing and threatening for those allies bordering or in close proximity to Russia."

Outdated Defense Plans

Six months ago, such words would have been inconceivable in a NATO document. But the crisis in Crimea and now in eastern Ukraine has called many certainties into question. One of these is that there will never be another armed conflict in Central Europe.

Military and political officials at NATO are currently drafting various documents, some of the reportedly classified as top secret, sources say. The reports will be submitted to the NATO political leadership in Brussels early this week, and the alliance defense ministers will meet on June 3 and 4, followed by a meeting of NATO foreign ministers. Even though the documents will likely be softened and couched in more diplomatic terms, they remain as sobering as they

are alarming. They presumably represent the first stage of a lengthy debate over NATO's capacity to take action, its strategic orientation and the levels of national defense budgets.

Underlying the debate is an assessment of the situation on which NATO and government officials generally agree, namely that the alliance currently feels incapable of defending the Baltic countries with conventional means, that is, with tanks, aircraft and ground troops. When asked about the situation, a NATO spokeswoman said: "We are reviewing and updating our defense plans and considering other longer-term measures."

Elmar Brok, a member of Germany's center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and a longstanding expert on European Union foreign policy, puts it more directly: "When the Baltic countries were accepted into NATO, Russia did not pose a military threat. The alliance complied with the agreement with Russia and did not station any troops east of the Elbe River. But now that Putin's policy seems to be changing, NATO must come up with a response. At present, the alliance could not protect the Baltic countries with conventional military means."

That is the most important sentence, and officials at the German defense and foreign ministries in Berlin agree. It would take about half a year before the members of the alliance would be capable of mustering a suitable response, if at all. "We wouldn't even show up in time for the Russians' victory celebration," says a government expert, who points out that the existing, vague deployment plans are "all outdated." The German military's joint operations command is now in close contact with NATO, with the aim of developing an emergency plan as quickly as possible.

On the political side, however, the German government dreads a discussion of new Western military plans. Both the chancellor and the foreign minister prefer a more cautious approach to diplomacy in the conflict with Russia. Officials in Berlin say that actions that Russia could interpret as the West flexing its muscle would lead "directly to disaster." In addition, German public opinion is extremely opposed to upgrading NATO under the premise that the West must arm itself for a military conflict with Russia. Chancellor Angela Merkel is unwilling to consider an increase in defense spending, and she is certainly not interested in setting off an uncontrollable German debate over the notion of German soldiers potentially risking their lives for the Baltic countries.

At the Mercy of Moscow

This doesn't change the problem. If NATO, despite the solemn obligation enshrined in Article 5, were incapable of reacting on a par with Moscow in the event of a Russian incursion into the Baltic countries, the alliance could disintegrate as a result, because it would be breaking the very promise that justifies its existence.

German government officials wonder whether this is precisely what Russian President Vladimir Putin envisions. From his standpoint, NATO's expansion into the territory of former Soviet republics and Warsaw Pact countries was deeply humiliating and a provocation for Russia. It triggered a series of real or imagined fears of being surrounded by enemies. In Chancellor Merkel's assessment, Putin would reverse NATO's eastward expansion if he could.

The chancellor has repeatedly stated in public that the security guarantee of Article 5 is valid. But because she too has played out the scenario of an attack on the Baltic countries to the bitter end, she is deeply concerned about the possibility of a dangerous escalation. Even Merkel doesn't know what Putin's limits truly are.

According to a senior government official, the current situation is reminiscent of the climax of the euro crisis in 2012. At the time, a breakup of the euro zone was considered as unlikely as a Russian military attack on the Baltic countries is today. Nevertheless, the German Finance Ministry took the precautionary step of calculating the consequence of a collapse of the euro. Today, the same considerations apply to the Western defense alliance, with one key difference: In 2012, governments and the European Central Bank had the capacity to save the euro. But in the Ukraine crisis, Russia is in charge, leading the Balts and the Poles to feel at the mercy of Moscow.

Putin is already playing with fire in the region, at least according to the German government's perceptions. He cancelled an agreement to exchange military information with Latvia. Two weeks ago, he signed an order to grant Red Army veterans of World War II still living in the Baltic countries an honorary pay of sorts, to be disbursed by the Russian treasury -- but only to those who carry special identification cards for Russian minorities in those countries. Officials in Berlin point out that during the Crimean crisis, Putin promised local government officials substantial pay increases once the peninsula became part of Russia.

