In the face of severe political stresses, will the Western allies be able to adapt to new world circumstances?

The NATO Response Force

By Adam J. Hebert, Senior Editor
NATO invited seven nations (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) to join the alliance as early as next year. They will add unique military capabilities.

Meanwhile, a new command structure is to replace the alliance’s archaic headquarters system with two overarching entities: an Allied Command–Operations and an Allied Command–Transformation. This restructuring should be finalized at a meeting of NATO defense ministers in June and will roughly mirror the split between geographic and support commands in the US Defense Department.

NATO’s operations command will be headquartered at Mons, Belgium, and will oversee near-term warfighting needs. The transformation command will be at Norfolk, Va., colocated with US Joint Forces Command. The command will “be responsible for the continuing transformation of military capabilities and … promotion of interoperability,” according to a NATO release.

Extending NATO’s Reach

“Prior to 11 September, there was always a theological debate about whether NATO should ever operate outside the NATO area of responsibility,” said former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Gen. Joseph W. Ralston. “If 11 September did nothing else, it put to bed that argument that a threat to a NATO country has to originate in the country immediately adjacent to its border.”

The NRF was a US proposal and has been strongly advocated by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld.

The need for NATO to look beyond its borders was further validated by the experience in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. A senior defense official told *Air
Force Magazine that material recovered from al Qaeda showed there were “many Western European and American targets that this organization had its gunsights on.”

NATO hopes to have its response force work in a manner similar to the USAF’s rotating air and space expeditionary forces. Units will be on-call for six months at a time and will train and exercise together, remaining ready to engage in intense combat if needed. According to a White House fact sheet, the force will notionally include air assets and command-and-control capabilities to support up to 200 combat sorties per day. It would also have a brigade-sized land force and maritime forces up to the size of a NATO standing force. That would make the NRF roughly a 21,000-person force. Initial operational capability is slated for October 2004, if not earlier.

NATO is not waiting for new members to improve security in Europe, and officials say much progress has been made in recent years.

“You have to be able to respond to a threat,” Ralston said in an interview. For example, nearly 40,000 troops remain under NATO command in the Balkans, maintaining stability in the region after a decade of turbulence. “Every day, you don’t read about it, you don’t hear about it, but the troops are doing a remarkable job,” the general said. “Kosovo today is a far better place than it was three, or 20, years ago.”

Even the current Kosovo force level is a vast reduction from the units in place immediately following Operation Allied Force in 1999. “We’ve been able to make those reductions because the situation has improved on the ground,” Ralston said, an improvement directly attributable to the stability NATO has brought to the region.

Allied Force also revealed some of the limitations of the alliance’s existing structure, both militarily and politically. Kosovo and Afghanistan have reinforced the need for NATO to have a force ready to respond within or outside the alliance’s geographic area of responsibility.

“That’s what the NATO Response Force is all about—air, land, and sea [forces] that can do high-intensity conflict anywhere in the world,” Ralston said.

“Right now, NATO really doesn’t have the ability to respond on five days’ notice with a highly robust force,” another senior official noted. “We need something that’s light, mobile, that can sustain itself ... [and] can get to places quickly,” the official said.

Rumsfeld himself considers the NRF a cornerstone of the alliance’s future relevance. “If NATO does not have a force that is quick and agile, which can deploy in days or weeks instead of months or years, then it will not have much to offer the world in the 21st century,” Rumsfeld said before Prague.

Ralston said the NRF concept has been under development for years. “You don’t hear much about the High Readiness Force Land Corps Headquarters,” which oversees NATO rapid-reaction land forces. Combine the land corps with allied sea and air components, and “you’ve got the NATO Response Force,” Ralston said.

The NRF will train together to create the sort of intimacy that is “required for high-end operations, such as seizing an airfield,” another official said.

The US role in the NRF will depend upon the situation and is expected to fluctuate over time and with regular force rotations. One official
Organizing for Transformation

The simplified command structure proposed for NATO is being pursued in large part to foster transformation.

When the Pentagon updated its Unified Command Plan last year, US Joint Forces Command (the former US Atlantic Command) gave up all geographic responsibilities. This was done so JFCOM could focus on transformation and experimentation priorities without being distracted by near-term warfighting requirements.

That was “the mirror image of what NATO is doing—taking the former [Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic] and divesting SACLANT of its geographic responsibilities,” said former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Gen. Joseph W. Ralston.

Once NATO’s Allied Command—Operations assumes responsibility for combat in the Atlantic, Allied Command—Transformation will be able to focus entirely on transforming NATO’s militaries.

Until last year, the JFCOM chief also served as SACLANT, but the roles have temporarily been separated. “There was no need to fill that [NATO] hat while the transformation was under way,” a senior defense official explained.

Though the exact relationship between JFCOM and Allied Command—Transformation remains undetermined, officials on both sides of the Atlantic favor restoring a formal tie between the commands.

“It needs to be a very strong link,” Ralston commented. “My personal view is that the commander of US Joint Forces Command should probably be dual-hatted as the commander of Allied Command—Transformation” to ensure that US and NATO priorities remain in lockstep. “Once SACLANT gives up its geographic responsibilities,” the decision to decouple JFCOM from NATO should be revisited, he said.

