

Nick Watts, Deputy Director General of the U K Defence Forum recently sat down with General Sir Richard Shirreff lately Deputy Supreme Commander Europe, the senior British commander in NATO's military structure. The NATO biennial Summit in Wales in September 2014, was concerned with the subject of how best to respond to Russian actions in Ukraine and what this might mean for the way the Alliance protects its Member States who are adjacent to Russia in the Baltic.

"On the face of it, the summit said what needed to be said." By which Shirreff means a clear and coherent message from NATO; a strong position in the face of Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. This includes measures such as the formation of a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. But he wonders about the substance. "One area where it was not was the promise that within 10 years nations should aspire to be spending 2% on defence. That is a ten year rule which doesn't pass any hollow laughter test. The test will be the development of the Joint Deployment Force. The real nitty-gritty of readiness, sustainability, equipment and training. As an ex- NATO force generator, I would be pretty suspicious of whether the nations will sign up for that or not."

He added: "The Russians will be looking pretty carefully at this as well." He notes that there has been a recent increase in Allied activity in the Baltics, but feels that more will be needed. "We need to see some form of forward presence – not garrisons – a permanent land presence in the Baltics, able to send the right messages to Russia, and show that NATO can back its Article 5 guarantee." There is some dispute as to whether NATO pledged not to station military facilities in the territory of former Warsaw Pact members. Shirreff's answer to this is suitably robust. "Whatever undertakings might have been offered have been nullified by Russia's annexation of the Crimea and its actions in eastern Ukraine. The world picture has changed."

The Wales Summit established a Readiness Action Plan under which the Alliance would ensure 'continuous air, land and maritime presence and meaningful military activity in the eastern part of the Alliance.' This is to be achieved by frequent force rotation. The establishment of a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force of 4 – 6,000 troops at 2 – 5 days' notice to move. This is a reinvention of the former Allied Mobile Force (Land) of the Cold War era. Shirreff recognises that this is a necessary first step. But he believes that when dealing with the new Russian approach NATO has got to be credible. "It is about sending signals. NATO has got to put up a very large stop sign in the Baltics: backed by genuine and capable deterrence." He adds: "NATO has got to be ready to maintain forces – and reinforce really quickly."

NATO's senior political and military leadership needs to think through Russia's approach, Shirreff believes. After the Cold War the Alliance thought they could deal with Russia as a security partner. But Russia's unease at the overtures being made by NATO to Georgia and Ukraine to join the Alliance increased. These efforts which saw their high water mark at the Alliance's Bucharest Summit in 2008 has precipitated Russia's current approach.

If Russia seeks to undermine the stability of states from within by the manipulation of Russian minorities without crossing the Article 5 threshold, then NATO needs to develop a 'muscle memory' to guide its response. "It's through thinking about it, you can develop the means to counter it in order to ensure that the Russian minorities in the Baltics are not manipulated like they were in Crimea." He adds: "The areas of greatest concern are Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Estonia and Latvia have a border with Russia and significant Russian minorities. Lithuania and Poland have Kaliningrad sitting right next door. The Russians have demonstrated an ability to reinforce it. It makes a tempting Forward Operating Base."

At the political level NATO needs to go back to practising at senior political levels, Shirreff believes. "It sends a strong signal if political leadership is engaged." Shirreff points to recent experience to underline his point. "When NATO wants to be, it is impressive. In 2011 it took just 13 days from the signing of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to the imposition by NATO of a no fly zone over Libya." But he believes that for the new VJTF to be effective it should operate under SACEUR's command – not the political North Atlantic Co-operation Council.

What other areas should be of concern? "Don't discount the southern end of Europe, such as Moldova; observe, watch and be ready to respond." Shirreff believes that the political challenge to NATO's commitment comes from Western European countries. "We've unlearned war; the current generation of political leadership in the UK see peace as the default setting. Wars happen a long way away. Peace in history is not the default setting. The dynamic of war is too easily begun, and once that is started it's impossible to control."