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NATO Wales Summit Heightens Tensions Pouring More Fuel on Fire (II)

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This time the agenda included one of the most contentious and thorny issues of whether to place troops permanently in Eastern Europe. The summit backed a «Readiness Action Plan» aimed at strengthening the offensive capability. The plan aims to reduce the time for NATO forces to launch attack on short notice. It will come with increased air policing and other visible signs of alliance protection.

To top the list are the plans to set up a «spearhead» to the NATO rapid force, led under a six-month country rotation and consisting of several thousand troops, with air, sea and special forces support. The UK is willing to contribute 3,500 troops to the unit. The plan would establish reception facilities, prepositioned equipment and supplies, command and control, and logistics facilities. The new high-readiness brigade will be deployable in Eastern Europe within two days. The unit would have a permanent command centre staffed by rotating alliance members as well as supply depots located in various regions so troops would not have to fly in all their equipment. Heavy weapons will be pre-positioned in Poland to be used later by «follow-on» forces and a new command-centre will be established on Polish soil too. There will be an upgraded schedule of military exercises and deployments that are intended to make NATO's strike potential more credible. There is insufficient detail on who exactly might pay the bills or contribute troops

except the UK and what the rules of engagement would be.

A Polish request for 10,000 troops, including a sizeable American contingent, to be permanently based in that country was rejected, because it was provocatively too close to Russia's borders and would contravene the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. Member countries such as Germany rejected the idea.

NATO insists it still abstains from putting permanent bases in Eastern and Central Europe. Indeed, at first glance the new plan does not seem to technically breach that agreement, but the difference is rather semantic offering «persistent», presence instead of «permanent».

There is another force to bolster NATO's power. The UK and six other states agreed to create a new very high readiness joint expeditionary force (JOF) of at least 10,000 personnel to act as spearhead for the NATO response force (NRF). The aim is to create a fully functioning, division-sized force for rapid deployment and regular, frequent exercises. Officials involved in the planning say it will have the capacity to increase significantly in size. The force will incorporate air and naval units as well as ground troops and will be led by British commanders with other participating nations contributing a range of specialist troops and units. Countries involved at present include Denmark, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Norway and the Netherlands. Canada has also expressed an interest in taking part. The model for the new JEF will be Britain's expeditionary force with France, which has been years in the making and is due to be fully operational by 2016. Coordinating a force across seven nations is likely to be an even bigger endeavor. Britain will undertake much of the initial legwork in organizing the structure and logistics. The British plan runs in parallel to a German framework nation initiative, in which Berlin will work with some 10 East European partner nations to boost their capabilities.

Australia, Sweden, Finland, Jordan and Georgia were officially named enhanced partners of the organization recognizing their contribution to NATO operations over the past decade. Sweden and Finland also signed a pact that allows assistance from alliance troops in the Nordic countries in emergency situations - a «Host Nation Support memorandum of understanding» which would see NATO help the country to prepare for training exercises and ease military support in the event of a crisis or conflict. Australia already has a partnership agreement with NATO signed by the previous government, which covers the sharing of technology and intelligence, and joint training and personnel swaps. However the new enhanced partnership agreement - which Australia signed along with Finland, Georgia, Jordan and Sweden - is expected to mean a seat at the table for more of NATO's key deliberations and give these countries permanent access to the organization's planning at the earliest stages of future operations and ensure their presence in its governing councils. No bones about it— taking part in planning and deliberations actually makes enhanced partners of NATO, especially Sweden and Finland, members of the alliance. Informally they have joined. The both countries want NATO troops on their soil making themselves targets in case of conflict. Opinion polls in Finland and Sweden show majority opposition to NATO membership. Both countries were officially neutral during the Cold War. Nobody asked common people if they want to be NATO members and become targets in case of war. No referendums, no votes as their respective governments avoid the term membership by calling it enhanced partnership instead. What a difference a word makes!

Meanwhile, NATO is facing a growing challenge on its southern flank – the summit generated a collective call to meet the challenge, but nothing in concrete terms. President Obama failed to corral leaders to work toward a strategy to defeat the rapidly rising Islamic State (IS) militants in Iraq and Syria. The Americans have announced they are forming a «core coalition» to fight Islamic State. 10 countries involved are: the US, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Turkey, Poland, Canada and Australia.

No strategy» for defeating the extremists is agreed on. With fighters from the IS holding large swaths of territory across Syria and Iraq, allies fear fighters with European and American passports could carry out attacks at home. Turkey, a longtime NATO member, has served as a prime transit route for many of those fighters. With an estimated 15,000 fighters, including up to 7,000 members who carry European passports, the Islamic State has been described by some as more dangerous than al-Qaida. Several hundred fighters also are believed to be American.

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One can find free cheese only in a mousetrap. It goes for rotational, and even more permanent, presence in Eastern Europe. The Europe's share in the global GDP is 26% in comparison with 23% for the USA. At that America accounts for 70% of NATO's defense expenditure (used to be 50% in the days of Cold War). On average Europeans spend 1, 6% of GDP on military needs against 4, 5% allocated for defense related purposes by the United States. There is a wide gap here. The summit failed to solve the problem. These are rough times for Europe and it's hard to imagine taxpayers being happy to pay for greater military effort. Another Cold War is not what common people of NATO European members need now. The alliance is not that unanimous as it may seem at first glance. The «one for all and all for one» principle doesn't work here. For instance, the Hungarian Prime Minister says the days of liberal democracy are over. He wants Kiev to grant autonomy to Hungarians living in Transcarpathia. The issue of permanent NATO bases in East Europe is divisive. The French, Italians and Spanish are opposed while the Americans and British are supportive of the eastern European demands. The Germans are sitting on the fence wary of provoking inevitable Russian response. Robert Fico, the Prime Minister of Slovakia, supported Russia in the war with Georgia in 2008 and refused to condemn the Crimea referendum. He doesn't approve the deployment of missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic. Asked about his attitude towards hypothetical NATO forces deployment of Slovakian soil, he compared it with the Soviet Union bringing in troops in 1968.

The US is burdened with the heavy load of public debt. Europe is actually in recession with immense economic difficulties to face. The Alliance is not unanimous on key issues. The Islamic State is at the door. This is a real, not an imaginary threat. These are not the best times for confronting Russia which has not done anything to threaten the organization and has been adhering to the Founding Act provisions. Overstretching will hardly help NATO become more efficient addressing real security challenges, but it will certainly reduce living standards of grassroots and make them less secure.