



Defence: solidarity, trust and threat perception

by Jan Joel Andersson

A common defence policy requires mutual solidarity and trust, as well as a shared threat perception. Over the past year, the armed conflict in Ukraine has heavily tested all three in Europe and the US. So far, transatlantic solidarity, trust and shared threat perception seem to be holding. Reacting to Russian aggression in Ukraine and its belligerent military actions from the Baltic to the Black Sea, the member states of the EU and NATO have imposed economic sanctions on Russia and boosted their military defences.

But is the mutual solidarity and trust strong enough to keep the sanctions in place and collectively defend Europe if worse comes to worst? No one knows the answer but a recent report by the respected and non-partisan Pew Research Center (PRC) entitled 'NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid' indicates that the alliance may have a problem.

Drawing on extensive public opinion polls conducted between April and May 2015 in six large European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK), as well as in Canada and the US, the PRC researchers reported that 'many people in NATO member states are reluctant to use force to defend allies.' When asked "If Russia got into a serious military conflict with one of its neighbouring countries that is our NATO ally, do you think our country should or should not use military force to defend that country?", more than

half of respondents in Germany (58%), in France (53%) and in Italy (51%) answered "should not". Only in the US and Canada did more than half of respondents answer "should" use force, although pluralities also did so in the UK (49% vs. 37%), Poland (48% vs. 34%) and Spain (48% vs. 47%).

One for all and all for one?

While not mentioning Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, the above question is really about whether respondents believe their country should or should not honour the commitment of collective defence that is at the heart of NATO. Much can also be said about the information in the report that, while many Europeans are hesitant about themselves using military force to aid a NATO ally attacked by Russia, they hold great faith in the US willingness to do so. A median of 68% of all respondents surveyed think that the US would use military force to defend an ally in the event of a military conflict with Russia.

According to the PRC research team, this study is the first time that the publics in NATO member states have been asked what they really think about the Article 5 commitment of collective defence. Given that the article is the very essence of NATO's founding treaty, the result is sobering.

Clearly, European governments should be worried about the unwillingness of so many of their citizens to defend their treaty allies. After all, the

EU, too, is built on mutual solidarity and trust between its member states. The fact that European security still depends on the US – and on who sits in the White House – remains as true as ever. European capitals should therefore be concerned about their citizens' belief that the US will save them even if they will not defend each other. While there is majority support in the US to use force to defend allies, there is a sharp bipartisan divide over the issue. According to the PRC report, Republicans are far more open (69%) to use military force to defend NATO allies against Russia than Democrats (47%).

Solidarity, trust and threats

However, the polls do not exclusively show European and transatlantic divisions. In fact, the report's results underline that the publics in all the surveyed countries share a dim view of Russia and blame Moscow and Kremlin-backed separatists for the violence in Ukraine. While there are clear divisions over whether or not to supply weapons to Ukraine, there is overwhelming support for economic aid to Kiev across the board. There are also widely shared concerns about the military threat Russia poses to its neighbours.

Although there is a spread between those who believe Russia to be a 'major military threat' (ranging from 70% in Poland to 38% in Germany) or a 'minor military threat' (19% in Poland, 48% in Germany), only a small minority in the surveyed countries (ranging from 4% in Poland to 15% in Italy) believe Russia to pose no military threat at all to its neighbours. This common belief can help explain the sustained and coordinated European and transatlantic sanctions on Russia.

The shared sense of threat also contributes to greater willingness of NATO allies and partner countries to participate in the increased number of military exercises and deployments in eastern and northern Europe since 2014. For example, some 49 ships, 61 aircraft, 1 submarine and 5,600 military personnel from Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Turkey, the UK, and the US participated in the

recently concluded multinational maritime exercise BALTOPS 2015 – staged in Poland, Sweden, Germany and the Baltic Sea on 5-20 June 2015.

Send in the cavalry!

Nevertheless, the poor state of national defence in many European countries after years of budget cuts and the reluctance of their general publics to defend other European allies in case of war means that the US remains indispensable to European security.

But as the PRC opinion polls reveal, even the willingness of the US public to defend Europe should not be taken for granted. While President Obama and other high-ranking US and NATO officials have gone to great lengths over the past year to assure European allies about the NATO's ironclad guarantee to defend them, it is the deployment of troops on the ground that makes the promises believable in the eyes of many on both sides of the Atlantic.

Since last spring, the US has established a permanent military presence in eastern Europe by rotating small numbers of ground troops for extended training missions. Defence chiefs from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are now asking NATO for the permanent stationing of a brigade-sized force in the Baltic countries, drawn also from the European allies.

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Even a force of 3,000-5,000 troops would, of course, not be able to stop a Russian invasion but would act as a trip-wire, guaranteeing that a conflict between Russia and the Baltic republics would involve the US and European NATO allies from the very beginning. In a similar manner to the Berlin brigades during the Cold War, the estab-

lishment of such a Baltic brigade would underline the mutual trust, solidarity and common threat perception necessary for European defence.

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