NATO Secretary General George Robertson earlier this year cautioned against waiting too long to restore that link. By aligning US and NATO transformation and experimentation efforts, the alliance will “stop the possibility of the thinking drifting apart.” NATO is a force multiplier, Robertson said, but only if “the capabilities, the interoperability, and the thinking are fully in sync.”

At a defense ministerial meeting in June, NATO intends to finalize its new command structure, including the exact roles and makeup of Allied Commands Transformation and Operations. At that time, it is expected that Marine Corps Gen. James L. Jones Jr. will add the title of NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander—Operations to his duties as head of US European Command.

Jones has assumed command of an alliance with ongoing operational demands in the Balkans and broad responsibilities defending against terrorism, Ralston said.

“There is not as strong an appreciation in the US as there probably should be on the role that NATO is playing,” Ralston noted. “We have tried consciously to take it off the front pages of the paper and get the job done. I think NATO has done a remarkable job in the Balkans and [in] bringing stability to Europe,” he concluded.

Last June, NATO Secretary General George Robertson noted that Europe needs options like the EU force because “there is simply no guarantee that the US or NATO as an organization will wish to get involved in each and every security crisis in and around Europe.”

The concept for an EU force features the ability to deploy 60,000 troops within 60 days. The force was to have been established this year, but, as is frequently the case in European defense initiatives, wavering commitment has called the schedule into question.

According to an assessment by the British American Security Information Council, the EU Rapid Reaction Force “is falling farther behind its projected implementation date of 2003,” leading some to criticize the idea as a “phantom force” that will never be realized.

With US backing and calls for niche contributions, the NATO Response Force “may be able to avoid some of the problems that have beset the EU,” BASIC determined.

But American support does not mean the US is willing to foot the bill for the NRF, a senior defense official said. The US aims to be an equitable contributor—“we really want the allies to [provide] the weight, especially during the first several rotations of this force,” the official said.

The goal is to avoid a recurring problem from the past in which NATO initiatives devolve into US-funded initiatives. The best way to avoid that, according to the senior official, is for the European allies to take the lead on the initial NRF rotations, with US forces cycling in once the concept is firmly established.

“With every rotation you go through, you’ve got a wider pool” of trained, experienced, and interoperable forces spread across Europe, the official said.

Interoperability Improves

Recent events have begun to institutionalize alliance procedures to the benefit of all of Europe. “NATO is more interoperable today than at any time in its history, and that is a byproduct of the Balkans,” Ralston asserted.

Nations that fought in Allied Force or that are in the Balkans today are using NATO doctrine, procedures, and tactics “24 hours a day, 365 days a year,” Ralston said.

“And when that company from Bulgaria goes back home after pulling their tour, they don’t forget the procedures they had used—they continue and take that back to their countries,” he said. This was not always the case in the past. During the Cold War, nations would commonly use NATO procedures during exercises, then abandon them and go back to national procedures.

When Enduring Freedom came along, allies participating in the operation “immediately used NATO doctrine, NATO procedures, [and] NATO tactics—just like they had been doing with their troops in the Balkans,” Ralston said.

Another official said the ability to respond quickly in Enduring Freedom, which was not a NATO operation, was largely attributable to 50 years of NATO operations and training.

The international commanders in
Afghanistan know each other through NATO circles, this official noted. Common operating frameworks and interoperable equipment were available, so “even though NATO didn’t have its flag in Afghanistan, its ethos was there,” he said.

Interoperability is improving, but whether the allies will close the capability gap with the United States remains to be seen. The senior official said last November’s capability commitments are encouraging, but it would be “foolish to be wildly optimistic” about the allies catching up to US military strength.

However, niche capabilities do not mean that a nation can do “washing machine duties for the alliance and that’s it,” the official added. Members still require the “ability to send ground pounders” appropriate to their size.

“Let’s be realistic about this,” added Ralston. “What can they bring to the alliance that can be of use—that’s what specialization is all about.”

At the Prague summit, NATO pledged to improve military strength in specific areas. In a departure from 1999’s Defense Capabilities Initiatives, which laid out a laundry list of areas for improvement, the Prague Capabilities Commitment details a short list of requirements and steps to address them.

Robertson pushed cooperative efforts to fix several shortfalls, including a German–led initiative to improve alliance airlift. Germany recently committed to the Airbus A400M transport program, but the aircraft is not expected to enter service until around 2008.

Recognizing the immediate need for strategic lift, 10 NATO members signed a statement of intent at the summit. The document pledges “every effort to contribute to multinational arrangements in order to provide additional outsize airlift ... not later than 2004–2005.” Boeing’s C-17 airlifter is the logical choice to meet this interim requirement, but a company spokesman said no final commitments have been made.

Also approved in Prague was an air-to-air refueling initiative, led by Spain. “The objective is to make available a fleet of 10 to 15 additional air tankers or an equivalent solution,” the statement of intent reads. The aircraft are to be obtained “in the short/medium term” for possible use by both NATO and the European Union.

This plan would create a multinational force of tankers similar to the multinationaly operated NATO AWACS command-and-control aircraft force used to help defend US airspace in the days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Other multinational efforts addressing alliance capability gaps include a Dutch–led consortium to pool purchases of precision guided munitions, a Spanish–Dutch commitment to buy suppression of enemy air defense weapons, and a Norwegian–German agreement to improve maritime countermine capabilities.

NATO members Canada, Den-