

Cold war or common security—our choice

As NATO can only deploy forces once it has the political consensus of its members, its new spearhead isn't likely to be any more rapid than the current force. Another option exists.

[H. Peter Langille](#)

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The big choice for Canada and other alliance members at NATO's weekend summit in Wales was reported to be between two variants of a rapid reaction force: a "spearhead unit" of 3,000-5,000 troops or a joint expedition force of division size, 10,000 troops.

Seriously, sober alliance leaders chose the spearhead with some claiming it to be a bold, robust step to counter further aggression from the Kremlin.

For now, Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, are the new grave test for NATO. Aside from sanctions, NATO troops, planes and ships have already been deployed to forward operating locations in Eastern Europe.

The NATO shift to a familiar front follows operations in Afghanistan and Libya. Earlier embarrassing experiences in Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda prompted Western defence establishments to drop UN peace operations in favour of the bigger budgets and the big-league soldiering roles of NATO.

So once again, defence spending and military budgets will be pushed up to increase preparation for war. Although the cost of war reached \$9.8 trillion in 2013, NATO will make the case for each member carrying a larger share of the burden. Another Cold War has been rumoured and politicians know that's very easy to deliver.

Reversing course isn't so easy. It took over 40 years to wind down the last Cold War, as well as considerable luck and leadership. That period was highlighted by the day-to-day threat of mutually assured destruction, increasing risks and a wasteful arms race.

One predictable aspect of the experience was the action-reaction dynamic: when the West announced a new weapon system or force, the Russians tended to reciprocate (i.e., if NATO deploys rapid reaction forces, Russians are likely to announce spetsnaz formations).

A "security dilemma," a downward spiral of action and reaction thus becomes ever more difficult to stop.

Gradually, the recognition of mutual vulnerability in a balance of terror mobilized millions into movements worldwide. Eventually, governments followed.

Then, as now, the choice was relatively clear: we could either co-operate in pursuit of common security or risk perishing through a competition for military advantage.

Of course, another NATO rapid reaction force isn't likely to shift our odds or improve anyone's security; the EU already has eighteen standby battlegroups designed for rapid deployment and the Americans have more.

As NATO can only deploy forces once it has the political consensus of its members, its new spearhead isn't likely to be any more rapid than the current NATO response force (five days in the best estimate). And we really don't want to be too quick at initiating World War III against a nuclear armed Russia. But oddly a variation on the idea of rapid reaction might help.

Notably, in the aftermath of the last Cold War, the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom and France proposed some form of United Nations rapid reaction force. Aside from thinking of a UN that might fulfill its assigned tasks, they were also hoping to consolidate wider co-operation.

Clearly, neither happened, at least, not sufficiently. Yet a related option might get us back on track towards both objectives: a permanent United Nations Emergency Peace Service, effectively a multifunctional UN 911, a rapidly-deployable first responder for complex emergencies.

While no panacea or cure-all, UNEPS was designed to help prevent armed conflict and genocide, to protect civilians at extreme risk, to ensure prompt start-up of demanding operations, and to address human needs in areas where others either cannot or will not.

Co-operation on a big idea would take courage yet it might start a promising, overdue process. Some governments do know what's needed. As early as 1961, officials in the US State Department acknowledged:

There is an inseparable relationship between the scaling down of national armaments on the one hand and the building up of international peacekeeping machinery and institutions on the other. Nations are unlikely to shed their means of self-protection in the absence of alternative ways to safeguard their legitimate interests. This can only be achieved through the progressive strengthening of international institutions under the United Nations and by creating a United Nations Peace Force to enforce the peace as the disarmament process proceeds.

Now, that entails a very different process and outcome. In short, unlike another NATO rapid reaction force, a UN emergency peace service would not represent a threat or provoke a response risking a divisive Cold war.

A UNEPS might help to mobilize cooperation around a joint project to provide more legitimate and useful services for addressing serious global challenges.

Our common security matters. We have neither the time nor the resources to waste on another Cold War.

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NATO Photo
Rasmussen, Cameron and Obama watch an air show.

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Let's move from dangerous military posturing to serious negotiations