



At NATO, we are focusing once again on collective defence

Interview by Elie Perot and Octavian Manea



Rob Bauer is an Admiral in the Royal Netherlands Navy and Chair of the Military Committee of the North Atlantic Treaty

Organisation (NATO). He is NATO's most senior military officer.

Adm. Bauer joined the Royal Netherlands Navy in 1984. He has held notable commands, including the Air Defence and Command Frigate HNLMS De Ruyter (2005-2007) and the Landing Platform Dock HNLMS Johan de Witt (2010-2011). He was deployed to Bahrain as Deputy Commander of Task Force 150 (Operation Enduring Freedom) (2006). Admiral Bauer has occupied key leadership positions in the Netherlands Armed Forces, as Director of Plans (2012-2015) and Vice Chief of Defence (2015-2017). Between 2017 and 2021, he served as the Chief of Defence of the Netherlands.

How is NATO adapting its doctrinal outlook in light of the changing geopolitical situation and of the military lessons from the war in Ukraine, as we discussed in the first part of this interview?

This update started with a document called the NATO Military Strategy, which was approved in 2019. That was a result of the illegal annexation of Crimea. In the military, we understood that we had to do something about our military strategy, which had not been re-written for the last 60 years. We needed to focus once again on collective defence. We re-wrote our strategy with two threats in mind: the Russians and terrorist groups. On this basis, we started to write two other strategies. One is the 2020 Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA),

which is about how you deter and defend against those two threats today. The other is the 2021 NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC), which does the same thing but looking at the long-term and at how technology or demography may have an impact over the next 20 years.

Then, we started working on regional plans, which are more practical. These plans are focused on geography: the High-North and the Atlantic Ocean, Central Europe, and the South of Europe, including the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

There are also domain-specific plans...

It's a family of plans: you have the maritime plan, the land plan, the air plan, the cyber plan, the support plan, the special forces plan... The idea

is that this will be a continuum: it will never be finished because we need to integrate the lessons from Ukraine or changes in the behaviour of our enemies.

We now have regional plans and then, under that, will come tactical plans. In the land domain, for instance, this will be the plan for an army corps which will have to defend a piece of territory with its divisions and brigades. All this work is now ongoing since Vilnius. It will inform the Alliance about the type of forces we need and how we exercise command and control.

The good news is that, as a result of the Military Strategy and the two plans, the DDA and the NWCC, we were ready when the Russians attacked Ukraine. We were able to go from 4,000 to 40,000 troops under the command of SACEUR [Supreme Allied Commander Europe] in a matter of days. We were able to increase the number of the battlegroups along the Eastern flank. We had four of them in the North, in the three Baltic States and Poland. When we started this enhanced Forward Presence in 2016-2017, it was much more a matter of presence than deterrence and defence. Then, following Russia's attack against Ukraine in 2022, we built four other battlegroups in the Southeast – Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

That was all the result of the work of those plans, of our thinking...

Already before February 2022...

Yes, absolutely. As the result of that work, we were mentally ready, but also practically. We executed the DDA, which allowed for bilateral and multilateral discussions on deploying troops from one nation to another without necessarily having the whole of NATO deciding on this mission. This is a faster arrangement than when you have to decide at 31. For example, to build the battlegroup in Romania, the United States (US) talked to Romania, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg: they built together that battlegroup thanks to that multinational cooperation and it was then handed over to NATO. That is the result of the DDA and I think that it makes our

alliance much more flexible and faster in terms of response.

Now we need to continue our work and finalise the regional plans. Out of this work will come all the capabilities – the brigades, the airplanes, the ships, the special forces, the cyber, etc. – that are required to execute the tasks in those plans. That's the force structure. Then, we will need to look at the command and control structure – how do we command and control those forces? And finally, in parallel, we will have to look at our New Force Model – all the people needed to man those capabilities.

So, it is a huge undertaking, and it will take time before we are fully operational, before those plans – 4,500 pages of paperwork – are fully executable. That's what we talked about with the Chiefs of Defence in Oslo in September, after the regional plans were agreed and approved by the leaders in Vilnius in July.

The good news is that our plans are set against the strength of the Russians before they attacked Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Right now, the Russian army, and its missile forces, are weakened as a result of the war. So, we have a bit of time. But we see that the Russians are already reconstituting themselves and that they are moving towards a war-like economy. In the West, in general, we are too slow: we need a lot more ammunition, more people, more capabilities fast. The production capacity in the Western world is not being ramped up fast enough.

Beyond doubling the number of multinational battlegroups in the East, the idea is also now for NATO allies to be ready to quickly scale up these units to brigade level if needed. Is NATO shifting from a strategy of deterrence by punishment vis-à-vis Russia, built on a significant reinforcement component, to a strategy of deterrence by denial, based on credible, forward-positioned combat forces?

The battlegroups are more than a military fact. They are there physically, they are ready, and we can scale them up to brigades (about 50% of them have been tested to move to brigade level – three

out of eight, with another one coming soon in Bulgaria).

So, on the one hand, the battlegroups constitute a military presence which is about fighting power. At the same time, it is also a political signal to the Russians, showing that we consider what they did to Ukraine to be serious – which has an effect on our posture.

But there is also a discussion about whether we should have more forces along the Eastern flank than what is being projected now. The answer to that, militarily, is no. Not now. Because you want to be able to reinforce the place where the real attack is, when it's necessary. If, theoretically, all our forces were along the Eastern flank, then you could have a lot of them positioned in the wrong place. Another reason is that we have been able to see the Russian forces coming. We've monitored the Russian forces around Ukraine for months [before the 2022 invasion], we've seen the whole build-up, we can anticipate.

Is it a sort of a hedging posture?

Well, the battlegroups are a very important signal. They also serve to reassure the nations where they are positioned. The presence of a battlegroup has always been at the request of the host nation: Finland, for instance, has not asked for it, even though it has a long border with Russia. The multi-nationality of the battlegroups also shows that the Eastern flank matters. If something were to happen to Romania there will be troops from France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and the US that will be involved. An attack on one is an attack on all. So, it is a political as well as a military signal.

Nonetheless, militarily, if a war starts you want to have forces in the rear to bring them where they are needed, especially because there is not one road or highway connecting the whole Eastern flank. Yet, politically, it is understandable that, sometimes, people want to signal strength with the presence of more forces.

You often speak about a “new era of collective defence” for NATO, but what are the implications

at the nuclear level? Do you think there should be a change to NATO's nuclear posture?

There is a change. We are reporting more on what we do. In the two years that I've been at NATO, we have communicated a lot to increase the general knowledge on both conventional and nuclear deterrence. The two are not isolated. We need to make sure that our deterrence as a whole is effective, based on a combination of conventional and nuclear capabilities. This means that you have to consider deterrence in all its aspects. That's what we are doing. We are not always talking a lot about it – for good reasons, because deterrence also requires that your adversaries do not necessarily know your exact response.

So, we are seeing changes on the nuclear software, but not so much on the hardware...

I do not share your conclusion. In all areas, there is continuous development, both at the conventional and nuclear level.

This is the second part of two Strategy Debrief interviews with Admiral Bauer.



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This interview was conducted by **Elie Perot**, who is Programme Director of the Postgraduate Certificate in EU Policy Making and PhD Researcher at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS), Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), and **Octavian Manea**, who is a PhD Researcher at CSDS, Brussels School of Governance, VUB.

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