Anxiety in Poland

Poland is also become increasingly anxious, and is venting its displeasure at the West. People in Warsaw can often be heard complaining that their country is treated as a second-class member of NATO. And Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski is increasingly calling for a return to old virtues and obligations. "NATO must do in Poland what it has done in other countries," says Sikorski. "There are bases in Great Britain, Spain, Germany, Italy, Kosovo and Turkey. Those are safe places. But there are no bases where they would be truly necessary." According to Sikorski, much remains to be done to ensure that the alliance can truly uphold the Article 5 security guaranties. He believes that the same NATO infrastructure that already exists in the West, including airports, ports and communication facilities, needs to be developed in Poland.

In fact, for several years after the end of the Cold War, NATO did not draft any new operations plans for an attack from the east on one of the new NATO partners. And instead of sending troops to the new member states, NATO sought to improve relations with Moscow. Russia was to become a partner instead of an enemy. "Out of area or out of business," was the alliance's new leitmotif. In other words, either the alliance became involved outside Europe or it could close up shop.

Slashed Budgets and Capabilities

This maneuver away from national defense to global police is now catching up with NATO. According to the confidential NATO document for the member states' defense ministers, the end of the Cold War led to the conclusion "that the assets needed to fight conventional, large-scale,

high-intensity conflicts in Europe could be reduced." In some cases, "entire areas of capability were abandoned or substantially reduced."

At the same time, many NATO countries have drastically cut their defense budgets without appreciably coordinating these decisions. According to the NATO report, in 2010 some 16 member states had cut spending, adjusted for inflation, to below 2008 levels. This applied to 18 countries in 2011, and in 2014 it is expected to apply to 21. Between 2009 and 2014, German defense spending shrank from 1.44 percent to 1.29 percent of GNP. All European member states combined spend an average of 1.5 percent of gross national product on defense, compared with the official NATO target of 2 percent, and in some countries the ratio is less than 1 percent. The report argues that already deficient defense structures as they exist now cannot even be maintained at that level. And yet, "despite the action by the Russian Federation in recent months, currently there is little evidence to suggest that the defense spending cuts experienced by a majority of allies over the past five years will be reversed to any great extent."

Speaking off the record, NATO military officials are even more direct, saying that there are weaknesses in the armored corps and the infantry, fighting mines and submarines has been as neglected as air defense with flak and Patriot missiles, and pilots hardly train for aerial combat anymore. In fact, the armed forces of the NATO countries no longer conduct exercises with large troop formations, instead focusing on urban warfare with small units. In short, NATO has dangerously forfeited its ability to conduct a ground war with large troop formations in Europe.

Only one large unit, the NATO Response Force (NRF), has conducted operations in Poland and the Baltic countries, in its 2013 Steadfast Jazz exercise involving 6,000 troops. "The exercise showed that the NRF can do its job in the Baltic and Poland or any other part of the alliance if called upon," a spokesman said.

Russian Military Might

Meanwhile, Russia has modernized its military considerably. Western military experts have observed for some time that Russia is expanding and practicing its military capabilities. For instance, Russian long-range bombers regularly fly across the Baltic Sea toward the United Kingdom, Russian pilots are constantly clocking up flying hours, and once-outdated military equipment is steadily being modernized. According to Western military experts, the Russians "now have capabilities and systems once again that cannot simply be brushed aside."

In the fall of 2013, more than 60,000 troops were deployed in a large-scale, joint Russian-Belarusian military exercise. Western radar systems were jammed so that the maneuvers could not be observed. The exercise was called Sapad 2013, or "The West 2013." For far too long, Western politicians "cultivated a certain underestimation of the Russian desire to modernize" and failed to perceive it as a threat," say security experts.

NATO has criminally "neglected" its eastern flank, says Roman Kuzniar, and adviser to Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski. "We in Poland also believed that Russia wants to change and strengthen ties with Europe, and that it no longer thinks in terms of military strength and 19th-century zones of influence. We were wrong."